

## 2 UNIQUE



KELLI LEWTON

## Enchanting Thai cuisine a riot of color

I have just returned from an eventful ten days in Thailand. I traveled with a group of culinary experts, chefs and food lovers headed up by Master Chef Jeff Gabriel, instructor at Schoolcraft College in Livonia and owner of the Farm Restaurant in Port Austin, Mich.

Our trip had many magical moments filled with color and excitement as we traveled from Bangkok to the jungle-like north city of Chiang-mai and finally to Phuket, at the southern tip of Thailand engulfed by the Andaman Sea.

Color and diversity are the twinned elements of this vibrant rice bowl nation once known as Siam and now known as Thailand. A tropical kingdom about the size of France, its borders embrace a melange of cultural homogeneity and surprising geographical diversity, which is embodied heart and soul in Thai cooking.

Thailand is essentially an agricultural nation, its landscape dominated by the color green. It is a culture of rice farmers who produce and export more of this essential grain than any other culture. Rice is often the commonality you will find in Thai meals.

### Riot of colors

Thai food is a riot of colors, exciting flavors and textures which is evident from the finest restaurants to the world-renowned street food vendors. It is very likely that a street food vendor you may happen upon is third, fourth or even fifth generation, preparing the same family market dish in the same way as it has been done thousands of times before.

The true beauty of Thai food lies in its contrast, balance and harmony. Dishes will be sweet, sour, salty and spicy. They will be steamed, stewed, deep-fried and stir-fried. At any large gathering it would not be unusual to find all these represented on the dinner table.

Textures and temperatures will vary diversely in a Thai meal. And, to my surprise, often soup is served in the middle of the meal and salads contain meats, vegetables as well as fruits.

The Thai diet is a healthy one incorporating plenty of fresh vegetables, often cooked to retain their color, taste as well as texture. The fruit is perfectly sweet and many fruits as well as vegetables are hand-carved and arranged in a beautiful presentation.

Thai chefs and cooks are certainly amazing crafters of food. Meat, poultry and fish are expensive for the Thai people and are used sparingly in their traditional cooking. They mix proteins in small quantities with an array of fruit's, spices, noodles and vegetables.

### Influences

Thailand's geographical position in the heart of Southeast Asia is also evident in their native cooking. Indian and Chinese influences help make up the melting pot of panaromic Thai cuisine.

I sampled some amazing curries delicately flavored with coconut milk and unusual spices. Thai curry pastes differ from their Indian neighbor by using a wide range of herbs, chilies and spices.

Lemon grass, coconut milk and chili peppers are the cornerstone of Thai cooking. They take their chilies pretty seriously and I would often come across a chard of one in my dish that would warm my entire body.

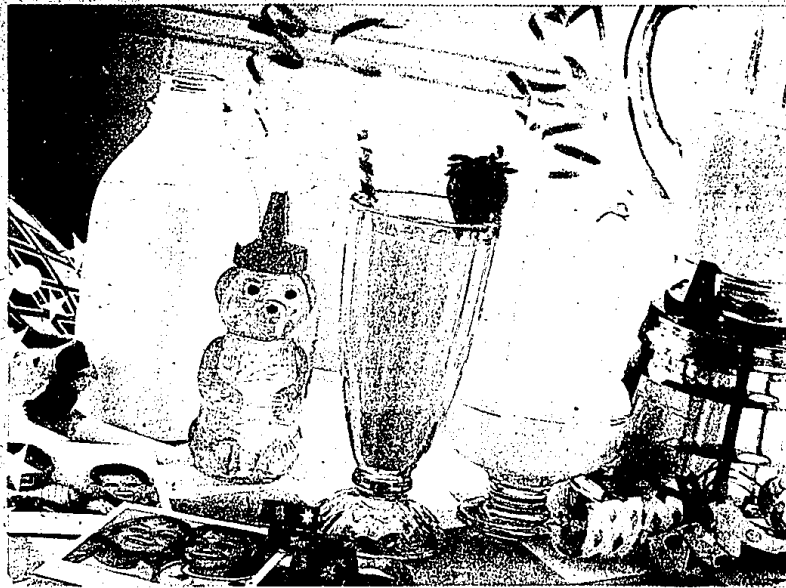
My favorite thing about Thai cooking is the eating of a Thai meal. It is a shared experience where diners are given a plate with the staple white rice which is eaten along with spoonfuls of food from various dishes available on the table. It is an experience of sharing food and conversation as you pass the dishes.

Please see 2 UNIQUE, D2

### LOOKING AHEAD

What to watch for in Taste next week:

- Iced tea
- Cafe Cortina



Healthy snack: Fruit & Honey Smoothie is a great tasting way to enjoy milk.

THE MILK PRODUCERS EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM

# Follow the MILKY WAY

## Toast your health with calcium rich dairy products

BY PEGGY MARTINELLI-EVERTS  
SPECIAL WRITER

**W**e've all seen the milk ads featuring celebrities extolling the virtues of milk. While the celebrity spokespeople are paid to model their "milk mustaches," the message they send — paid or not — is truthful. Milk and dairy products provide the richest source of calcium, a mineral vital for healthy teeth and bones. Milk is an excellent source of protein, riboflavin, potassium, phosphorus, magnesium and zinc. Milk is fortified with Vitamins A and D. It helps prevent osteoporosis and also may help prevent heart disease.

Some people debate the health benefits of drinking anything but mother's milk, saying that cow's milk is for calves. Milk opponents claim that milk is the cause of heart disease, ovarian cancer and juvenile diabetes. They claim adults should not drink milk because they cannot digest the milk sugar, lactose.

Reggie Paez of Southfield admits to some confusion when it comes to what one should or should not eat.

"I'm an avid reader and try to educate myself on which diets and exercises work best," said Paez. "Unfortunately, expert opinions can be conflicting. So I've found that sometimes it's best to 'stick to the basics.'"

Don't become "udderly" confused by the hype. Know the facts and include low-fat and non-fat dairy products in your diet. If

you consume many full fat dairy products, you are likely to raise your blood cholesterol levels. That is true. However, that's the case with any foods rich in saturated fat and cholesterol. In fact, studies show that diets with three or more servings of non-fat dairy products, along with lots of fruits and vegetables, actually decrease the risk of hypertension, which is a leading cause of heart disease and stroke.

There is little evidence that lactose causes ovarian cancer. The data shows that women with ovarian cancer had consumed less, not more of these milk sugars than healthy women. In addition, one study suggested that a protein in cow's milk might trigger an abnormal response in children genetically predisposed to developing juvenile diabetes. However, other studies have not found this connection. No reputable authorities have pected that children avoid milk and dairy products.

Elenn Kollin of Beverly Hills knows the value of kids drinking milk. "As a parent, I've made milk a top beverage choice for my son," said Kollin. "We talk about how milk helps him grow strong bones."

### Cheese and yogurt

Two dairy favorites that can fit into any healthy diet are cheese and yogurt. Cheese is packed with nutrition and flavor, but also calories, salt, fat and cholesterol. Cheese can be enjoyed in every course from appetizers to desserts. High in protein, calcium and

potassium, cheese is available in hundreds of varieties, making it is easy to find those that are low in fat and cholesterol. Cheese that is made from skim or part-skim milk, such as mozzarella, farmers and ricotta, has about 5 grams of fat per ounce. Hard, sharp cheeses are higher in salt and fat, but have a richer flavor, so you may use less.

### Tips

An experienced cook, Audrey Klein of West Bloomfield has entertained family and friends for years. "I'm comfortable in the kitchen and have learned cooking techniques—slicing, dicing, sautéing and the like—by doing," said Klein. She is a fan of the Food Network shows. "It's fun to watch the chefs and also learn a few tips from the masters."

All cheese dishes should be cooked at relatively low temperatures for short periods. Overcooking may cause cheese to separate and become stringy and tough. When using cheese as a casserole topping, it is best to use grated cheese and add it during the last 10 minutes of baking. Using grated cheese minimizes the chance that the cheese will curdle, a result of the proteins separating from the fat and other components in the cheese. Aged cheeses generally melt and blend into foods easier than young cheeses. The key to cooking with cheese is to heat it gradually, stir it slowly and handle it gently.

Please see DAIRY, D2

## Reduce fat, not flavor in old-fashioned Cheese Strata

### MAIN DISH



MURIEL WAGNER

Brunches at our house usually meant a main course that could be prepared ahead. Mom liked to play the role of relaxed hostess.

One of her favorites was Cheese Strata — a custard cheese toast. Sausage, eggs, cream, cheese and bread were the major players. Besides the fat, this old-fashioned dish is today's salmonella risk because the mixture stood overnight. Even though it was refrigerated, the conditions were just right for salmonella to develop.

My version of Cheese Strata reduces fat by substituting ham or sausage, fat-free half and half for cream and reduced fat cheddar for full fat cheese. Veggies sneak in the fiber and antioxidants. Pasteurized commercial egg substitute replaces raw eggs to cancel the salmonella risk. Thus, fat grams are cut by 75 percent, as well as similar reductions in saturated fat. But, everyone still loved the flavor. See what you think.

### EATING YOUNGER CHEESE STRATA

- 1 tablespoon Canola oil
- 6 ounces cooked ham, diced (optional)
- 1 10-ounce can sliced carrots
- 1 cup fresh mushrooms, sliced
- 1/2 cup fresh asparagus tips, washed
- 1/2 cup red bell pepper, washed and chopped
- egg substitute equal to four eggs
- 1 cup nonfat milk
- 1 cup Land O'Lakes fat free half and half
- 1 1/2 cup Healthy Choice grated cheddar cheese or veggie slices, grated soy cheese
- 1 loaf day old Italian bread sliced into 18 slices
- Your favorite light tub margarine (optional)

Heat 2 teaspoons oil in nonstick skillet. Add asparagus, red bell pepper and mushrooms. Stir fry only until vegetables are partly cooked. Add carrots and ham. Heat through. Set aside.

Combine egg substitute, milk and half and half. Set aside.

Lightly oil bottom and sides of a 2-1/2 quart casserole dish.

Remove crusts from bread and spread lightly with margarine if you wish. Place a layer of bread in the bottom of the casserole. Top with one half of the ham and veggies. Top with 1/2 cup of cheese.

Repeat with another layer of bread, the rest of the ham and veggies and 1/2 cup cheese.

Cover with a third bread layer. Pour the egg and milk mixture over the top and sprinkle with the last 1/2 cup of cheese. Refrigerate overnight up to 24 hours.

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Bake the strata until top is browned and bubbly (about one hour). Serves 6.

Nutrition Facts: Calories, 331; Total Fat, 2.5 g; Sat. Fat, 1.9 g; Cholesterol, 17 mg; Sodium, 660 mg.

Food Exchanges: 2 lean meat, 2 bread, 1 vegetable. Muriel G. Wagner is a registered dietitian and nutrition therapist with an office in Southfield. She publishes "Eating Younger," a quarterly newsletter with recipes and nutrition tips. To subscribe, send a check for \$13.50 to Eating Younger, P.O. Box 69021, Pleasant Ridge, MI 48069.