

Hogtown HomeGrown™

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What was your best birthday?

I recently took two of our grands to a birthday party for Simone, the one-year-old daughter of family friends. Attended by many of the parents' contemporaries, the house was also filled with family, from a great uncle and aunt to cousins, one just months older than the birthday girl. Not caring about the cake, Simone reveled in looking at each face and being passed from lap to lap. For her, a perfect birthday was simultaneously being adored and watching her older cousins zoom around the yard with water balloons and squirt guns.

When our three boys were young, most of their birthdays were just like Simone's—cake and presents with family and friends. It could be at a park or crowded into our living room, but the location never really mattered, it was the company that was important. Well, and the cake. Unless there was a special request, carrot cake made with whole wheat, crushed pineapple and spices was served with freshly churned honey vanilla ice cream.

As I grew up, most of my birthdays from age 5 to 18 were celebrated at Piccolo's, our favorite Italian restaurant, on Miami Beach. Pat, our waiter for all those years and more, patiently watched me evolve from a child eating cheese ravioli to a budding omnivore ordering escargot and crab stuffed shrimp. Unlike Simone, I did care about the cake. At Piccolo's it was always an Italian Rum Cake, with a sparkler that simultaneously intrigued and frightened me. Mom and Dad were usually the only ones singing along with Pat since my birthday was right in the middle of summer vacation.

My favorite birthday was fifty years ago this July. As an avid fan of the space program, I watched every launch and splashdown, switching between TV channels for my favorite announcers and analysts. When Apollo 11 took off on as scheduled on July 16, I knew that this was going to be a special birthday. I would be 12 on July 20, 1969, the day of the planned moon landing.

Originally, the main event planned for July 20 was just piloting and setting the lunar module down on the moon. Mom and Dad let me sit at the end of their bed and I stared in rapt attention at the black and white tv on the rolling cart. After a few heart-stopping moments, with only 6 seconds of fuel left, the module touched down and everyone breathed a sigh of relief. The tension was so great though, even for a twelve-year-old, that the words "Tranquility Base here. The Eagle has landed." still give me goosebumps.

The actual walk on the moon was scheduled for the July 21 and I knew that staying up until the wee hours of the morning was not in my future. Then the astronauts whipped through their checklists and begged Houston to let them go out and play. Houston said yes, and the rest is history.

I don't remember having a party, what I ate at Piccolo's or the presents I received that year, but Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walked on the moon the day I turned 12. I still think it was the best birthday I will ever have!

So, what was your best birthday?

What's Fresh Right Now?

Corn—silver queen

Cucumbers—slicers

Eggplant—fairy tale, graffiti, purple Italian, asian

Fennel

Garlic—chives

Greens—rutabaga

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, red/yellow

Papaya—green, ripe

Peaches

Peanuts—green, boiled

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

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

Potatoes—red/white

Radishes—globe

Rutabaga

Shoots and Sprouts

Squash—long/Italian/golden zucchini, yellow crookneck, summer, white/yellow pattypan, kabocha, acorn, hubbard, spaghetti, butternut, calabaza, seminole pumpkin

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

Turmeric

Watermelon

There's more than produce at every market!

Look around the farmers market for seasonal and staple foods.

Breads, pastries and pasta.

Jam for your bread and a sauce for your pasta.

Meat from many sources and seafood of various kinds.

Eggs from chickens and occasionally ducks and quail.

Milk, yogurt, kefir and buttermilk from goats or cows.

Cheeses made from cow or goat milk.

Flowers!

Local and Fresh— Peppers

It's no secret that the hot summer days produce an abundance of peppers at the farmers markets. Common peppers, like sweet bells with their distinctive shape and fiery jalapenos with their distinctive bite, are very familiar. Becoming more prevalent are shishito peppers, often served blistered into sweet goodness, and Florida's own indigenous datil peppers.

The newest innovation during the past two years has been the availability of freshly-roasted peppers at the Haile Farmers Market. Joe Durando, from Possum Hollow Farm, sets up his sensibly-sized barrel roaster and roasts peppers onsite. The aroma fills the market and draws me in. My brain scrambles for recipes and I leave with a bag each of sweet and hot.

Joe's roasting season is over, so try it yourself at home—one at a time or a bunch.

Roasted Peppers

INGREDIENTS

Fresh peppers, hot or sweet, washed and dried

DIRECTIONS

Gas burner

Turn the burner to medium-high and use long, heatproof tongs to rotate the pepper over the flame until completely charred.

Oven broiler

Preheat the broiler to high and place the rack 6 inches below the heat source. Place peppers in one layer on sheet pan and cook until one side is charred. Turn as needed to char all sides.

Grill

Preheat the grill on high and place the peppers over direct heat. Turn as needed to char all sides.

When peppers are charred, place them in a covered bowl until completely cooled and wet from the steam.

Rub charred skins off peppers with hands—for best results and flavor, do not rinse the peppers.

Use immediately or store covered in refrigerator for up to a week.

Sunset on the Range

INGREDIENTS

16 ounces pinto or kidney beans, cooked and spiced OR 6 cups canned beans with chili sauce
15 ounce can diced tomatoes
1 cup fresh peppers, roasted, peeled and diced (try sweet, hot or a combo)
10 ounce can enchilada sauce
16 ounces elbow macaroni, cooked and drained
12 ounces sharp cheddar, shredded

DIRECTIONS

Combine beans, tomatoes, peppers and enchilada sauce. Bring to a boil and stir in cooked elbow macaroni.

Cover, reduce heat and simmer for 15 minutes or until heated through.

Remove from heat. Stir in shredded cheddar, cover and let sit for five minutes.

Stir again and serve immediately. Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

VARIATION **Saucy Sunset on the Range** - use 2 cans of enchilada sauce.

Sunset on the Ranch

INGREDIENTS

16 ounces pinto or kidney beans, cooked and spiced OR 6 cups canned beans with chili sauce
15 ounce can diced tomatoes
1 cup fresh peppers, roasted, peeled and diced (try sweet, hot or a combo)
10 ounce can enchilada sauce
16 ounces elbow macaroni, cooked and drained
16 ounces sharp cheddar, shredded
3-4 green onions, finely chopped

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly oil a large ovenproof casserole.

Combine beans, tomatoes, peppers and enchilada sauce. Bring to a boil and stir in cooked elbow macaroni.

Cover, reduce heat and simmer for 15 minutes or until heated through.

Remove from heat. Stir in cooked elbow macaroni and 1/2 the shredded cheddar.

Pour into prepared casserole. Top with remaining cheddar and chopped green onions.

Bake in preheated oven about 30 minutes or until edges are browned and bubbly.

Let sit 5 minutes before serving.

Serve hot. Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

VARIATION **Saucy Sunset on the Ranch** - use 2 cans of enchilada sauce.

Tricks and Tips

Called Chili Mac in many kitchens around the country, Sunset on the Range is a vegetarian version of a quick easy meal meant to fill the bellies of a growing family. My friend Chris used to make it regularly, but it really didn't have a name. On a family campout, one very hot July evening in western Georgia, we cooked up a potful for dinner and noticed it matched the colors of the sunset reflected in the lake. The name **Sunset on the Range** was born.

When you aren't out on the range or it is finally cool enough to turn your oven on, it's time for **Sunset on the Ranch**—the cousin of Chili Mac that's oven-baked.

For a creamier and cheesier experience, try substituting Monterey Jack cheese for half of the sharp cheddar in either the Range or Ranch versions.



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Local and Seasonal Recipes, Menus and More

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When I heard that Nan, who lives in Brunswick, Georgia, made this cake for a recent family celebration, I asked for the recipe, of course.

While it can be flavored with just vanilla, according to Nan, the chocolate version "...has been a hit with anyone who eats it."

Nan had two tips:

"There is supposed to be a crack on the top with the crust side. Makes it look unique!" I usually turn mine upside, that way the crust doesn't get crushed."

"And, after the cake is frozen and thawed, it seems to be moister."

Nan's Chocolate Pound Cake

INGREDIENTS

- 3 cups all purpose flour, sifted
- 4 Tablespoons cocoa powder
- 1/2 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 2 sticks butter, softened
- 1/2 cup Crisco shortening
- 3 cups sugar
- 5 eggs, room temperature
- 1 cup milk, room temperature
- 1 Tablespoon vanilla

DIRECTIONS

- Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Grease and flour a tube pan.
- Combine dry ingredients and sift together. Set aside.
- Cream butter and shortening.
- Add sugar and beat until light and fluffy.
- Add eggs, one at a time. Beat until each egg is completely incorporated and the mixture is light and fluffy before adding the next egg.
- Stir half the dry mixture into the butter-sugar mixture until almost combined. Stir in half the milk and mix well. Repeat with remaining dry ingredients and milk.
- Scrape sides and bottom of mixing bowl with a spatula. Add vanilla and beat until completely combined into a smooth batter.
- Pour or spoon batter into prepared pan. Lightly smooth the top.
- Place in center of preheated oven and bake at least 80-90 minutes. The center will feel firm to the touch and a toothpick tests clean.
- Cool in pan on rack. Run a knife around the edges of the cake to loosen. Turn out of pan and place crust-side-up on serving platter.