

Hogtown HomeGrown

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It's not rocket science

The apartment was on the top floor of a large antebellum house facing Coleman Avenue in Macon, Georgia. A former parlor, the room had two walls of windows, with a curved alcove facing the street and a round porthole window of beveled glass in the bathroom. Oaks and poplars surrounded the house, and the view through the bare windows was green. We were living in the tops of the trees and the surrounding walls of branches burst with leaves and life, even as fall gently approached. As in any small Southern town, there were always eyes upon us, but in this case it was just our neighborhood, the birds and squirrels. Decades-old memories linger—long lazy afternoons spent listening to rain bounce off the leaves while cool breezes filled the high-ceilinged room. Young and in love, the feeling of living in nature with complete privacy was so romantic.

The romance ended in the kitchen, if you could even call it that. Carved out of what should have been a closet, it boasted a range with two gas burners and an oven smaller than a cookie sheet. The refrigerator was dorm-sized with just enough room in the freezer for two metal ice-cube trays. The sink was free standing, so there was no counter space and the tile floor was comprised of six square-foot tiles. Oh, did I mention that one wall was the door to the bedroom and another the door to the bathroom?

But young love makes you blind and sometimes broke, so you make do. Pots and pans were procured from the shed behind Granny's house, along with a couple of plates and bowls. Breakfast was a cinch—I'd been cooking eggs in one form or another since I was five. No toaster was a slight hiccup, but the oven did have an upper element and I began what would become a life-long habit of burning bread under the broiler! Larger meals were problematic, but a spare chair served as counter space and I learned to plan menus that only had one dish cooked in the oven. It was definitely not the best-appointed kitchen in the world, but we made some spectacular dinners and fed a lot of friends out of that closet.

A recent study from North Carolina State University concluded that for many households, cooking dinner is not only unappreciated, but too much work and too inconvenient to be done on a regular basis. Picky eaters, lack of equipment and restricted budgets were some of the given reasons. The authors suggested that families might be better off if they were able to pick up dinners at their local school when they picked up their children.

Yes, I am shaking my head! Granted, the poorest families living in shelters or hotels have seemingly insurmountable barriers to cooking fresh food, but most of us have more to work with than that, even if the kitchen is in a closet. As a young bride, Granny cooked dinner with a skillet and a dutch oven in an open fireplace. What choice did she have?

Cooking is an essential skill which must be recognized as more important than the ability to operate a car or a computer. The Food Network has made it a spectator sport for perfectionists, but cooking is not rocket science, requiring fancy ingredients and expensive equipment. Simple meals made from fresh food are all that humans require to nourish and fuel our bodies. The best way to accomplish that every night is to cook dinner at home!

Hogtown HomeGrown Public Demo Schedule

In Celebration of World Food Day—Union Street Farmers Market - Wednesday October 22, 5:30p.m.

What's Fresh Right Now?

- Beans**—purple/green long
- Citrus**—juices
- Cucumbers**—mini seedless, slicers
- Eggplant**
- Fig**
- Garlic**—chives, elephant
- Greens**—collards, malabar spinach, mustards, arugula
- Grapes**—purple/bronze muscadines
- Herbs**—italian/opal basil, lemongrass, mint, allspice/curry/lime/bay/cinnamon leaf
- Honey**
- Okra**—green
- Onions**—white sweet
- Papaya**—green
- Pears**
- Peas**—crowder, white acre
- Peppers**—red/green sweet bell, cubanelle, poblano, jalapeno
- Persimmon**—astringent/non-astringent
- Pineapple**
- Potatoes**—small red/white
- Shoots, Sprouts and Microgreens**
- Starfruit**
- Squash**—zucchini, acorn, butternut, kabocha, pumpkin
- Tomatoes**—grape, plum, beefsteak

Caprese for a Crowd

INGREDIENTS

- 6 plum tomatoes, chopped
- 8 ounces fresh mozzarella, diced
- 1 cup basil leaves and flowers
- 2 Tablespoons olive oil
- 2 Tablespoons white balsamic vinegar
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper

DIRECTIONS

Combine all ingredients. Serve at room temperature for best flavor.

Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

Local and Fresh—

Plum tomatoes

A sweet red fruit with a meaty interior, the plum tomato is named for its shape and is not a relative of the plum! Bred for use in sauces, they can be served raw or cooked. San Marzano tomatoes are a popular variety.

Look for even coloring with no green near the stem. A fully ripe plum tomato will be dark red with a firm texture. Avoid tomatoes with soft-spots or a mushy feel.

Always store tomatoes in an open bowl or on the counter at room temperature, never in the refrigerator!

Tomato Crusted Red Snapper

INGREDIENTS

- 3 Tablespoons olive oil, divided
- 1/2 cup finely chopped onion
- 2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- pinch salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 4 plum tomatoes, seeded and chopped
- 1 pound red snapper fillet
- 1 Tablespoon pomegranate molasses

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 400 degrees.

Heat a heavy skillet over medium heat, add 2 Tablespoons olive oil and stir in onion. Cook until onion is softened. Stir in garlic, salt and pepper and sauté until garlic is softened.

Stir in tomatoes and cook until juices have evaporated.

Push tomatoes to the edges of the pan. Add remaining olive oil to center of pan and heat until it shimmers.

Place fish skin side down on hot oil and use a spoon to cover fish with cooked tomato mixture. Place fish in oven, reduce heat to 350 degrees and bake 15 minutes.

Drizzle tomato crust with pan drippings mixed with pomegranate molasses. Bake additional 10 minutes, until fish flakes easily.

Let fish rest 5 minutes before serving.

Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

Never-Ending Pot - Mexican Beans

INGREDIENTS

3 pounds dried pinto, kidney or black beans
1/4 cup ground cumin
1/4 cup chili powder
3 Tablespoons dried oregano
2 Tablespoons dried basil
1 Tablespoon salt
2 Tablespoons olive oil
1 large onion, finely chopped
4 cloves garlic, smashed and chopped
1 large can crushed tomatoes with puree
1/2 cup sun-dried tomatoes, chopped
1/4 cup chili powder
1 Tablespoon sweet smoked paprika
1 Tablespoon siracha or other hot sauce
2 cups corn kernels
4 Tablespoons butter
8 cloves garlic, smashed and finely chopped
2 Tablespoons dried cumin
1/2 cup salsa (not too chunky)
salt and hot sauce to taste

DIRECTIONS

Place beans in large pot. Add water to cover. Stir in cumin, chili powder, oregano and basil. Bring to a boil, lower heat, cover and simmer until soft. Stir in salt and set aside. In a skillet, heat oil and sauté onion and 4 cloves garlic until softened. Stir into beans. Remove 8 cups of bean mixture, including some liquid, and set aside for refried beans.

Chili with Corn

Bring remaining beans to a boil and stir in tomatoes, chili powder and smoked paprika. Reduce heat, cover and simmer 30 minutes. Add hot sauce and corn kernels, stir well and simmer another 15 minutes.

Remove 4 cups of cooked chili from pot and set aside to cool. When cooled place in a freezer container or bag, label, date and freeze. Set warm chili aside to use for dinner.

Refried Beans

In a large skillet melt butter and stir in 8 cloves chopped garlic. Add reserved 8 cups of beans and cumin. Puree with a potato masher to desired consistency. Stir in salsa and simmer 10-15 minutes. Taste and adjust seasonings.

Remove half refried beans and set aside to cool before bagging and freezing. Cover and refrigerate remaining refried beans for use within 3 days. Try them in tacos or burritos.

Tricks and Tips

Cook once and eat four times! Making big pots of food cuts down on your daily cooking time.

Instead of feeding your family beans every night, use your freezer to store a portion of what you created in your Never-Ending Pot.

If you do this on a regular basis, then you will be able to bring one meal out of the freezer as you put a new one in.

Let's say last week you made a double batch of a pasta casserole and froze half. When you put your bean meals in, you take a pasta meal out—you get variety for this week's menu and freezer space for your new addition.

And you still only cooked once this week! If you cook a new Never-Ending Pot each week—

for example, one week pasta, one week beans, another week rice—then there will be lots of variety in your freezer.

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Tricks and Tips

The chocolate bread is so good, it is hard to let half a loaf go stale. Instead, try cubing the amount of bread you need and placing it in one layer on a cookie sheet or two. Leave it uncovered for a day or two, stirring once a day, until the cubes are dry but flexible.

You can use your oven to store it—as long as the oven is off. You don't want to make croutons!

Chocolate Bread Pudding

INGREDIENTS

- 1/2 loaf chocolate bread from UpperCrust, cut into 1 inch cubes (6-8 cups)
- 1 cup strawberry or raspberry jam, very low sugar but not artificially sweetened
- 1 cup dark or bittersweet chocolate chips
- 3 cups chocolate milk
- 4 eggs
- 1/2 teaspoon vanilla
- 1 Tablespoon unsalted butter, plus a little to butter the casserole
- 2 Tablespoons raw sugar

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly butter a 2 quart oven-proof casserole.

Place 1/3 bread cubes in casserole. Top with half the strawberry jam and 1/4 cup of chocolate chips. Repeat with 1/3 bread, 1/2 jam and 1/4 cup chocolate chips. Finish layering with remaining bread.

Beat together chocolate milk, eggs and vanilla. Pour over layered bread. Top with remaining chocolate chips and dots of butter. Sprinkle sugar over the entire top.

Cover and bake in preheated oven until puffed and completely set in the center.

Serve hot or warm. Cover and refrigerate leftovers.