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World-wide recipe swap

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For The Tennessean

Bloggers share a wealth of food tips at your fingertips from their Web food journals

Renee Kho recently gave me a recipe for a flourless chocolate cake that she made for her mom's birthday, to rave reviews. It rivaled the pound cake recipe she shared last summer, when she went through a spate of comfort cooking after her uncle's death.

We've never met or talked, yet I know more about Kho and what she eats every day than I do many of my friends. I'm connected to Kho through her food Web log, or blog.

Like the recipe exchanges that used to take place over backyard fences, food blogs are a way for modern cooks to brag about their culinary triumphs or ask for advice when a cake falls. Mostly by amateur cooks — some are by professional chefs — food blogs are a way for ordinary people to write about what they cook, what they eat and what they are passionate about.

The major difference is, with the Internet, that backyard fence opens to the entire world.

Take Kho, for instance. She recently raved about a restaurant she tried, detailing dishes that made my mouth water. But it may be a while before I get there, since the restaurant is in Singapore, where Kho lives.

There are hundreds of food blogs on the Internet, some focused on a particular topic (beer or French cooking) others more general (what I made for dinner tonight). No matter your level of culinary expertise, you're bound to find a blog that draws you in and keeps you checking back. Many are updated daily, if not weekly, and you can strike up a relationship with other cooks by leaving comments on a particular entry or e-mailing the blogger directly. It's this type of virtual conversation that elevates food blogs beyond cookbooks.

What follows is my own log of five days cooking from different food blogs.

Day 1

With dinner being leftover turkey from the weekend, all I needed was a fast dessert tonight.

Wanting something chocolate, I turned to the promisingly named The Best Easy Chocolate Birthday Cake Ever on www.gas.troblog.com. It wasn't anyone's birthday, but Cathy Seipp's recipe didn't call for any unusual ingredients, and it made a 9-inch square cake, just the size I wanted.

As promised, the cake came together easily and cooked up dense and moist. Cathy offered some great shortcuts, such as not bothering to sift the flour, and melting the butter in the microwave.

The result: a delicious, easy cake that didn't even require icing.

Day 2

Tonight it was time to transform the turkey leftovers into something more substantial. I turned to a favorite blog, Cooking for Engineers (www.cookingforengineers.com), where amateur chef Michael Chu takes a scientific approach to food reminiscent of Alton Brown's Food Network show *Good Eats*. Although his traditional chicken pot pie recipe looked involved, Chu assured me, "It's a breeze to make."

I wouldn't recognize Chu if he were standing in front of me, but I trust him. So I plunged in.

He was right. The pie came together easily. I was so excited about how good it looked, I forgot to brush the surface with a beaten egg, as Chu suggested, to give it a shiny brown color. As a result, mine ended up pale and somewhat floury on top. But it tasted wonderful.

Day 3

Desiring something light yet substantial for dinner, I turned to the Cooking With Amy blog (www.cookingwithamy.blogspot.com).

"There is something comforting about leek and potato soup," Amy wrote.

Boy, she wasn't kidding. How could only four ingredients turn out such a sublime, nourishing, healing bowl of comfort?

Day 4

Looking for a meatless dinner, I turned to the Too Many Chefs blog (www.toomanychefs.com). The Mexican black bean tart sounded good, and, with the aid of step-by-step photos, it came together easily.

Barrett Buss, who works in the computer field in Chicago, took the time to explain some of his ingredients, which was helpful. (You can substitute epazote, an herb found in some Mexican markets, for cilantro.)

"I warn you that you might have to limit yourself when you start eating," Barrett wrote. "The finished tart is filling and spicy and you will want to overstuff yourself."

He was right. My husband and I quickly ate half the tart before I remembered his warning and reined ourselves in.

The good news is that it heated up wonderfully for lunch the next day.

Day 5

Today I needed to use up some over-ripe bananas. I turned to Singapore resident Kho's blog (www.shiokadelicious.com) and found a recipe for low-fat banana bread.

As an example of the insight a global blog can provide, Kho described how she lined her pan with banana leaves so the loaf would not stick. She said that cooking oil spray could be substituted.

Sans banana leaves, the loaf came out fine. Not great, as it had that tell-tale spongy texture of many low-fat recipes containing minimum oil.

And, not to brag, but my original recipe for banana bread has been winning kudos for years, not to mention a blue ribbon at a county fair.

Maybe I'll just have to launch my own blog and share my recipe with the blogosphere.

What is a blog?

Blog is a shortened version of "Web log," which is an online personal journal. There are thousands out there, some personal, some professional, focused on everything from sports to politics to . . . well, food.

What elevates a blog is that it usually contains hyperlinks (for example, a link to a Web site selling the whisk a cook is raving about). And most blogs allow you to leave comments and read comments left by others, a particularly helpful feature when you want to know how others have fared in trying a recipe.

Where to look

Finding a food blog isn't tough. A good place to start is at www.globeofblogs.com. There, you can select blogs by categories (there are 689 blogs about food and cooking listed, including 35 about

vegan cooking). You can find an alphabetized list of food blogs if you go to www.kiplog.com/food and click on "My list of food blogs & food resources."

Making your own blog

Once you start following a few blogs, you might think about creating your own. Setting up a blog is relatively easy, and there are several step-by-step resources out there, including Blogger.com and Typepad.com.

Keep in mind what you like best about other food blogs. For instance, I find the photos of the finished dishes as compelling as the stories behind them, so you might want to invest in a digital camera.

And keep in mind that the more often you update your blog, the better your chances are of gaining a regular following. Be sure you have the time and energy to devote to keeping your blog, and fan base, rolling.

A few of my favorites

Cooking With Amy: A blog of recipes, restaurant and product reviews by a woman in San Francisco. Just go to www.cookingwithamy.com.

Shiokadelicious: Singaporean Renee Kho is the director of her own company by day, cook and blogger on nights and weekends. Find Kho's blog at www.shiokadelicious.com.

Chocolate & Zucchini: This well-illustrated blog is by Clotilde, a 25-year-old Parisian who works as a computer engineer but has aspirations to be a food writer. Quite simply, it's at www.chocolateandzucchini.com.

101 Cookbooks: This is the most beautifully illustrated food blog, with fabulous photos of all the finished recipes, by Heidi Swanson, who (no surprise) recently published her first cookbook. And if you haven't figured out the pattern by now, you'll find this blog at www.101cookbooks.com.

Mexican black bean tart with cornmeal crust

Crust

1 cup all purpose flour

½ cup cornmeal

1 stick (8 tablespoons) butter, cut into 32 small cubes and chilled

¼ cup ice water

Pinch of salt

Black bean filling

2 cans drained black beans, preferably organic

¼ cup fresh chopped cilantro

Big pinch of salt

½ teaspoon black pepper

1 tablespoon Tabasco or Louisiana hot sauce

1 teaspoon cayenne pepper

1 tablespoon cumin

2 tablespoons olive oil

2 tablespoons tequila

2 tablespoon lemon juice

½ cup shredded Chihuahua cheese

Salsa

2 tomatoes, ripe and red, diced

1 jalapeño, chopped small

1 Anaheim pepper, chopped small

¼ cup fresh chopped cilantro

6 green onions, sliced thin — white and green portions

1 tablespoon lime or lemon juice

1 clove garlic minced fine

Preheat the oven to 400.

Crust: Sift flour, cornmeal and salt together in a large bowl. Cut the butter in and mix with your hands and/or a fork until the mix looks like a uniform mix of tiny crumbs or meal. You want to break the butter down, but not melt it.

Mix in the ice water well. You may need less water if the air is humid.

Form the dough into a ball in your hands. Flour the work surface and flatten the ball out into a disk. Roll the disk out into the appropriate shape for the pan you are using (a big circle if you're using a 9-inch tart pan, a rectangle if you're using a rectangular pan). You may need to fold the whole mess in again, rotate and re-roll the dough.

Once it holds together well and is large enough, move the dough into the tart pan and press down to make sure it squares off at the sides. Patch any holes and trim any overhang.

Prick the bottom with a fork several times. If you wish, you may add a piece of parchment and some pie weights to keep bubbles from forming. Place the tart crust in the oven for 15 minutes or until golden brown.

Filling: While the crust bakes, either in a blender or in a bowl with an immersion mixer, mash up the black beans. Add the olive oil, tequila and lemon juice to help it along if the beans are too dry to mash/blend.

Mix in the cilantro, salt, pepper, Tabasco, cayenne pepper and cumin (and olive oil, lemon juice, tequila if you haven't already) and mix well. Taste for heat and salt and adjust.

When the crust comes out, let it cool five minutes, then spoon in most of the black bean mix. You're aiming for almost filling the crust. Leave 1/16th of an inch between the top of the crust and the bean mix.

Spread ½ cup cheese on top of the black bean mix in the tart. Put the tart back in the oven for 18-20 minutes until the cheese on top is brown and the beans are heated through.

While that bakes, make the salsa: Mix together chopped ingredients well and let sit to let the flavors meld. If you prefer, you can make this the night before.

When the tart comes out let it cool for 10 minutes before removing it from the mold. It should come away easily. Slice into 1½-inch slices and spread the salsa on top of the tart with a spoon.

— *Recipe from www.toomanychefs.com*

Cathy Seipp's Best Easy Chocolate Birthday Cake Ever

1 cup milk

½ cup melted butter

2 eggs

1 teaspoon vanilla

1¾ cup white flour

1 cup sugar

¾ cup good quality unsweetened powdered cocoa

1 teaspoon baking powder

A few shakes of cinnamon

Combine liquid ingredients, then dry, and stir with wooden spoon.

Pour into 9-inch square glass cake pan.

Bake in 350-degree oven for 35-40 minutes until done.

—*Recipe from www.gastroblog.com*

Chicken pot pie

6 tablespoons butter, divided use

½ cup all-purpose flour

2 cups chicken broth

1½ cups whole milk

3 chicken breast halves, cooked and cubed

2 tablespoons sherry

Lemon juice

½ teaspoon nutmeg

Salt

White pepper

¾ cup peas

1½ cup carrots, chopped

1 medium onion, chopped

¼ cup celery

3 tablespoons parsley, minced

2 cups crust dough

Melt 4 tablespoons butter in saucepan or saucier over low heat. Pour flour in and whisk.

After one minute, remove from heat and add 2 cups chicken broth. Whisk until smooth.

Add milk and whisk over medium heat until simmering. Remove from heat and scrape the sides of the saucepan with a heat-proof spatula. Whisk vigorously to break any chunks and return to medium heat for one more minute.

Turn off heat and mix in chicken and sherry until evenly distributed. Add lemon juice, nutmeg, salt and white pepper to taste.

If peas and carrots are frozen, thaw in water and drain.

Melt remaining 2 tablespoons butter in nonstick skillet over medium heat. When butter is foaming, add onions, celery and carrots and cook until tender, about five minutes.

Stir vegetables (including parsley and peas) into creamed chicken and pour mixture into a 9-by-13-inch baking pan. Now top with either pie crust or biscuit dough. (I usually use biscuit dough because I like the fluffy texture.)

Using a pastry brush, brush beaten egg over the surface of the pot-pie crust to give it a brown color after baking.

After baking for 25-35 minutes at 400 degrees, the crust should be golden brown and the chicken mixture should be bubbling. Your pot pie is now complete and ready to serve.

—Recipe from www.cookingforengineers.com

Low-fat banana bread

1¾ cups plain flour

2 teaspoons baking powder

½ teaspoon baking soda

½ teaspoon salt

1 cup mashed ripe bananas (about 3 medium)

¾ cup sugar, divided use

2 large eggs

1/3 cup buttermilk (see note)

1 tablespoon vegetable oil

1 tablespoon vanilla extract

Line an 8½-by-4½-by-2½-inch loaf pan with banana leaves. (If not using banana leaves, coat the loaf pan with cooking spray.) Preheat the oven to 325 degrees.

Combine the flour, baking powder, baking soda and salt. Sift and set aside.

Break the bananas into chunks, sprinkle with a little sugar (taken from the ¾ cup of sugar listed in the recipe), and mash with a fork. The sugar helps to prevent the bananas from oxidizing into a dark, rather unappealing, color.

Using an electric mixer, beat the eggs and sugar, on medium-high speed, until thick and light, about 5 minutes.

Mix in the buttermilk, bananas, oil and vanilla. Beat until blended. Fold in the flour mixture until just blended.

Bake until the top is golden brown and a skewer inserted into the center comes out clean — about one hour. Turn out onto a rack, and let cool.

Note: You can substitute yogurt mixed with a dash of milk for the buttermilk.

—*Recipe from www.shiokadelicious.com*

Leek and potato soup

2 leeks (white and pale green parts only), cut in half lengthwise, then thinly sliced

1 tablespoon butter

3-4 potatoes peeled, cut in half, then sliced

4 cups or so of chicken broth or water or a combination (homemade broth is best, of course)

Salt & pepper to taste

Note: To clean the leeks, place the chopped leeks in a bowl of water and swish around until the leeks are clean. Lift the leeks out carefully, leaving the grit in the bottom of the bowl.

Melt butter in heavy large saucepan over medium heat. Add leeks; stir to coat with butter. Cover saucepan; cook until leeks are tender, stirring often, about 10 minutes. Add potatoes. Cover and cook until potatoes begin to soften, stirring often, about 5 minutes. Add liquid. Bring to boil. Reduce heat, cover and simmer until vegetables are very tender, about 20 minutes.

Puree soup in batches in processor until smooth or use an immersion blender directly in the pot. Thin with additional broth, water or milk if soup is too thick. This soup can be very smooth or chunky as you prefer. Season with a good amount of salt and a little pepper.

—*Recipe from www.cookingwithamy.blogspot.com*

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