

Friends,

For those of you who have dined with me, you know how much emphasis I place on good food. However, my financial situation has not always allowed me to afford to dine at restaurants serving the cuisine of my choice. Therefore, I have compiled these recipes; most are quick, easy and can be prepared costing less than a meal for two at a fast food restaurant. Some of these recipes are even perfect for special occasions.

The recipes have been derived from a multitude of sources. Family members or friends passed some recipes to me; less than a quarter of the recipes are adapted from ideas I found in cookbooks. A few are attempts to recreate amazing delicacies I had the great fortune to taste while traveling with my former boss Arla, who herself is a gourmet chef and delved into multicultural food with the pleasure of a kid in a candy store. She was a true inspiration and broadened my mind when it came to the world of food. Still, the vast majority are creations I stumbled upon while hungry and raiding the fridge and pantry.

My general premise of cooking is that it should be easy and delicious. Actual preparation (time spent in the kitchen chopping, mixing, or stir-frying) should take no more than 30 minutes. Most of these recipes require light preparation and are ready within 25-40 minutes. There are some more time consuming recipes listed at the

back of the book, but don't let that scare you off, the recipes are worth it!

To me cooking is not at all an exact science. When adding herbs and spices to a dish, I rarely use measuring spoons. I had to quantify many of the ingredients in my own recipes for the purpose of this cookbook. Ingredients in a casserole or stir-fry dish are determined more by what's in the kitchen instead of what is called for, and cooking time may very depending on whether or not I get wrapped up in reading the latest Robert Jordan novel.

None of the ingredients or quantities should be taken as gospel when using this book. If you are missing an ingredient, try something else. If you don't like onions and garlic, modify the amounts I have suggested. These are mere suggestions as to a general plan of cooking not a regimen to be followed absolutely literally. Good cooking is an art and an attitude. The same dish takes on a different flair prepared by a different cook.

This cook –me- tends to have an odd flair for ethnic foods, mostly of my own ethnicity. What's my ethnicity? Hope your sitting down while you read this, for here comes the list: 25% Italian, 25% Armenian 18.75% Mexican, 12.5% Lithuanian, 6.25% French, 6.25% Creek (also known as Muskogee Indian), and 6.25% German. So, I could be classified as 50% European, 25% Indigenous North American, and 25%



Eurasian. What's Eurasian? Well, for those countries that are too far south and east to really be a part of Europe, but aren't so far east to really be a full part of Asia, they're called Eurasian – or Middle Eastern. Most of old Armenia is now modern day Turkey, even though there is much reduced modern Armenia, my family descends from the area that is now a part of Turkey. Armenians are not considered Arabs.

Born in Japan, and raised on the Westside of the greater Los Angeles area in a very culturally diverse part of Venice and Marina del Rey, the influences in my cooking come from all over the ethnic chart. Some recipes I have vague recollections of my various family members making when I was young, and have tried very hard over the years to recapture the flavors I recall. My husband comes from a mainly German and English background. The various recipes that I have learned via his side of the family come mostly from those cooking traditions. Where did all the Asian cuisine come from? My parents both loved Chinese food and we ate it often; good-old Canton Kitchen on Venice Blvd between Wade and Centinela. They had some of the best shrimp fried rice around. One of my dearest friends Emily is Japanese and through her, I was exposed to



Arla Ramsey,
Friend & Chef
Extraordinaire

a variety of different Japanese dishes; although the Chinese wonton recipe in this cookbook is most certainly hers. The other large Asian cooking influences in my life would have to be my dear friend Isaac and of course Arla; who went out of their way to learn about Asian cooking and I was just lucky enough to absorb it from them as I could.

This cookbook contains a variety of recipes that have a common point of practicality. All can be made in the home with a minimum of resources. If you have the items listed under “necessary” in the Kitchen checklist (page 11) you'll be able to use these items to perform the same tasks done by many high tech gadgets. Of course, it will take a lot longer.

There are more than 200 recipes here that can help you plan menus made quickly and easily. You'll find international recipes including Mexican, Asian, Italian, and Greek dishes. There are more than 22 vegetarian recipes. Watch out. Strict vegetarians should not eat the Worcestershire sauce in Mushrooms in Burgundy- it contains anchovies.

I believe that each dinner should be well balanced. There should be a protein, starch and one or two vegetables. During the week, there usually isn't time to cook each part of the meal from scratch. An easy solution is to marinate your meat, fish, tofu, or poultry early in the day and bake it in the oven later. While your main dish is baking you can prepare an easy side dish and steam some vegetables. There are a variety of tasty side dishes available from packaged mixes which I tend to use with minor additions and alterations when pressed for time. These can be used in combination with your homemade recipes to create an easy tasty meal.

If you are looking for some great meal combinations that are easy to fix and taste great together, I have included some of my favorite party menus on the following pages. Menu ideas for various religious and holiday celebrations are listed in the back of the book near the index.



Easy Italian Night

Chicken Pasta Toss
Pseudo Caesar Salad
Bread & Garlic Butter



Going Greek Night

Fried Zucchini & Eggplant with Garlic
Dipping Sauce
Rustic Greek Salad with Chicken
Flat Bread
Baklava



Oriental Feast

California Rolls
Alison's Crab Rangoon
Alison's Spring Rolls
Roberta D's Thai Peanut Salad
Korean Barbeque Chicken (Dak Go Ghi)



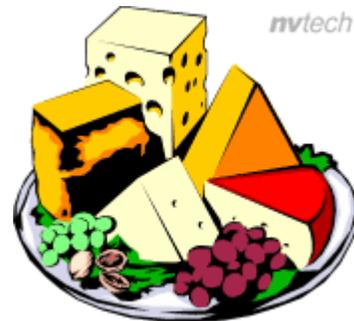
Fiesta Night

Guacamole & Chips
Tijuana Fish Tacos
Cilantro & Lime Black Beans
Spanish Rice



Fancy & Elegant Dinner

Stuffed Pork Chops or Water Chestnut
Stuffed Chicken Breast
Rice Pilaf
Squash Medley – Side Dish Size



Party Menu

Sourdough Bread Bowl Ranch Spinach Dip
Crudités & Cheese Board
Cheese or Sausage Stuffed Mushrooms
Seven Layer Walking Taco & Tortilla Chips
Teriyaki or Spicy Chicken Wings
Crock-pot Little Smoky Wieners
Roasted Red Pepper or Smoked Salmon
Zucchini Canapés

Party Preparedness & Planning

I am by no means Martha Stewart, yet I have hosted many successful parties and have actually been paid to plan and/or cater bridal showers, bachelorette parties, weddings, college reunions, ground breaking ceremonies, and grand opening celebrations. Here are some tips that I have picked up along the way for hosting a successful party.

Before a party, place items on the table that require no heating like chips, vegetables, bread bowl, and dips. Because your scheduled party time will never be the time when the guests are arriving, wait to serve your hot food. Judge your starting time for hot foods by the people you've invited to the party. I usually wait until the third or fourth guests have arrived before I put the hot foods in the oven. Microwave foods have a quicker preparation time, so judge these on an immediate basis.

Normally cooking times for appetizers are about 20 minutes. By the time you take them out of the oven, guests are ready for the hot food. If you're expecting a big crowd over a long night, make the hot food in batches. Latecomers will be upset if they missed "your famous coconut shrimp". Normally the first plates of hot foods are devoured immediately so be prepared to keep them coming along.

If you're afraid of running out of foods too quickly, have plenty of chips and veggies or fruit out for your guests to munch on. Put out two rounds of hot foods right away, and then give a little break before you whip up the next batch. This gives people a chance to digest their food. Some will realize they're not so hungry and don't need another six chicken wings – leaving them for your other guests to gorge themselves.

During the party, the buffet table may become slow and some of the hot foods will get cold. Be sure to check the food regularly throughout the party. If something has cooled, reheat it in either the microwave or the oven. No one will tell you why guests aren't eating the food, but your first thought should be the temperature and freshness of your appetizers. If you are serving hot dishes, be sure they can easily be transferred to a pan or dish that can be popped into the oven for reheating. Leave your oven on during the course of the party so you don't have to wait for it to heat up. This can cause the kitchen to be warmer, which isn't a problem during winter usually. I tend to use a toaster oven which can get to the needed temperature much faster than a conventional oven and doesn't heat up the house. I tend to stay away from microwaving things if I can due to the unpredictability the microwave can have on the texture of the food, as well as its moisture level.

Another aspect to monitor is the fullness of your platters. Try to keep the plates full. Rarely will someone eat the last chicken wing left on a plate. If you keep restocking the plates or even condensing all the appetizers onto one platter towards the end of the evening, the food will be more appealing.

If you want more selections for your party, consider storage, reheating times and methods when choosing your menu. Serve as many foods as you like and can prepare with reasonable preparation, which of course is all based on what you, the chef, finds to be reasonable. I take on fairly complicated dishes for the sheer joy of it, and tend to have as many as three appetizer dishes for a planned meal along with my ever present fruit or vegetables I serve with every menu. For example, my Hawaiian Luau menu calls

for Coconut Shrimp, Lomi Lomi Salmon, Fried Swordfish Poke, and assorted tropical fruits (pineapple, kiwi, bananas, papaya, mango, and melon varieties like honeydew, cantaloupe and watermelon) all as appetizers – one hot and three cold dishes, two of which can be prepared well in advance. The fruit in itself provides variety and color to the table. Try for as many different colors as possible, and even leave some of the fruit whole or cross sectioned just for display. Papayas are beautiful cross sectioned as are star fruit and kiwi.



Fruit display at my Hawaiian Luau. The punch bowl was filled with my Pineapple Orange Punch after the picture was taken.



Note that I use white serving dishes and bring the color to the party with the food, flowers, and the tablecloth. Also note the speaker above the Lomi-Lomi salmon under cling wrap. I piped in Hawaiian music to help set the mood.



If you can, use interesting shaped dishes, like this leaf dish I used for the Fried Swordfish Poke. I added green onions and an edible flower to the dish for attractiveness.



Serving hot food outdoors means keeping things covered and warm. Chaffing pans (steam trays) keep the food from getting cold and uninvited “guests” from helping themselves. No flies in Luau!



I tend to present my food whole when I can, and slice to the desired thickness per guest. Serving, even in a buffet line can help your guests tremendously since they are holding their own plates.

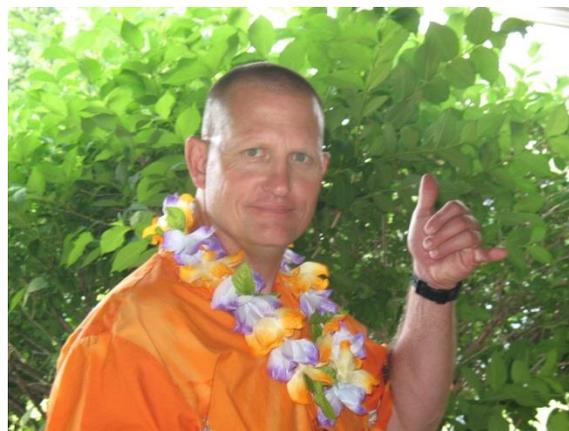


Remember, it is always better to have more food, than not enough. A Luau for forty people needs to be able to cover forty people eating some of everything. Forty chicken breasts, forty servings of pork, forty servings of everything!

A few things about general appearances and necessities of your buffet table; unless you want your table ruined or you have a glass table that is easily cleaned, use a table cloth, buffets are inherently messy. If you have a theme, get creative with the tablecloth. I've used old quilts for BBQs and floral sheets for brunches; even using a colorful serape accompanied by a straw sombrero for a Mexican theme using the sombrero as the chip bowl adds a special touch to the meal.

More words on theme parties. I have found that people will get 'into' the theme of the party more if you have appropriate music such as Mariachi for Mexican or Blue Grass for BBQ. There are numerous party supply stores online that cater to theme parties with relatively inexpensive ideas.

Amazon.com has wonderful downloads so you can pick and choose songs instead of buying entire discs of music. Make a playlist and pop it on your MP3 player, and there you go! I have included lists of theme music at the back of the cookbook in my special occasion's section.



Having a luau? Buy some colorful fake leis for each guest at less than a dollar a piece, hula skirts for about three dollars each. Shells are also very inexpensive. Check out your local dollar store. Remember, once you've purchased your theme do-dads, you can keep reusing them when needed. I do, and my guests appreciate the added flare.

Other tips for a successful party...make sure that you never run out of napkins and keep them easily seen by the guests. When serving food that must be kept in an electrical device, like a crock-pot or fondue pot, or something like that, be sure to duct tape the dangling cord to the floor or wall, so that it is not tripped over. Believe me; I have seen some party stopping – people injuring disasters from happy partying people tripping over dangling cords.

If you can, enlist others to do the clean up for you or resolve yourself to leaving everything until the next day. Don't start cleaning up when the party is still happening. It detracts from the mood. Of course you can restock the plates and shift the remaining buffet food around removing unused plates, but don't walk through with a garbage bag in hand picking up used paper plates, napkins and cups...definite mood killer.

Planning to do a party with the help of other people, relying upon them to bring critical pieces of the menu? More often than not you will be disappointed. Unless they have a vested interest in this occasion or are extremely reliable with a memory like a steel bear trap never ask someone to contribute the main dish or your only true side dish. Have them bring drinks, or appetizers, even those precious napkins, but never the ingredients to something important. I have had to send my husband or other reluctant enlistees to the supermarket at the last minute to get something that someone promised to bring but forgot.

Most of all, remember to have fun. You may be the host or hostess of this shindig and are responsible for the food, but nobody wants to be at a party where the people who are throwing it aren't having fun and aren't in a good mood. Screw that smile on, relax, and go with it. If you don't think you can, hire a caterer and let them worry about the food.

Thanksgiving Dinner Buffet

Remember that Thanksgiving can be stressful because of the family you are dealing with who may be arguing, drunk, or both. I do not go out of my way for Thanksgiving buffets as I do for other parties because people tend to overlook the truly pretty things I do with food, and are just hungry and wanting to gorge themselves.

Stick with white or silver trays and plates, let the color of the food speak for itself. I do recommend a nice centerpiece, preferably something that can be easily moved, and that you wouldn't cry over if it gets broken. Seriously, many disasters happen at Thanksgiving, and a buffet can help relieve the stress of plating and serving food to your family.



Clockwise: Sourdough Bread Bowl with Ranch Spinach Dip, Alison's Secret Mashed Potatoes, Holiday Stuffing in a baked pumpkin half, Roast Turkey, Wheat Rolls, Vegetable Crudités. Middle: Turkey Gravy.



Clockwise: Danny's Baked Beans, Michelle's Candied Yams, Deviled Eggs, Matt's Green Bean Casserole, Red Grape-Cranberry Sauce, Holiday Stuffing in a baked pumpkin half, Alison's Secret Mashed Potatoes. Middle: Dill Pickles, Garlic Stuffed Green Olives, and Large Black Olives.



Clockwise: Pumpkin pies (made from the other half of the baked pumpkin the stuffing is in), Zucchini Bread, Carrot Cake with Cream Cheese Icing.

Hors d'oeuvres and Dessert Buffets



Clockwise: Red grapes, hot & mild salsa, Super Spicy Tuna Melts, Mexican Shrimp Ceviche, fresh strawberries, white chocolate macadamia cookies, red raspberry swirl cheese cake, tortilla chips, bacon wrapped water chestnuts, bacon wrapped shrimp.



Know your guests! Do they like seafood and spicy flavor? If so, they will like this spread as it features three dishes with seafood, and at least two very spicy hot dishes.



Tower of desserts for everyone is very important. Fresh fruit, cookies, and cheesecake give a nice sweet variety. Someone is bound to like one of these sweet offerings.

Remember children might be coming and have things for them as well. I included individually wrapped string cheese, popcorn, and cheese flavored golden fish – a child’s version of the cheese plate and crackers seen on the opposite side of the table. Also, children really enjoy whimsical gestures. The miniature dill pickles I rolled in Italian deli meats on the bottom left of this picture are topped with cheese I cut out in the shapes of stars using a tiny cookie cutter like device from Pampered Chef. My guests’ children were delighted.



Dessert buffets are awesome because this is where you can allow your guests to chip in and bring some food. It is very easy for them to hit up the local bakery and supply very tasty desserts, and it helps with the variety.

