

# Hogtown HomeGrown

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## Just three little words

My Aunt Lil was a renegade. Despite a heritage that said women should stay at home with their parents, she went to college. Despite an era that said women should hide their light under a bushel, she became a renowned and published operating room nurse. Despite a hierarchy that said women should follow orders, she helped develop innovations in light therapy. Despite a culture that said that women shouldn't work outside the home, she had an amazingly successful career. Despite a society that said women can't have it all, she had a wonderful family, with three devoted children, Susan, Lisa and David, a very special and dear husband, Al, and a huge extended family of relatives and friends.

She was the fifth of six children who lived to adulthood, but with her passing last month, they are all gone now. Born a first generation American to parents from Syria and Lebanon, she married into a Lebanese family. During her early married years, Lil and Al acquired a number of lifelong friends whose varied heritages—most notably Italian—added to their budding cosmopolitan tastes.

Aunt Lil's mother, Sitto, did all the cooking and actually shooed people out of her small kitchen, so Lil acquired very few kitchen skills at home. Lil relied on her own desire to cook, plus knowledge gained from their circle of friends. Soon she had not only perfected traditional Arabic dishes, but had branched into a full range of Mediterranean-based cooking.

Among other accomplishments, her obituary notes that she was "a passionate cook." Just three little words. What an understatement! She created and served food with love. As her family grew, she cooked each child's favorite meal for their birthday, whether she personally liked it or not, as in the case of one child's favorite, leg of lamb! Holidays brought their own special treats, and Orthodox Easter was always a taste extravaganza to be remembered. Even as she got older, feeding family and friends was a passion that kept her spirits up when her body was failing.

She was 81 when I saw her for the last time in 2009, but she threw a birthday party bash for her youngest during my visit and among the various delights, she served a shrimp dish flamed with ouzo. When I quizzed her on the ingredients, she revealed that she had made it in stages over the prior three days, so of course, I had to ask for the recipe. She produced a magazine clipping, and then proceeded to tell me all the changes she had made to it. I forgot about the conversation and all too soon both the party and my short visit were over. As I left, various containers and foil packages were loaded into bags so I could enjoy some of her cooking for weeks to come. A few days after my return home, a small envelope came in the mail. Aunt Lil had handwritten the recipe for the shrimp dish, with all of her changes—a gift of both time and knowledge that I treasured.

She gave me a more important gift at the age of 13—my first caprese salad. Her version was amazing. I had never eaten fresh buffalo mozzarella and the way the cheese melted in my mouth to blend with the myriad other flavors was revelatory. You see, Lil did not make her caprese with just the simple tomato, mozzarella and basil. Layers of thick cut tomatoes, fresh mozzarella and onion were drizzled with olive oil and pesto—words fail me!

For this moment and so many more, I say thanks Aunt Lil. You provided a moment of revelation that helped steer my life and I will think of you every time I am in the kitchen.



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## What's Fresh Right Now?

- Beets**
- Bok Choy**—pak choi, tatsoi
- Broccoli**
- Cabbage**—chinese, napa, savoy
- Carrots**—traditional, red
- Cauliflower**—white, romanesco
- Chard**
- Citrus**—juices, satsumas, lemons, kumquats, oranges, tangerines, sour orange, grapefruit
- Cucumbers**—slicers, mini seedless
- Eggplant**
- Garlic**—chives, elephant
- Ginger**
- Greens**—collards, mustards, turnip, spinach, kale, escarole, sorrel
- Herbs**—cilantro, parsley, dill, rosemary, spearmint, chives
- Honey**
- Kale**—tuscan, red russian, curly
- Kohlrabi**
- Lettuce**—mizuna, arugula, salad mix, red/green romaine, red/green leaf
- Microgreens**—assorted
- Mushrooms**—chanterelles, shiitake
- Nuts**—pecans
- Onions**—green, yellow
- Papaya**—green
- Peppers**—various sweet and hot
- Potatoes**—red, sweet
- Radish**
- Shoots**—pea, sunflower, corn, spring mix
- Sprouts**
- Squash**
- Strawberries**
- Sugarsnaps**
- Tomatoes**—red beefsteak, grape, green

## Local and Fresh— Shiitake Mushrooms

Grown in Asian countries since prehistoric times, locally grown shiitake mushrooms are available in North Central Florida's farmers markets. These meaty mushrooms, one source of the elusive savory taste known as umami, can be used fresh, dried or powdered.

Look for whole mushrooms with intact stems and no major cuts or damage to the caps. The stems of the smaller mushrooms can be used along with the cap, but the stems of more mature mushrooms can become woody and are best used to make stock.

Store mushrooms in a paper bag in the refrigerator. If you forget to use them all, dried mushrooms can be soaked in warm water and then sliced and used as fresh. Use the soaking water as you would any lightly-flavored broth.

## Creamy Shiitake Spinach Soup

### INGREDIENTS

- 3 Tablespoons butter, divided
- 1 shallot or 1/4 onion, minced
- 2 cups sliced shiitake mushrooms
- 3 Tablespoons flour
- 1 cup water or veggie broth
- 4 cups thinly sliced spinach
- 2 cups milk
- pinch salt and freshly ground pepper (optional)

### DIRECTIONS

In a large pot, sauté shallot and shiitakes in 2 Tablespoons butter over medium heat for about 15 minutes, until shallot is softened and shiitakes begin to color.

Stir flour into veggie mixture and cook for 2-3 minutes. Whisk in water until a smooth base is formed, and then whisk in milk. Stir in spinach and remaining butter. Bring to a simmer, reduce heat to low, cover and cook 20 minutes or until ready to serve.

Taste and adjust seasonings as desired. Serve hot. Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

# Saffron Chick Pea Stew

## INGREDIENTS

1 pound dry chick peas (also known as garbanzo beans)  
1 large pinch saffron  
6 cardamom pods, cracked  
2 Tablespoons olive oil, plus extra for garnish  
1 teaspoon salt  
2 cups potatoes, cut into 1/2 inch pieces  
3 carrots OR 2 carrots and 1 parsnip, cut into rounds  
1 shallot, minced  
1 Tablespoon each sherry vinegar and finely chopped fresh parsley  
salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

## DIRECTIONS

In a large pot, combine chick peas, saffron and cardamom and cover with at least two inches of water. Bring to a boil, cover and cook for 2 hours or until chick peas are tender. Stir occasionally and add water as needed.

When chick peas are tender, add oil, salt, potatoes, carrots, shallots and water to cover. Simmer until potatoes are cooked through, adding water as needed, until a nice stew texture is achieved. Add vinegar and parsley, stir well and adjust seasoning if desired.

Serve hot with a drizzle of olive oil on top. Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

# Tomato Bread Soup with Roasted Garlic

## INGREDIENTS

8 large tomatoes, cut into eighths  
1 head garlic, cut off top, drizzle head with olive oil and wrap in foil  
1/4 cup olive oil, divided  
1 onion, chopped finely  
1 large can diced tomatoes with puree  
2 cups stale bread torn into small pieces—ciabatta or another country-type bread works well  
2-4 cups veggie broth  
a handful of fresh herbs—basil and parsley are good choices

## DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Place tomatoes and wrapped garlic on cookie sheets. Roast 45 minutes, until garlic is soft when squeezed and tomatoes begin to soften.

In a large pot, heat 2 Tablespoons of oil and sauté onion until translucent. Add roasted and canned tomatoes, mash lightly to break up pieces. Simmer on medium heat about 15 minutes. Squeeze in garlic and stir in bread pieces. As bread absorbs liquid, add veggie broth to desired consistency. Rough cut herbs and stir into soup with remaining oil just before serving.

Serve hot. Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

## Saffron Chick Pea Samosas

Make samosa dough by combining 1 cup all purpose flour, 1/2 teaspoon salt, 1/4 cup each oil and buttermilk. Mix thoroughly. Knead for 5 minutes, cover and set aside for 15 minutes before dividing and rolling into 8 equal circles. Pre-heat oven to 400 degrees. Warm 1 cup of thick Saffron Chick Pea Stew.

Place two scant tablespoons of warm stew on each dough circle, wet edges with water and pinch to seal. Bake on a cookie sheet in pre-heated oven for 8-10 minutes until lightly browned.

## Saffron Chick Pea Soup with Spinach

For each cup of stew, add 1 cup of veggie broth and 1 cup of finely chopped spinach. Simmer over medium-high heat until spinach is wilted and soup is thoroughly heated.

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## Tricks and Tips

I do not recommend my pesto recipe for use in Aunt Lil's Caprese because it is too chunky. However, you can smooth chunky pesto in a blender or mortar and pestle, adding extra olive oil to create the texture needed to drizzle. Considering store-bought pesto? Check the ingredients first! Pesto should not contain any oils other than olive oil.

# Aunt Lil's Caprese

### INGREDIENTS (for each serving)

- 3 thick slices of ripe tomato
- 1 slice onion (white or sweet onion)
- 2 thick slices fresh buffalo mozzarella
- drizzle of olive oil
- 1 Tablespoon smooth pesto (it should be liquid enough to drizzle)
- several grinds of coarse black pepper
- 2 or 3 fresh basil leaves

### DIRECTIONS

On a salad plate, arrange tomato, onion and cheese, starting and ending with tomato. Drizzle with olive oil and pesto. Top with pepper and basil. Serve at room temperature.

### PRESENTATION

Make a tower on a bare plate or fan the ingredients out on a large piece of green leaf lettuce.

NOTE: The tomato needs to be ripe, but still firm. If the slices are really watery, lay them on a paper towel to absorb any extra juices before plating.