

(In loving memory of Patricia DuPree Baker, February 11, 1936 – March 23, 2011. Reprinted from September 2009.)



When visiting family and friends in North Carolina last week, I had the opportunity to see the new movie, "Julie and Julia" with my mother, the woman responsible for nurturing my love of cooking. While I savored the time with Mama, the movie almost hit too close to home for me! It made me remember Coq Au Vin (also known in our house as Purple Panic Chicken) spilled in the oven and across the kitchen floor. I had flashbacks of Vince suffering through some of my kitchen experiments (that weren't suitable for serving, much less eating) while diplomatically explaining to me that the dish was "good, but just not my taste."

And, hours of talking and discussing over and over again my insecurities about a dish or an event. I guess my point is, I don't know how I would have made it without throwing in the towel if I didn't have Mama and Vince in my corner. When I was a very young girl, I had an idea but no recipe for a dish I called "Hot Candy." I vaguely remember thinking it would be something gooey and chocolaty. Mama supported my interest in cooking but wouldn't let me near the stove. She finally set me up at the kitchen counter with some red and green Christmas lollipops and Nestle's Quick chocolate drink mix. I proceeded to concoct a disgusting mixture of candy dipped in thick chocolate milk that never dried much less turned into a candy coating. The events of the day got me over the whole "hot candy" deal but it didn't quench my interest in the activities that were taking place in my Mama's kitchen. I was always available to help mix and stir --- and taste! By the time I got to high school I was becoming a pretty good cook. Mama taught me how to make her wonderful spaghetti sauce and how to bake layer cakes and make homemade frosting. I learned how to make Chicken Chow Mein and Chocolate Chip-Oatmeal Cookies. I suppose there must have been some kitchen disasters back then, too. But, I don't remember them. I only remember Mama's loving support and patience with everything that I wanted to try to learn. When I was reminiscing with her about our kitchen memories, I joked, "Now that I'm a better cook I can also make a bigger mess." Mama politely disagreed with me and reminded me that she had witnessed years of my messes and was quite aware of what I was actually capable of. Which brings me back to my wonderful, supportive and tolerant husband, Vince. Vince is the number one witness for the prosecution as to my ability to completely wreck a kitchen. He also takes great pleasure in commending me for my ability to "dirty" every knife in the house when I'm cooking for a party. Becky Trask has told me for years that I married well.

And, she's right! Vince has had to endure multiple taste tests (not all successful), 10pm dinners when I return home late from an event, and piles and piles of dirty platters and chafing dishes. The list is just too long to name! The man is a saint. "Julie and Julia" made me contemplate my journey into the kitchen and the people who have helped me want to stay here. I didn't chose catering as a profession, somewhere along the line, it chose me. My life is all about food and the people I love and somehow in the whole crazy recipe I have turned out to be completely happy and satisfied! The recipes I'd like to share with you this week are some of my "training wheel" recipes. They're the first dishes I ever learned to prepare. All are easy and delicious and I hope you'll enjoy them, too. In keeping with the spirit of the movie, my inspiration for this column, I quote Julia Child when I say, "Bon Appetit!"

Beef and Pork Wontons

1 envelope vegetable soup mix (Lipton or Knorr)
½ pound ground beef
½ pound ground pork
1 cup bean sprouts (fresh or canned)
1 package frozen chopped spinach, cooked and squeezed dry
1 tablespoon white wine
½ teaspoon ground ginger
1 package wonton wrappers
Vegetable oil, for frying

Cook beef and pork until brown. Drain and set aside. In a medium bowl, combine soup mix, meat, bean sprouts, spinach, wine and ground ginger. Place 1 teaspoon of the mixture in the center of each wonton wrapper and seal. In a deep-fryer, heat oil to 375 degrees. Drop wontons in hot oil and fry until golden brown. Drain on paper towels. Makes 45 wontons.

Hot Dog Appetizers

1 package hot dogs
1 jar red currant jelly
1 jar Chinese hot mustard

Combine jelly with mustard. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat, stirring constantly. Slice hot dogs into bite-sized pieces and add to mixture. Simmer for approximately 30-45 minutes. Serve in a chafing dish or crock pot with cocktail picks. Serves 6 to 8.

Classic Spinach Salad

For the salad:

1 pound fresh baby spinach, stems removed, washed and dried
1 can sliced water chestnuts, drained
1 can bamboo shoots, drained
3 hard-boiled eggs, cubed
1 small red onion, thinly sliced
6 slices bacon, cooked and crumbled

For the dressing:

¾ cup vegetable oil
½ cup sugar
¼ cup vinegar

1/3 cup ketchup
2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce
2 teaspoons seasoned salt
1 tablespoon lemon juice

Place the ingredients for the salad in a large bowl. In a small bowl, whisk together the ingredients for the salad dressing. Toss the salad lightly with the dressing before serving. Serves 4.

Honey-Mustard Pork Tenderloin

1 whole pork tenderloin
4 tablespoons honey
2 tablespoons cider vinegar
2 tablespoons brown sugar
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
1/2 teaspoon paprika

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Combine ingredients thoroughly. Coat tenderloin with the marinade. Roast for 20-30 minutes, basting occasionally, until meat registers 160 degrees. Slice thinly to serve. Serves 4.

Chicken and Broccoli Divan

1 pound fresh broccoli, cut into spears, cooked and drained
1-1/2 cups cubed cooked chicken
1 can cream of broccoli soup
1/3 cup milk
1/2 cup shredded swiss cheese
1 tablespoon butter, melted
2 tablespoons dry bread crumbs

In a 9-inch pie plate or shallow casserole, arrange broccoli; top with chicken. Combine soup and milk; pour over chicken. Sprinkle with cheese. Combine butter and bread crumbs; sprinkle over cheese. Bake in a preheated 350 degree oven for 25 minutes or until heated through. Serves 4.

Pineapple Au Gratin

2 large cans chunk pineapple, drained
6 tablespoons all-purpose flour
1 cup sugar
2 cups shredded sharp cheddar cheese
1 stick butter, melted
1 sleeve butter-flavored crackers, crushed (Ritz)

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Mix together pineapple, flour, sugar and cheese. Place in a greased casserole dish. Sprinkle crushed crackers on top. Drizzle with melted butter. Bake, uncovered, for 20-30 minutes or until heated through. Serves 8.

Italian New Potatoes

12-15 new potatoes, cut in half
1 package Italian dressing mix, dry
1 stick butter, melted

Combine melted butter with dressing mix. Place potatoes in a casserole dish. Pour butter mixture over potatoes, tossing to coat well. Cover. Bake in a preheated 350 degree oven for 45-50 minutes or until potatoes are tender. Serves 4 to 6.

Chewy Butterscotch Bars

1 (12-ounce) package Butterscotch Flavored Morsels

1 cup butter

1/3 cup light brown sugar, firmly packed

1/3 cup sugar

3 eggs

2 teaspoons vanilla extract

2 cups all-purpose flour

1 cup chopped pecans

1/4 teaspoon salt

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. In saucepan, over low heat, melt morsels and butter; stir until smooth. Pour butterscotch mixture into large bowl; stir in sugars. Add eggs and vanilla; mix well. Stir in flour, nuts and salt. Pour into greased 13x9-inch baking pan. Bake 25 to 30 minutes or until wooden pick inserted near center comes out clean. Store loosely covered at room temperature. Makes 36 bars.

Tollhouse Pie

1 stick butter

2 eggs

1 cup sugar

1/2 cup flour

1 teaspoon vanilla

1 cup chocolate morsels

1 cups chopped pecans

1 unbaked deep-dish pie shell

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Melt butter and remove from heat. Beat eggs and mix with sugar, flour and vanilla. Add melted butter and mix well. Stir in chocolate chips and nuts. Pour into unbaked pie shell and bake for 45 minutes or until pie is set. Serve chilled. Serves 6.

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