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The trip not taken

It was a wonderful long weekend. San Francisco's weather was perfect—sunny and breezy with fog rolls you could set your clock by. The flight in had been delayed, so when we landed around midnight our reserved car and driver were nowhere to be seen. Needless to say, Mom, the Intrepid Traveler, was cheery but tired when we checked in to our historic hotel after 1:30 A.M. and made our way to the sixteenth floor. I was thrilled to find our room, 1604, was right across from the elevators—I didn't have to walk more than a dozen steps before I could fall into bed.

Mom and I set out for breakfast after a restful night; just a quick trip downstairs to the restaurant. Avocado toast for me and bacon and eggs for her. During breakfast she asked when we were getting on the ship and I reminded her that our cruise was leaving the next day—we had a whole day to wander around San Francisco. We went upstairs to brush our teeth before heading out and Mom asked what room we were in as we got out of the elevator—I laughed and asked if she had been sleepwalking last night. But I knew...

You see, we had planned this trip for a year, booking the cruise tickets and excursions six months in advance. We were going to Japan via Seattle, Canada, Alaska and Russia—thirty five days on the high seas—glaciers to geishas. Mom had let me take the lead on plans this time, partly because of her cataract surgery in April and partly because everything was on computer instead of brochures and catalogs. She would ask when we were flying to Tokyo to get on the ship—I laughed and asked if she was going to skip the first half of the cruise and meet me in Japan. But I knew...

We bought our MUNI passes and hopped on the first passing cable car, up Nob Hill and down to Fisherman's Wharf. I took Mom's photo and had to remind her to smile. She seemed distant as we walked. She talked about past trips with my dad, where they ate and what they saw, but had no interest in shop windows, sea lions or Bay views. Mom had walked circles around me on our last trip, but her boredom made me think she was just tired, so I cut the walk short and we waited for the next trolley car. But I knew...

We headed for the Ferry Market Building where, although there was no farmers market, some of my favorite food souvenirs awaited. Exotic mushrooms at one stand and intricate pastries at another. Mom had no interest in sampling breads at ACME or cheeses at Cowgirl Creamery, but I thought she would be excited about the innovative ice cream flavors at Humphry Slocombe. She couldn't decide and went with their bestseller, Secret Breakfast. Not even a smile for bourbon ice cream and cornflakes.

Back at the hotel, I held back as we exited the elevator. She had her key card in hand, but could not find our room or use the card correctly to open the door. We sat down in the hotel room and I added up all the clues. I realized that Mom could not go on the cruise if she couldn't find her cabin or her lifeboat station. I began to cry, but not because we couldn't go on our trip. There was no question, the cruise would not be safe for her. No, I cried because the trip not taken was inconsequential to the one we were about to start.

No one books a trip to dementia or Alzheimer's with their parent—the ticket is issued whether you want to go or not. I made Mom a picture book of our time in San Francisco and the cruise to Japan is now nothing more than a foggy dream of the trip not taken.

What's Fresh Right Now?

Bananas

Beans—purple/green yard long

Bitter Melon

Corn—silver queen

Cucumbers—slicers, kirby

Eggplant—fairytale, purple asian

Fennel

Garlic—chives

Ginger

Grapes

Greens—collards, kale

Herbs—parsley, dill, cilantro, curry leaf, italian/lemon/thai basil, mint, thyme

Honey—orange blossom, gallberry, wildflower, tupelo

Moringa

Mushrooms—shiitake, white/blue/yellow oyster, lion's mane, trumpet, dried shiitake

Okra

Onions—green, sweet

Pac Choy

Papaya—green, ripe

Peanuts—green, boiled

Pears

Peas—shelled and unshelled, white acre, pink eye, black eye, creamer

Peppers—green/red/purple bell, shishito, jalapeno, datil, cherry bomb, serrano, poblano, Anaheim, banana, cayenne

Persimmons

Pineapple

Potatoes—red/white

Radishes—globe

Rutabaga

Shoots and Sprouts

Squash—green/golden zucchini, yellow crookneck/summer, kabocha, spaghetti, butternut, calabaza, seminole pumpkin

Sweet Potatoes

Tomatoes—cluster, heirloom, grape, sun gold, plum

Turmeric

Putting Food By

Be sure to buy some extra hard squashes to store for use during the next few months, especially butternuts, acorns, calabazas and Seminole pumpkins. Look for fruit with unblemished skin and a long stem. Store in a cool dark place.

Local and Fresh— Datil Peppers

Commonly found around North Central and Northeast Florida, no one really knows how datil peppers came to this area. Origin rumors are as far flung as Minorca, Africa and Chile.

Whatever the derivation, these little beauties pack the punch of a habanero with a lovely fruity flavor. Ranging in size from 1-4 inches, the fruit are ripe when the yellow color has a little peachy glow. Refrigerate fresh datils. These peppers dry well for extended storage.

Datil Butter

INGREDIENTS

2 Tablespoons unsalted butter, softened

2 teaspoons shallot, minced

1 lime, zested and juiced

Pinch each of salt and pepper

1-3 datil peppers, seeded and finely minced

2 Tablespoons olive oil

DIRECTIONS

In a small bowl, use a fork to mash minced shallot into softened butter. Add lime zest, salt, pepper and minced datils. Continue to mash until combined.

Add lime juice and olive oil. Stir until completely combined. Refrigerate for a few minutes if butter is too runny.

Use a spoon or your fingers to dot onto seafood, veggies or bread before broiling.

Cover and refrigerate.

Datil Broiled Shrimp

INGREDIENTS

1 pound shrimp, peeled

Salt and freshly ground pepper

1 batch Datil Butter

1 lime, cut into wedges

DIRECTIONS

Preheat broiler to high.

Place shrimp close together in one layer on a rimmed baking sheet. Season lightly with salt and pepper. Dot with Datil Butter.

Broil until shrimp are opaque and firm.

Serve shrimp hot with sauce formed by butter and shrimp juices. Garnish with lime.

Zucchini Tomato Couscous with Thyme

INGREDIENTS

2 Tablespoon olive oil, divided
1/2 medium onion, chopped
1 clove garlic, finely grated
3-4 sprigs fresh thyme, plus more for garnish
4 cups zucchini, shredded
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 Tablespoon tomato paste
2 cups whole grape tomatoes
1 cup sun-dried tomatoes, chopped
1-2 teaspoons sherry or cider vinegar
1 1/2 cups water
1/4 teaspoon salt
1 Tablespoon olive oil, plus more for garnish
1 cup dry couscous

DIRECTIONS

In a large skillet, over medium-high heat, sauté onion in olive oil until softened. Add garlic and thyme sprigs. Cook one minute, stirring constantly.

Add zucchini and salt. Cook 5 minutes, stirring occasionally. Push the zucchini aside to make space on the bottom of the pan for the tomato paste. Cook paste for one minute, stirring once or twice as it cooks.

Add grape tomatoes to pan and stir to combine. Let cook for 5 minutes, stirring occasionally. Mash tomatoes with potato masher or large fork. Add sun-dried tomatoes and stir to combine completely. Cook 10 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Bring water to a boil in a small covered pot. Add salt, olive oil and couscous, stirring well once. Cover with lid and remove from heat. Steam for 5 minutes.

Remove lid and use a fork to fluff couscous. Cover pot with a thin towel and replace cover until ready to serve.

Finish zucchini mixture by removing cooked thyme stems, adding some fresh thyme leaves and the sherry vinegar. Stir well, remove from heat and serve.

Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

SERVING SUGGESTION

Choose a large flat platter. Place a small bowl upside-down in the center of the platter. Pile couscous on the platter around the bowl, leaving a clear area when the bowl is removed. Use the back of a fork to lightly shape the couscous into an even bed.

Spoon the zucchini mixture into the clear area on the platter and use the back of a fork to shape into a smooth mound.

Sprinkle fresh thyme leaves on top of everything and finish with a drizzle of olive oil.

Summer Squash Queso

INGREDIENTS

2 Tablespoons olive oil
1 shallot, diced
2 datil peppers, seeded and finely minced
4 cups yellow squash, shredded
1 cup salsa
4 ounces cheese, shredded (cheddar, monterey jack or pepper-jack types work best)
1/2 cup sour cream, crema, greek yogurt, cream cheese or cottage cheese

DIRECTIONS

In a large skillet, sauté shallot and datil peppers in olive oil.

Stir in squash and cook until tender.

Add salsa, stir well and bring to a simmer.

Add cheese and stir until it is just melted.

Add sour cream, stir well, remove from heat and cover.

Let sit five minutes before serving.

Cover and refrigerate leftovers.



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Local and Seasonal Recipes, Menus and More

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Tricks and Tips

Ever want something sweet, but you know if you make a batch of cookies, you will eat them all? Ever want a treat, but don't have time to bake?

Try this trick the next time you make a batch of bar cookies—you won't eat them all and you will put food by!

Cut cooled cookies and double wrap each in plastic wrap or parchment and then foil.

Pack all of the individually wrapped portions in a container with a lid or a freezer ziptop bag.

For best results, leave individual portions wrapped while they defrost at room temperature.

Rum Raisin Maple Oat Bars

INGREDIENTS

- 1/4 cup rum (apple juice is an adequate substitute)
- 1 cup raisins (do not use jumbo raisins)
- 1/2 cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, melted
- 1/2 cup maple syrup
- 1/4 cup dark brown sugar, packed
- 1 egg
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1/2 cup flour
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 3 cups rolled oats

DIRECTIONS

Place raisins in a small bowl and stir in rum. Cover and soak overnight for best results or just 15 minutes, if you're in a hurry.

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly grease an 8x8 pan.

Add maple syrup and dark brown sugar to melted butter and beat until syrupy. Add egg and vanilla to butter mixture and beat until completely combined.

Mix soda and salt into flour.

Add flour mixture to butter-sugar mixture and stir until smooth.

Add oats and stir until just combined.

Add raisins with liquid. Stir until all ingredients are combined well and the raisins are evenly dispersed.

Spoon into an 8x8 baking pan and smooth into an even layer.

Bake in preheated oven 30-40 minutes, until firm and edges are lightly browned.

Cool in pan.

For best results, wait two hours before cutting. Use a serrated knife.

Store in an airtight container and eat within a few days.