

# SPICE, THE VARIETY OF LIFE

Issue 23

January 2025

Happy New Year!

I hope this newsletter finds you all happy, healthy and eager to start your new year!

January is a weird month where you are exhausted from all of the activity from the previous month, but you feel compelled to start the new year off full of energy, determination and the best of intentions for getting your life and your world in order.

While I can't help you with most of that, I decided that January might be a great time for an issue of tips, hacks and shortcuts in the kitchen.

While the kitchen is a happy place for most of us, we can always make it happier by making things easier, so enjoy and good luck with those New Year's Resolutions!

Gwen



## Cooking Tips and Hacks

As I read various articles, books and websites looking for information for the newsletter, I frequently come across random, but helpful tidbits of information. I have been keeping them on a word document, trying to decide what to do with them and it dawned on me that I could turn them into an issue. So, here we are. Get ready for a chaotic, but fact filled journey through my collection.

### Bits and Pieces

With the cost of food soaring, nobody wants to waste food. But what do you do with those random pieces left at the end of a cook?

Here are some ideas:

Eggs – If you have a recipe calling for only yolks or whites, did you know that egg yolks will last for about 4 days in the refrigerator, while the whites will last about a week. That gives you plenty of time to come up with something.

Tomato paste – if you are using tomato paste from a can and do not use the whole can, you can portion out the remaining paste by the tablespoon into an empty egg carton and freeze. Once frozen, you can place them in a zipper lock bag for future use.

Meat and vegetable trimmings- You should always keep 3 zipper lock bags in your freezer. One for vegetables, one for meat scraps and one for chicken bones and scraps. When the bags are full, you can throw them in a

pot with water and make your own stock. Then you can freeze the stock in ice cube trays and use as one of the *layers* of your cooking.

Garlic - If you have trouble using up a full head of garlic, then try mincing the whole head and freezing in one clove portions using the empty egg carton again. That way when you are cooking you can grab as many cloves as you need (they defrost very quickly) without worrying about the rest drying up.

### Substitutes

There is very little more frustrating than getting halfway through a recipe only to discover that you are out of an ingredient! Here are some ideas for some quick substitutions for many of cooking's basic ingredients.

If the recipe calls for	You can use
Fresh garlic	½ tsp dried, minced garlic for one clove of fresh
IT prepared mustard	1 tsp dry, ground mustard
IC shortening	⅔C oil
IC cream	IC evaporated milk, if you are using it for thickening a soup, use skim and add 1½ tsp of cornstarch
IT flour for thickening	1½ tsp cornstarch
IC Half and Half	1½T melted butter and enough milk to bring it up to IC.
1 tsp vinegar	2 tsp lemon juice
½C chopped fresh onion	3T dried, minced onion
Ricotta	small curd cottage cheese (and vice versa)
Teriyaki sauce	IC soy sauce + ½C sugar + 2 cloves garlic + 1 tsp ginger - heat until sugar dissolves and liquid gets a bit thick.
Brown sugar	IC white sugar + 1-2T molasses
Buttermilk	1T lemon juice + 15T milk
Cream of Tartar	2 tsp lemon juice or vinegar

### Converting Dried Ingredients to Cooked

Sometimes it's hard to know how much pasta or grains and legume to cook. There is a pretty standard formula for all of those.

Pasta – 8 ounces of dried pasta will cook up to 3½ -4 cups of cooked pasta. This will be a little off for some of the larger sizes, but it's a good starting point.

Legumes - 1 pound of dried beans will yield about 6-7 cups cooked.

Grains – Generally 1 cup of grains will require 2 cups of water and will yield 3-4 cups of cooked product.

### Cooking Times and Temps

Timing is everything they say, and it is never truer than in the kitchen. Here's some tips to help make sure your food is cooked perfectly.

Fish – Cook fillets or steaks over medium high heat for 10 minutes per inch of thickness.

### USDA Minimum Meat Cooking Temperatures

Product	Minimum temp
Beef, Pork & Veal -steaks, chops, & roasts	145° F (this equates to medium doneness)
Ground meats	160° F
Poultry	165° F
Ham	145° F
Eggs	160° F
Fish & Shellfish	145° F
Leftovers & Casseroles	165° F

Converting Slow cooker to Oven cooking times and vice versa

Stovetop/Oven Cooking Time	Low setting	High Setting
15-30 minutes	4-6 hours	1-2 hours
30 minutes – 1 hour	5-7 hours	2-3 hours
1-2 hours	6-8 hours	3-4 hours
2-4 hours	8-12 hours	4-6 hours

## Random One-Off Tips

Okay, here's where a bit of the chaos comes in. These are the ones that didn't fit into any specific category, but they are just as helpful.

-Really, really want a baked potato but don't want to heat up the whole kitchen, try the slow cooker. Spray the potato with cooking spray and sprinkle whatever seasonings you want and wrap it in foil. Place in the slow cooker, add ½ cup water and cook on slow for 6-7 hours or high for 4-5.

- Can't find your clay brown sugar saver? Try throwing a couple of marshmallows or slices of bread into the cannister.

- For creamier mashed potatoes, put the potatoes in cold water and bring everything to boil together.

- Did you know that Instant mashed potatoes can work wonders as a thickener in soups and stews?

- Having trouble getting the crock of your slow cooker really clean? Try filling it with water and white vinegar, with a tsp or two of baking soda and turn on low for 4 hours.

- When adapting a recipe for the slow cooker, cut the liquids in half. Conversely, if starting with a slow cooker recipe and adapting to the oven or stovetop, double the liquid.

- Dusting chicken with baking powder makes for crispier skin. You can even use the baking powder to make wings if you are sensitive to gluten, just use a thicker coating.

- Make double, freeze half in portion sizes. Many sites have these sort of gigantic ice cube trays that hold 1-2 cups. You can freeze stock, stew, soup in serving sized portions, then transfer them to bags.

-Invest in a vacuum sealer.

And last but not least,

- Use an empty water bottle to separate the egg yolk from whites. Squeeze the bottle, place it over the yolk, then stop squeezing the bottle and pull it up. The yolk will be pulled up into the water bottle!



See you next month!

*Gwen*

## What's new

While I won't be at any shows until March, the store will be open for business as usual!

I'll be busy working on all of the projects I mentioned last month, so I hope you will stay in touch.

Happy new year!

# SPICE, THE VARIETY OF LIFE

Issue 24

February 2025

It's February!

I hope this newsletter finds you all happy, healthy and eager to start your new year!

I have taken a short break from shows, (I will be at the Capital Arts and Crafts Fair in March) and have used this down time to see what's next for Gwen's Blends.

I have been reading a bunch of books and websites and decided that I needed to refine my mission statement. I know that I want to make cooking good food accessible to everyone, but why? What's the big deal about cooking? Why is it important to share it? A big part of it for me is sharing something that brings **me** joy, but why should you all come along for the ride? Read on and find out!

*Gwen*

## Why Cook?

With all of the pre-made, pre-portioned, delivered right to your door options available now, why should you cook? I may be a tad biased, but I can think of several reasons.

Cost – all of those designer options are pretty pricey.

Flavor – by cooking your own food you get it your way!

Fun – cooking is fun, especially if you do it with or for someone you love.

Health – not only is food you cook yourself healthier for you, but the act of cooking it has its own benefits.

So, the first reason is pretty self-explanatory, especially with the cost of everything today. Why spend \$50 on a dinner that you still have to do all of the work, when you can stop by the store, pick up a few things and feed your family for \$20 or so? The days of \$10 meals might be gone, but \$20 is more than enough to put a feast on the table no matter what cuisine you prefer.

Flavor is my favorite reason to cook. I mean, if it wasn't, I would certainly be in the wrong business, wouldn't I? Being able to vary my menu regularly with a robust spice cabinet allows me to cook the foods that I like the best as well as stretching my palate and exploring new recipes. While spices have a reputation for being expensive, a

little can go a long way, meaning that they can also be a part of the first reason.

That brings us to the third and fourth reasons listed.

They are somewhat related, so it makes sense to weave them together here. After all, fun makes you happy and happy makes you more healthy, so it is kind of a two for one deal.

When I was much younger (back in the last century), cooking Chinese food at home in your own wok was very popular. I enjoyed it as much for the final product as for the food prep. All of the chopping was a really great way to wind down from the chaos of the day. I had several friends who shared my enthusiasm, so we began to have wok-a-thons, where we all gathered (bringing our own woks) at one house or another and cooked together. We discovered that Motown music helped create a great rhythm for chopping, so we would crank up the Four Tops or the Temptations and sing and dance around the kitchen as we cooked. Those were some of the best meals. Not only was the food terrific if I do say so myself, but the companionship, as well as the outright silliness of the evening culminated in an experience that we all loved.

I think most of us will agree that food eaten with friends and family in a warm, happy, fun environment always seem to taste better. It is also better for us. I'll bet that most of you assumed that I was referring to eating low fat, or low salt, or vegetarian when I mentioned healthy eating and while cooking for yourself does make it easier to eat healthy food, it turns out that the benefits go way deeper than that.

I make no secret of the fact that I am total geek, so I am going to start off with some science here. Recent research is beginning to show that eating in a positive frame of mind is healthier than eating in a negative state of mind.

When you are happy at a meal, your hypothalamus sends positive vibes to your salivary glands and all of the other parts of your digestive system. This is the reason for that "mouthwatering" effect food can have on you. It also gets your whole digestive system amped to get going. This results in more complete digestion of the foods you have eaten as well as full metabolism of the nutrients.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, a negative environment sends out different signals and the result is often incomplete breakdown of the foods. This leaves food in your system longer and creates an environment for toxic byproducts to be released, the good bacteria in your gut being killed off and less that complete calorie burn. That last one can be a cause of weight gain since the calories not burned are stored as fat. Doesn't sound too ideal, does it?

In addition, we all know how prepared foods are full of lots of preservatives, flavor enhancers, stabilizers, etc. Another item found in higher quantities in most prepared items is sugar. I don't know about you, but I don't remember making salad dressings with sugar, or bread, much of anything else for that matter. Aside from the obvious caloric impact of too much sugar, it has also been shown to cause inflammation and to worsen depressive symptoms.

So now that we know that cooking for ourselves can be good for our body, let's talk about the ways it is good for our souls. Like my wok-a-thons, cooking is a gateway to socialization. Getting together with friends over dinner is an ancient ritual. The phrase "breaking bread" actually comes from the ancient tradition of the Jewish Sabbath, where the 12 loaves are broken apart and shared among the attendees. The word companion itself leads us back to food. The word is derived from the Latin words, "con" meaning "with" and "panis" meaning "bread".

In addition, cooking increases self-confidence. The creative expression of cooking and sharing food, provides positive feedback and can increase feelings of well-being. Just as I enjoyed the act of chopping things for the wok, the act of meal prep can lead to lower levels of stress and increased ability to reach a state of mindfulness. Feelings of being overwhelmed by life can be reduced by cooking. Taking on a small project that you have control over can begin to lay the foundation for coping with larger challenges. There is even a school of thought that utilizes "Kitchen therapy" as part of a multi-faceted approach to dealing with some mental health challenges.

All in all, it seems to me that cooking at home is a pretty good way of making your life happier, healthier and a

whole lot more fun. So, let's look at few recipes designed to be shared.

Take care and I'll see you next month!

Gwen

## Vegetable Soup

### Ingredients

2 T Olive oil  
1 Yellow onion, chopped  
2 Carrots, chopped  
2 Celery Stalks, chopped  
3 cans Chicken Broth 14.5 oz. each  
1 C Water  
½ lb. Yukon gold potatoes, cut into 1" cubes  
1 can Diced Tomatoes  
¼ lb. Green beans, cut into 1" pieces  
1 C Broccoli, chopped  
2 tsp **Gwen's Blends Seasoning**

### Instructions

Heat oil in a large saucepan or stockpot, over medium high heat.  
Add carrots, onion, and celery and cook until softened, but not browned.  
Add broth, water, potatoes, and seasoning and bring to boil.  
Reduce heat and simmer for 15 minutes, partially covered.  
Add tomatoes, green beans and broccoli, return to simmer and cook until vegetables are tender.

**Our recommendations: Italian Seasoning, Tuscan Seasoning.**

## Chicken Poppers

### Ingredients

8 Chicken breasts, thin cut  
1 Jalapeno  
4 oz. Cheese (your choice)

¼ C Breadcrumbs  
1½ tsp **Gwen's Blends Seasoning**  
6 T Butter, melted  
2 T Parmesan, grated (optional)

### Instructions

Preheat oven to 425°  
Rinse chicken and pat dry.  
Stem and seed the jalapeno and cut into 8 strips.  
Cut cheese into 8 strips as well.  
Lay chicken flat, place 1 strip of jalapeno and 1 strip of cheese on the chicken and then roll up.  
Combine the breadcrumbs and seasoning and put in a bowl.  
Brush the rolled up chicken with the melted butter and then roll in the breadcrumbs.  
Place the breaded chicken on a sheet pan and drizzle the remaining butter over the rolls.  
Bake for 20 minutes.

**Our recommendation: Southwestern Rub, Adobo Seasoning, Nate's Nashville Hot, Ranch Seasoning.**

## Macaroni & Cheese

### Ingredients

8 oz. Cooked pasta  
12 oz. Evaporated milk  
4 T Butter, melted  
2 Eggs  
5 C Cheese, grated  
1½ C Milk  
1 T **Gwen's Blends Seasoning**

### Instructions

Preheat oven to 350°.  
Beat eggs with seasoning blend.  
Add butter and milk.  
Stir in pasta and cheese.  
Put in a greased 9x13 casserole pan.  
Bake 50 minutes.

Add-ins: Bacon, ham, lobster

**Our recommendation: Cajun Blend, Ranch Seasoning, Southwestern Rub.**

## What's New!

After much thought and deliberation, I am proud to introduce you to the new look of Gwen's Blends...



Still the same fresh taste inside, just a little fancier on the outside. There will be 3 sizes, and the size of each variety will be based on its cost.

2 oz. size      \$4.00

4 oz. size      \$6.00

8 oz. size      \$9.00

I am still working on getting the website updated, hopefully in the next couple of weeks. Until then, I will honor what is currently in the store.

Can't wait to see you at the

Spring Capital Arts and Crafts Festival

March 21-23 at the Dulles Expo Center!

# SPICE, THE VARIETY OF LIFE

Issue 25

March 2025

Wow! This year is flying by.

As I said last month, Gwen's Blends has been going through a bit of a transition. Rebranding was a big deal for me, and it has led to a lot of other ideas about taking things to the next level. Nothing radical, and certainly nothing that affects the quality and pricing of my blends, but more along the lines of reaching a larger audience.

I am not sure exactly what that looks like, but I'll keep all of you in the loop as I figure it out.

In the meantime, please enjoy this month's article, and if you enjoy it, please share with anyone that enjoys food.

*Gwen*



## The Art? of Cooking

While we all know that really good food comes from the heart, it is also true that much of what we do in the kitchen to manipulate the foods we are preparing is based on scientific process. I think you all know that I am a geek first, chef second, so the science intrigues me. Let's take a look at some of those scientific things and hopefully you will find some of it intriguing as well.

**Sidebar: Did you know that the word "chef" comes from the Latin "Caput" which meant "head". This was transformed into "Chief" and then shortened to "Chef".**

Have you ever wondered why you can reach your hand into an oven set to 450° and not feel anything more than a bit of warmth, but if you were to stick your hand into boiling water at 212°, you would suffer some pretty serious burns? It is the same sort of effect that while running your finger through a flame is not dangerous, but dripping hot wax on your skin can create a significant burn. The answer is Science, of course. Heat is transferred in several ways, with the heat being transferred from molecule to molecule. Most ovens utilize convection, or the circulation of hot air around the food. It can be passive, like most standard kitchen ovens, or active like "Convection Ovens". The molecules in air are spaced somewhat far apart compared to a liquid, so fewer are in actual contact with your skin at any given moment. Conduction, on the other hand is the act of applying heat



directly to an item. When you touch the boiling water or melted wax, the denser arrangement of molecules in the liquid, means more heat being transferred directly to the skin in contact with the liquid. These are the two most reliable and consistent methods of cooking.

The other two major methods of cooking are a little less consistent and accurate. Radiant heat, cooking over an open flame, like on a grill, combines both convection and conduction. The flames are heating the air, but they are also heating the grill, so the food is getting a double whammy and without close attention can end up being overcooked or cooked unevenly. The fact that the fire is outside and subject to the wide-open spaces, also means a lot of heat is lost adding to the lack of precise control. Radiation, or microwave cooking, is the least predictable method. Electromagnetic waves carrying heat move through the food with a sort of random pattern, leading to what we have all seen come out of a microwave, raw on the inside and burnt at the edges. Microwaves are great for short spurts to re-heat things, but for longer term cooking, not so much.

Frying, while technically a type of conduction, has a few idiosyncrasies that make it a little different. The temperature of the oil is usually quite high to facilitate the cooking without allowing the oil to penetrate your food. That is why smaller pieces of food fare better in the deep fryer than larger ones. The more surface area, the more evenly the food cooks. Different oils also act differently. Oil high in saturated fats (animal fats) will produce a crispier crust, but as we all know, that comes at a price in terms of cholesterol. Lower saturated oils (plant based) are more commonly used. Try to pick one with a higher smoke point (meaning less likely to burn) and a taste that will not conflict with what you are preparing.

Why cook meat at all? Why don't we eat it raw like our ancestors? Good questions. The main reason is that unlike our ancestors that killed and ate their meat in a short space of time to prevent getting sick from rotting meat, we now have a greater length of time between the killing and the eating, so there is more of an opportunity for the meat to become tainted. Cooking eliminates the hazard of pathogens and parasites. Cooking also does something else amazing. It breaks down the proteins in

meat and makes them easier to chew (unless of course you cook it to death). Why that matters is that we don't have the same kind of teeth that our ancestors did. Evolution downsized our teeth to make more room in our skulls for brains, which allowed us to be able to figure out that fire + meat = easier to chew among other things. Acids can also be used to break down the proteins in meat, which is why we tend to marinate tougher cuts of meat like flank steaks or London broil.

**Sidebar: The Maillard Reaction is the browning of meat over high heat, caramelizing the natural sugars in meat and enhancing the flavor. Patting the meat dry before cooking maximizes the effect.**

That leads us into our next science lesson on Brining. Brining means to drive water out. It concentrates flavor and depending on the water content can firm up texture or tenderize. A brine is generally considered to be a liquid made with salt and water but brining can also mean pre-treating with salt for a length of time. Most brines also include sugar to help round out the profile. In brining, or more commonly called pickling, vegetables, however, the sugar plays a more important role. I once tried to make pickles without sugar for a friend on a zero-carb diet and they were awful. Much of cooking is like chemistry. Just like layering flavors changes the way things taste, combining certain ingredients can change the molecular structure of some foods and that also changes the taste/texture. Dill pickles made without sugar in the brine end up having a bitter taste. It is also important to note that not all things will brine well. Meat for example tends to be a good substrate since the high salt content penetrates the tissue of meat and dissolves proteins that would otherwise contract during cooking, leading to a more tender piece of meat. In the fruit and vegetable world the higher the water content, the better the final product. Cucumbers, cabbage, and onions all pickle remarkably well. Potatoes, hard winter squashes and Brussel sprouts, with their lower water content, not so much.

Brining leads us to fermentation. Fermentation is the anaerobic breakdown of carbohydrates. It is facilitated by organisms like bacteria or yeast and in its simplest form is

the breakdown of complex carbohydrates to simpler compounds like alcohol or organic acids. Think cabbage to kimchi, or grape juice to wine. From Yogurt to sourdough bread, fermentation is a more widely used process than most of us realize. If you are interested in giving it a try, Alton Brown actually has several How-to videos and several chapters in his cookbooks devoted to fermentation. There's a recipe to try at the end of the column.

So, there you have it. A brief summary of how understanding science can help you grow as a chef and lead you to making some amazing food that you might not have dared try. I hope I didn't bore you!

See you soon!

*Gwen*

## Fermented Corn Salsa

### Ingredients

- 3 C Corn kernels
- 3 T Onion, diced
- ¼ C Tomato, diced
- 2 T Bell pepper, diced (to increase heat, up the Scoville count on your peppers)
- 2 Garlic cloves, minced
- 2 T Lime juice
- 1 tsp **Southwestern Rub**
- ½ T Salt
- 3½ C Water

### Instructions

Add all of the ingredients except the salt and water in a large bowl and toss together.

Mix the salt and water, set aside.

Fill a 1 qt jar with your salsa, packing it down somewhat until it reaches about 2-3 inches of jar unfilled.

Place a fermentation weight on top to prevent vegetables from floating when you add brine.

Pour brine over everything, including weight, leaving the

air space unfilled.

Close the jar and leave in a place that is between 70-80° F for 48 hours.

Open and taste, if it needs more tang, re-wash the weight and place back in the jar. DO NOT ferment for over 72 hours.

Eat right away or refrigerate for up to 2 weeks.



## What's New!

**Can't wait to see you at my upcoming festivals!**

### Spring Capital Arts and Crafts Festival

March 21-23

Dulles Expo Center, Chantilly

### Annual Hayfield Secondary Craft Fair

April 5 10 AM – 4 PM

7630 Telegraph Rd, Alexandria, VA 22315

### South Riding Mosaic Festival

May 3 2 PM – 6 PM

South Riding Town Square

Old Town Arts & Crafts Festival

June 7 10AM – 5PM

Old Town Alexandria Waterfront at the base of Prince  
Street



## Spice, The Variety of Life

Issue 26

April 2025

Making your food budget work without sacrificing flavor

We are all aware of the rising cost of living in the Washington metropolitan area right now. Groceries in the area are hovering around 10% higher than the national average and are expected to continue to rise as the bird flu, droughts and other factors impact food production and import.

That being said, it is still possible to eat well without breaking the budget. And by "eating well" I mean yummy, varied and healthy. Sometimes it just takes a little planning and maybe an afternoon in the kitchen to set yourself up.

I have put together a few tips to get you thinking about how you can continue to eat the way that you want and still keep an eye on your bank balance too.

*Gwen*



Meal prep gets a bad rap in my opinion. It doesn't have to mean assembly line production managed with military precision. It can simply mean thinking long term when you are cooking. If you are going to make soup, can you make a little more and freeze it for a quick meal later? If chicken thighs are on sale for a ridiculously low price, can you buy an extra pack or two, separate them into single meal portions, marinate or dry rub them and freeze them for a quick thaw and bake? If you need an ingredient that is perishable and you won't be using all of it, can you find a way to preserve it long enough to find another way to use it up? A few issues back, I pulled together a list of kitchen hacks and tips. Take a look at that, (or reach out and I'll re-send it to you) and see if some of those feel doable. I am going to through a few ideas out here to get you going. Please take them and run with

your own ideas, palate preferences and storage space limitations.

So first of all, take a moment to sit down and think about what you enjoy eating. Are you a fan of chicken noodle soup in the winter? Do you love stir fry? Tacos? Once you have a sense of the menu, start to think about the ingredients. What's canned or dried, what freezes well, what has a long life in the refrigerator? Think in terms of things you can buy on sale and have on hand when you are ready to cook. Every frugal shopper will tell you that a well-stocked pantry is the key to quick, easy and cost effective cooking.

While fresh herbs are amazing in the summer, it is important to remember that most spices are dried and keep well in a cool dark cabinet. Keeping a couple of blends that you like, on hand, helps you broaden the scope of your menu.

I take a look at the sale flyers before I shop and pencil out a menu for the week. I also keep an eye on really good prices for things I might not need this week but are shelf stable. I love a good lasagna in the winter, so come fall I start to watch for canned tomatoes & pasta. Summertime light eating means stir fry so canned water chestnuts or corn, and dried fruits and nuts to mix in with farro or rice for a filling salad.

Watching the sales at the meat counter can also be productive. Ground beef can be browned, drained and frozen for quick tacos or Bolognese sauce. My favorite prep is with chicken. I'll buy a large pack or two and when I get home, split them into portions of about the size of two meals. Using a vacuum sealer or zipper lock bags, I will add a marinade or a dry rub, let them sit in the fridge for a couple of hours and then pop them in the freezer. Then, take them out the night before and place in the fridge to thaw out for cooking the next day. The best part is that I use a different seasoning for each bag, meaning I can eat a different meal each time.

Stews and soups are an easy make ahead. For very little extra work, you can create several meals at once. Freezing in serving sized portions is easy. I found these trays online and they work perfectly.



Once everything is frozen solid, you can pop them out and place in plastic bags to save space. They work well for soups, stews, meatloaf, pulled pork or beef, even pastas.

The last big saver is getting in the habit of saving lots of bits and pieces. I keep a couple of bags in the freezer, one for chicken and one for vegetables. All the trimmings or bones, all the end pieces or the just didn't finish it in time leftovers go in and when they get full, I make stock. Store bought stock is not cheap and most of them have a fair amount of salt. Making my own means I can flavor my own way and storing in the same trays above or even ice cube trays, lets me use as much or as little as I need at a time. Even the carcass of a store-bought rotisserie chicken can be the basis of a delicious pasta dish. I have included a few basic recipes below, but spread your wings, get creative and have fun.

Sidebar – If you are like me with a finicky or elder pet, then stocks and stews are a good way to supplement their diets and are way cheaper than pet food.

Be Safe,

*Gwen*

## Vegetable Broth

### Ingredients

- 1 Onion
- 4 Carrots
- 3 Celery stalks with leaves
- 1 Parsnip
- 1 Sweet potato
- 1 Leek
- (All vegetables are left unpeeled and chopped into 2" chunks.)
- 10 C Water
- 2 T **Gwen's Blend Seasoning**

### Instructions

Place everything in a large stock pot and bring to boil.

Lower heat and let simmer about 2 hours.

Salt & pepper if needed.

Remove large chunks of vegetables and set aside in a bowl.

Strain the broth through a colander lined with cheesecloth.

Add the large pieces to the colander and press to remove as much broth as you can, then discard.

Let cool and store.

Note: You can substitute any combination of vegetables that you prefer.

**Our Recommendations: Summer Blend, Tuscan Blend or for a spicier kick, Berbere.**

Notes: You can roast the vegetables for a deeper flavor, but it is not required.

## Chicken Bone Broth

### Ingredients

- 3 qt Water
- 2 lb. Chicken wings, backs, necks (the more cartilaginous and bonier, the better)
- 3 Celery stalks
- 2 Carrots, unpeeled

- 1 Onion, quartered
- 2 Bay leaves
- 2 T Gwen's Blend Seasoning

### Instructions

Place everything in a large stock pot. (The vegetables can be placed in whole, just wash them first.)

Bring to a boil and then lower to a simmer and let cook 6-8 hours.

Salt & pepper to taste.

Remove large pieces and then pour through a colander lined with cheesecloth.

Either skim fat while still hot, or wait until it cools and use a spoon to scrape it off.

**Our recommendations: Italian seasoning, Tuscan Seasoning, Chili Lime Seasoning, Summer Blend, Garlic Herb Blend, Avo's Portuguese Allspice.**

## Meatloaf Baseline recipe

### Ingredients

- 2 lbs. Protein
- ½ C Flour
- 2 tsp Salt
- 1 tsp Black Pepper
- 2 T Olive oil/Butter
- 1 can Diced tomatoes
- 1 Onion, chopped
- 3 Garlic cloves, minced
- 3 C Broth
- 4-6 C Assorted vegetables, potatoes
- 2 T Gwen's Blends Seasoning

### Instructions

Cut your meat into 1" cubes.

Combine the flour, salt and pepper and toss the meat to coat.

Heat 2 T oil or butter in a Dutch oven and brown

the meat on all sides over medium high heat.  
Remove meat a from pan and sauté onions and garlic.

Add the 1 cup of the broth to deglaze the pan.  
Add the remaining broth and seasoning, and return the meat to the pot.

Bring to a boil and then reduce to a simmer until meat is tender (about 1 hour).

Add the vegetables and continue to simmer for another 30 minutes.

Serve hot.

#### Slow cooker version

To prepare in a slow cooker, reduce broth to 1 C and place all ingredients in the slow cooker once the meat has been browned. Cook on low for 8-12 hours or high for 4-6 hours.

	Version 1 - Traditional	Version 2 - Lamb	Version 3 - Pork
Protein	Beef – chuck roast is preferred	Lamb – boneless leg of lamb	Pork - Tenderloin
Vegetable	Potatoes, carrots, celery	Parsnips, sweet potatoes, Yukon gold potatoes	Bell pepper, hominy, pinto beans
Broth	Beef	Beef	Chicken
Seasoning	Gwen's House Rub, Adobo. Italian or Tuscan Seasonings	Lamb Seasoning, Gyro Seasoning, Wild Game Rub	Adobo seasoning

#### Vegetarian version

You can easily sub any of the heartier, sturdier squash or root vegetables for the protein and vegetable or mushroom broth for the liquid. The ratios still work: 2-3 cups broth, onion, garlic, seasoning, and about 4-6 cups of butternut squash, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, etc. Just skip the first four ingredients and the browning step, but consider roasting your vegetables for 15-20 minutes before putting in the broth.

## What's New!

### **Can't wait to see you at my upcoming festivals!**

#### South Riding Mosaic Festival

May 3 2 PM – 6 PM

South Riding Town Square

#### Old Town Arts & Crafts Festival

June 7 10AM – 5PM

Old Town Alexandria Waterfront at the base of Prince Street

I'll be taking a break from fairs for the summer but will still be working hard filling orders and getting ready for the Fall Season. More details to come. G2





## Spice, The Variety of Life

Issue 27, May 2025

It's finally Spring for real and it's Farmer's market season.

There is something special about waking up early Saturday morning, grabbing a coffee and heading out to your local market. What is it about the farmer's market that captivates us so? Is it the food itself, fresher and usually less expensive than the chain grocers? Is it the social interaction, spending time with like-minded people? Or maybe the sense of community, helping support local businesses and catching up with your neighbors? How about the fact that most food is grown without the use of chemicals?

No matter what your reason is, I think we can all agree that it's worth getting up early to experience a farmer's market. I personally think that part of the charm is reconnecting with our shared past when the town square market was the heart of a village. It's a little bit of a break from the hustle and bustle of our daily lives. Let's look at the history of the town market and its journey to today's version. Enjoy



While there is very little written history from the early days of town markets, most historians agree that once our ancestors settled down, began farming and realized that a division of labor was a much more effective way for the tribe to survive, there needed to be a way to share the resources that each individual contributed. As the tribes grew and encampments began turning into towns and villages, the method of trading and sharing resources grew as well.

Cue the visual of Indiana Jones walking through the marketplace in the first movie. Hustle & bustle, an explosion for the senses, voices, colors, smells permeate the small, enclosed space.



*Gwen*



Over time, as the variety of goods increased and bartering became more traditional commerce, these markets evolved into more permanent businesses with each farmer or craftsman creating their own shops that were open to business throughout the week, not just on the weekends.

The next big shift came as travel became more common and what we call trading posts began to appear in more remote areas. The creation of the "Middle Man" became the foundation of what we know today as Retail Commerce.

Over time, as the population increased, growers struggled to keep up with the demand and science turned its attention to increasing production and reducing loss. Without getting too deeply into this aspect of food production, the old slogan "Better living through chemicals" became the mantra and large scale, combine farms dominated the market. That is until the early 2000's when we hit a tipping point.

The struggle to balance preservation of our environment and our own health has been going on for almost as long as we have been creating the need for that oversight. The difference seems to be that now it isn't just a small, marginalized group calling for a better life. Mainstream America is finally waking up to the fact that we need to do better. The desire for fresh, chemical-free meat and produce has led to a resurgence of local markets.

The 1980's saw the beginning of larger scale change with Whole Foods and Mom's Organic Market hitting the national scene, but the early 2000's saw a dramatic increase in the smaller side of the business. There were 1755 registered markets in 1994 and by 2006 that number had increased to 4385. 2009 saw 5274 markets and 2013 hit an amazing 8144. New York City alone had 107 markets in 2012 and Los Angeles saw 88 in

2014, many supporting the Hispanic and Asian population. Even the Federal Government got on the bandwagon with SNAP and WIC on board supporting the new commerce channel.

All in all, there don't seem to be any downsides here, so if you don't already have a favorite market, you might want to check out one or more of these.



Old Town Farmers' Market - Alexandria

301 King Street

Saturdays, rain or shine 7:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

Del Ray Farmers' Market - Alexandria

2311 Mt. Vernon Avenue

Saturdays, rain or shine 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.

Four Mile Run Farmers & Artisans Market

4109 Mt. Vernon Avenue

Mid April -early December 9 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Check website for opening & closing dates

[www.4mrmarket.org](http://www.4mrmarket.org)

West End Farmers Market – Alexandria

Parking lot 4800 Brenman Park Drive

Sundays 8:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Columbia Pike Farmers Market - Arlington

2820 Columbia Pike

Sundays 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Westover Farmers Market – Arlington

1644 N. McKinley Road

Sundays 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. April – November

9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. December – March

Fairfax Farmers' Market – Fairfax

10500 Page Avenue

Saturdays 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. May 10 thru Oct.

### Burke Farmers Market – Burke

5671 Roberts Parkway

Saturdays 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. April 19 thru  
Nov. 22

### Lorton Farmers Market - Lorton

8994 Potomac Bend

Sundays 8:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. May 4 thru Nov.  
23

## What's new

I wanted to share a recipe with everyone. This was sent to me by two of my more adventurous chefs, Paula and Matt.

### Famous Oven Fries



Cut 3-4 large potatoes, irregularly ( that way some get crispy, and some stay soft for a wonderful mix of textures.)

Toss with Sesame oil, salt flakes, black pepper and a mix of King's Curry and Bay Style Seafood Blend.

Bake at 425 for 45 minutes on a sheet pan.

Enjoy!

## Where to Find us

### May 3

So. Riding Mosaic Festival

Town Green, 43080 Center Street

2:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.

### May 17

McLean Days

Lewinsville Park, 1659 Chain Bridge Road

11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

### June 7

Old Town Arts & Crafts Fair

Waterfront Park, The Strand & Prince Street

10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

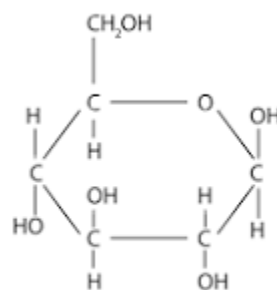


## Spice, The Variety of Life

Issue 28, June 2025

Welcome to Wonderland!

At least some days that's what it feels like. What's real, what's not, and how much of that will change by tomorrow? It's enough to spin your head around, so I thought I would take a shot at demystifying some current food news: food coloring and additives and the effect of tariffs on your grocery bill.



### Food Additives

So, our current Secretary of HHS, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has begun to make his presence felt with the recent enforcement of a 1990 ban on Red Dye #3 and his commitment to keep chemicals out of our food. While some of this seems like big news, much of what is on the table, so to speak, has already been banned in Europe, so it would appear that the question isn't so much whether these chemicals are safe, but rather how far the government should go in its oversight of food additives.

While several dyes are going to be off the table, the FDA has approved some natural ones; Galdieri extract blue (derived from a species of algae), butterfly pea flower extract, also blue, and calcium phosphate, white (this is a naturally occurring mineral). Most of the approved uses are in candy, beverages and other snacks.

*Gwen*



So how does the United States align with the rest of the world regarding food additives. The European Union takes a much more conservative stand banning ingredients; if they can't dismiss the possibility of harm, then it can't be used. The United States tends to rely more on proof of harmful effects before considering acting. In 1990, the FDA passed the Delaney Clause which, in essence, states that a food additive cannot be used if it has been shown to cause cancer in humans or animals. As the case of Red Dye #3 ban illustrates, however, enforcement is a separate issue.

Two notable ingredients that illustrate the difference between the US and the EU are titanium dioxide and potassium bromate. The EU has banned both of these with titanium dioxide having the potential to cause DNA or chromosomal damage and the potassium bromate being linked to cancer and gut problems. Both of these substances are allowed in the US. Titanium dioxide is used to make things whiter and brighter in color and is used in many candies and packaged baked goods. Potassium bromate and is found in baked goods, strengthening the gluten and giving the dough a whiter and smoother texture.

In general, the path to banning a substance seems to be about as difficult as any bureaucratic process. According to current regulations, food manufacturers are not even required to report the use of additives to the FDA. Where does that leave us, as consumers? It leaves us where we have always been, with responsibility for our welfare in our own hands. Reading labels and getting to know a little about where your food comes from is the best way to ensure that what you eat lives up to your standards.

Fortunately, you can rest easy with Gwen's Blends. All natural, majority organically grown ingredients with NO artificial anything.

(The content above was condensed from an article by Alana Samuels for Time Magazine.)

### Tariffs

Food tariffs are definitely going to have an impact on food costs. While the United States grows/raises about 85% of the food consumed domestically, that still leaves at least 15% subject to tariffs. That 15% could increase quite significantly if a substantial amount of the packaging materials used in getting that domestic food to market is made overseas.

Another consideration is what food items make up that 15%. Granted, some of it is the more specialized, higher end delicacies, but not all. Did you know that 94% of our seafood comes from China? While much of it may be caught here in the United States, it is shipped overseas to take advantage of the cheaper labor to debone, devein, skin, repackage and freeze before shipping back stateside. How will the tariffs affect that? No one is quite sure.

What about bananas and coffee? Both are consumed in pretty large quantities but not grown domestically. How about oranges in summer, strawberries year-round, fresh herbs? The growth of global commerce has afforded us the opportunity to be accustomed to all kinds of produce at any time of year. Are we ready to give that up, or will we continue to purchase at any price? Only time will tell.

You might be thinking to yourself, that sticking to domestic products will keep your costs down and you would be wrong! Manufacturers have a little habit they call "Industry Price Gap Management". In essence this means that if all of your competitors are getting more for their products, so can you, so even if your costs haven't risen, you can still jack up your prices because consumers have no alternatives. Let's hope that there are still

some humane (not a typo) beings somewhere in our food supply chain.

There is a little spot of brightness in this mess. The United States grows/raises more of several items than we can consume and so exports them to foreign markets. Chicken, pork, wheat and corn are a few of the things we export. Caught in the crossfire of the tariff wars, we may see prices drop on chicken and pork, especially, as the farms look to move their product domestically until they can downsize production. Fingers crossed.

(The content above was condensed from an article by Betty Lin-Fisher for USA TODAY.)

### Miscellaneous News

I ran a google search for “Trending Food News” and what follows is the AI response.

Recent trending food news includes a focus on gut health, plant-based options, and a resurgence of home baking. There's also a notable shift towards plant-based alternatives and a growing interest in sustainability and ethical sourcing. Additionally, complex spicy flavors and dehydrated fruit and candy are gaining popularity.

Here's a more detailed look at some of the trending topics:

- **Gut Health:** Consumers are increasingly prioritizing gut health, leading to a demand for foods and beverages that promote gut health, such as those rich in fiber.
- **Plant-Based Eating:** The plant-based food movement continues to grow, with more people adopting plant-based diets or incorporating plant-based meals into their routine.
- **Home Baking:** Baking from scratch is making a comeback, with people rediscovering the joy and satisfaction of making their own treats.

- **Complex Spicy Flavors:** Consumers are increasingly seeking out new and interesting spice combinations in a variety of food items.
- **Dehydrated Fruit and Candy:** The light and airy crunch of dehydrated fruits and candies is gaining popularity on social media.
- **Sustainability and Ethical Sourcing:** There's a growing demand for sustainably produced foods and a greater awareness of the impact of food choices on the environment and animal welfare.
- **Restaurant Trends:** Sit-down dining is making a comeback, and American food staples like hamburgers, hot dogs, and fried chicken are experiencing a resurgence in popularity.
- **Food Recalls and Safety:** There have been several food recalls recently, including Igloo cooler recalls due to fingertip amputations and baked bean recalls due to potential health risks.

*Gwen*

### What's New?

The response to our **Quick & Easy Dinners** has been very positive, so we have expanded our selection.

Each variety is available in a ¾ cup size which equals two or three meals' worth along with a copy of the recipe.

### **Quick & Easy Dinner varieties**

\$9.00 each

Beef Stroganoff

Chicken Shawarma

French Dip

Fried Chicken Breeding Seasoning

Gyro

Indian Butter Chicken

Indian Spiced Shrimp

Jerk Seasoning

Old School Pot Roast

Peruvian Chicken

Sloppy Joes

Tortilla Soup

Vegetarian Chili

### **Where to Find us**

Gwen's Blends will be taking the summer off from festivals, but our online store will be fully operational.

We'll be busy looking for new tastes, new partnerships and new deals!

We'll be back in September at Burke Centre Festival!



## Spice, The Variety of Life

Issue 29, July 2025

Happy Summer!

I don't know about you, but I am already seeing my grocery bill climbing. I joined one of the big Clubs a couple of months ago, thinking that even though I live alone, there were some things that I could buy in bulk, save money, and not have to worry about for a while. Sounds like a good plan, right? Well, once I started walking the aisles I found myself buying things that sounded really good and then I got home and realized that it would be years before I ate that many bags of chips or that many pounds of snack mix.

So now, I go armed with a list and I am only allowed to buy 1 item that is not on the list. So far, so good. All that being said, I thought I would put together a list of pantry items that seem to pop up on most pantry lists I found online to get us all started.

*Gwen*



Wouldn't we all like to have a pantry as large as the one above? That **and** a walk-in refrigerator and freezer with a huge island are just the beginnings of the kitchen I am going to build when I win the lottery! Until that time, I must be satisfied with an average sized kitchen, as I imagine most of us have.

Food prep seems to be the buzzword for 2025 cooking! Between restaurant prices that never came down after COVID supply issues and everyone's re-discovery of the joys of staying home with family and friends, people are cooking at home at rates much higher than pre-COVID. That being said, even with the refocus of our attention homewards, no one wants to spend all of that time at home in the kitchen. Hence, food prep.

The key to it all is making sure that you have an ample supply of the basics on hand so that when

you get to the kitchen you are ready to go. The list I am going to present below is a compilation from 4-5 sources, so you should find that some of this works for you, while some of it may not. There is no right or wrong. Just think about what you and those you cook for like to eat and tailor your pantry with that in mind.

### **Suggestions for a well-stocked pantry**

It should go without saying that the most important items in your pantry are a wide selection of spice blends from Gwen's Blends. Spices are your ticket to creating a variety of flavors from the same items. So, assuming that you have that covered, here's the rest of the list.

#### **Condiments**

Oils & vinegars – depending on your tastes, keep 2-3 of each.

Ketchup

Mustard

Honey

Barbecue Sauce

Mayonnaise

Maple Syrup

#### **Grains & pasta**

Rice – several varieties

Pasta – several shapes

Oats

Quinoa

Farro

#### **Dried Legumes**

Lentils

Split Peas

Dried beans – kidney, black, navy

#### **Canned Goods**

(we all agree fresh is best, but today's canned vegetables are way better than they used to be)

Tomatoes – sauce, paste, diced or whole

Beans

Chickpeas

Potatoes

Corn

Olives

Artichoke hearts

Assorted peppers

Evaporated & Condensed milk

#### **Baking Ingredients**

Flour

Sugar – white & brown

Salt

Baking Soda & Powder

Cornmeal

Masa

Shortening

#### **Other Non-Perishables**

Nuts

Seeds

Dried fruits

Peanut Butter

Jams & Jellies

Breadcrumbs

Shelf stable milk

#### **Semi-Perishables**

Garlic

Onions

Potatoes

#### **Refrigerator**

Butter

Eggs

Yogurt

Sour Cream

Salad dressings

Fresh fruit & vegetables

Cheese

Bacon

Tofu or other plant-based proteins

#### **Freezer**

Meat – your choice

Frozen vegetables

Frozen fruit



Shrimp  
Bread or rolls  
Sausage  
Any food that you have cooked in large batches,  
broths, chilis, soups, stews, etc.

I said the list was long! Hopefully, it gave you some ideas of how to stock your own pantry to fit your diet. I have included a few recipes that freeze well as well as some that can be made with mostly ingredients from the list above. Have fun putting together your own pantry.

## *Gwen*

### Weekday Pasta

#### Ingredients

2 T Butter, unsalted  
3 Garlic cloves, minced  
2 C Chicken broth  
1 C Milk  
1/3 C Parmesan  
2 T **Gwen's Blends Seasoning**

#### Instructions

Sauté butter, seasoning, and garlic until fragrant.  
Add broth and milk.  
Bring to boil, add pasta and cook until your preferred doneness.  
Add the seasoning and parmesan.  
You can add any protein and vegetables you like, just pre-cook them and toss in for the last minute or so to warm them.

**Our recommendations: Italian Seasoning, Moroccan Blend, Garlic Herb Salt Free, Cajun Blend.**

### Jamaican Jerk Stew

#### Ingredients

2 med Sweet potatoes, cubed  
1 can Water chestnuts, drained and sliced

1 cup Dried apricots (or raisins)  
1 can Pineapple, chopped, drained and juice reserved (or canned mango)  
4 Chicken breasts, boneless  
5 T **Quick & Easy Jerk Seasoning**  
1/4 C Onion, minced  
2 T Worcestershire sauce  
1/4 C Lime juice

#### Instructions

Place sweet potatoes in slow cooker.  
Add water chestnuts, apricots and pineapple, mix well.  
Sprinkle **Jerk Seasoning** on the chicken and lay on top of mixture in crock.  
Combine the reserved fruit juice, onion, Worcestershire, and lime juice in small bowl, mix and pour over chicken..  
Cover and cook 7-9 hours on low (3-4 hours on high), until chicken and potatoes are fork-tender.

### Spicy Black Beans

#### Ingredients

1 lb. Black beans, dried (These will need to be rinsed, soaked overnight and then drained.)  
5 cans Chicken broth (10.5 oz. each)  
1 C Onion, chopped  
1/2 C Bell pepper, chopped  
2 tsp **Gwen's Blends Seasoning**

#### Instructions

Add all ingredients in a large saucepan and bring to a boil.  
Cover, reduce heat and simmer 2 hours or until beans are tender.

**Our recommendations: Southwestern Rub, Cajun Blend, Nate's Nashville Hot for a real kick!**

Note: Enjoy as is or use as a base for soup, beans and rice, or tostados.

## Mediterranean Chicken Soup

### Ingredients

- 1 C Garbanzo beans, dried – (will need to be prepared the night before)
- 1 lb. Chicken, boneless, skinless
- 2½ C Carrots, sliced
- 1½ C Celery, sliced
- 1 Onion, chopped
- 2 T **Tuscan or Greek Seasoning**
- 1 Chicken bouillon cube (1 T bouillon granules)
- 4 C Water
- 1 C Spinach, fresh, shredded

### Instructions

#### *The night before*

Rinse the beans and place in a large saucepan. Add enough water to cover by 2" and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer for 10 minutes before removing from heat. Cover and let soak in a cool place over night.

#### *Cooking day*

Drain and rinse the beans again and place in a slow cooker with the chicken.

Add the next 6 ingredients and cook on low for 8-10 hours on low ( 4-5 hours on high).

Remove chicken, cut into bite sized pieces and return to cooker.

Add spinach.

Let stand 5 minutes, until spinach wilts.

Serve.

## Minestrone

### Ingredients

- 2 Garlic cloves, minced
- 1 T Olive oil
- 1 C Onion, chopped
- 2 T **Gwen's Blends Seasoning**
- 2 each Carrots, celery stalks, potatoes, small zucchinis, chopped ( feel free to substitute your favorite veggies)
- 2 C Savoy cabbage, chopped (any leafy green

will work)

- 2 C Tomatoes, chopped
- 2 qt. Broth (chicken, beef or vegetable)
- ½ C Pasta, uncooked (pick a very small variety like ditalini)
- 1 can Kidney or black beans, rinsed and drained
- 1 C Parmesan, grated

### Instructions

Heat oil in a Dutch oven and sauté onion for 3 minutes.

Add seasoning and garlic and sauté for 2 minutes more.

Add the carrots and potatoes and sauté for 5 minutes.

Add the rest of the vegetables and give it 5 more minutes.

Add the stock and tomatoes and bring to a boil.

Reduce the heat, cover and simmer for 2 hours.

Add the pasta and canned beans and continue the simmer until the pasta is tender.

Serve and top with cheese.

(If you are using a tender leafy green like spinach, add it at the last minute.)

**Our recommendations: Tuscan Seasoning, Italian Seasoning, Southwestern Rub.**



## What's New?

I want to give a shout out to one of my cooking buddies for sending in a great suggestion.

Try adding a little Berbere to your boiled eggs for a new take.

Do you have an idea for a new and different way to use one of our blends?

Let me know!

While I am asking for suggestions,

Does anybody know of a place where a pop-up stand might work?

I am thinking about trying one or two for 2-3 hours on a Saturday.

Not sure yet but just throwing it out there in case someone knows of a good place to try.

Let me know, thanks.

G2

[ggattsek@gmail.com](mailto:ggattsek@gmail.com)

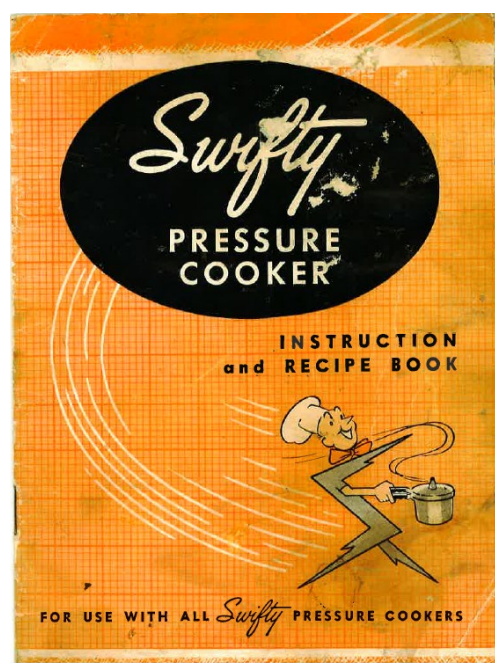


## Spice, The Variety of Life

Issue 30, August 2025

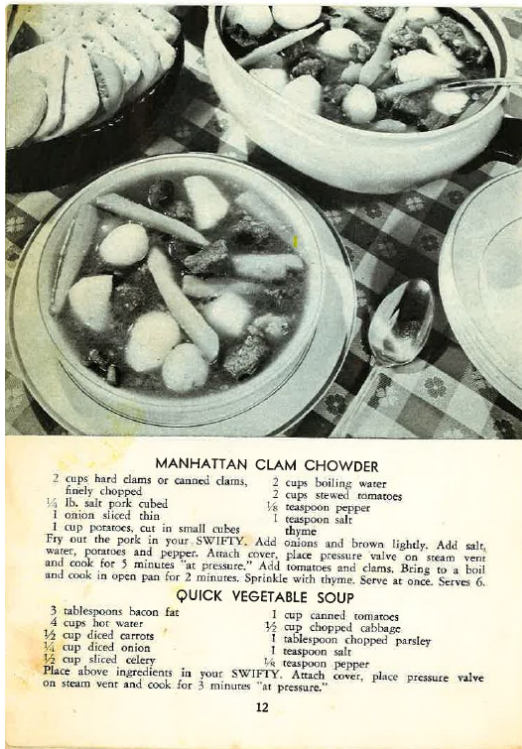
I recently came across a collection of old-school recipe booklets that were either sold in the checkout lanes of the grocery stores of days gone by or were included in your newfangled kitchen appliance, or maybe even in that new product you saw on the shelves of your grocery store. Many of you will have absolutely no idea what I am talking about, but some of you are nodding and thinking back to that Pillsbury recipe book you bought for a dollar back in the sixties. I decided that this part of our culinary heritage deserved to be celebrated for what it was, the ultimate act of kindness, sharing food.

*Gwen*

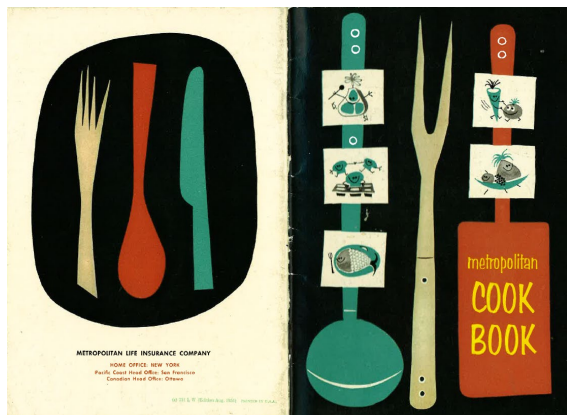


Let's start with the Swifty Pressure Cooker, made by Eastern Metal Products Co. in 1949. Along with 6 pages of instructions, this treasure also has a couple of recipes that you could make with your new Swifty.

Fortunately, both of these recipes look pretty good and if you were to look up these recipes online today, the odds are that you wouldn't find them terribly different.



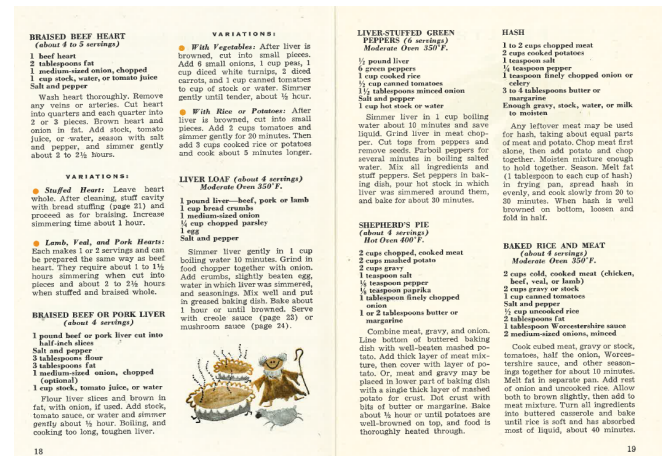
Next up is a promotional piece from Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. Open an account with us and get a free cookbook!



This particular one was the August 1954 edition. It contains everything from soups to cookies. In the salad section we begin to see the insidious presence of gelatin. God only knows what possessed people to start using gelatin in all of their foods. Gelatin was originally thought to be a viable protein to help sustain the poorer peasants in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was extracted from the hooves of horses, pigs and other livestock. By

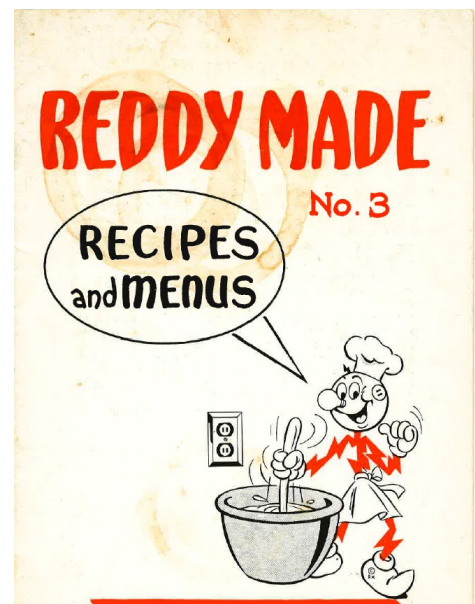
the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, Jell-O had us convinced that it was a treat.

But I digress. This particular cookbook has an interesting cross section of recipes.



From the questionable Liver Loaf to a Shepherd's Pie that looks pretty delicious, especially if you add a bit more salt and pepper. The sophistication of this cookbook shows in its "Variations" as well as the inclusion of how many servings to expect from a recipe.

The last one I will share today is my favorite of the three.

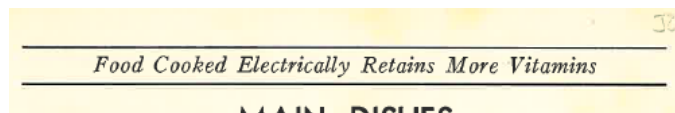




Produced by The Potomac Edison Company that still operates in Maryland as a subsidiary of FirstEnergy Corp., its roots were far more homegrown. From its homey message on the back cover:



which was followed by a listing of the aforementioned young ladies and their phone extensions, to the quaint little headers on each page,



this booklet looks like it came straight out of the town of Mayfield. (That's where the Cleavers lived.) Not as misogynistic as some, it still leans in that direction.

"A major part of every housewife's time is devoted to food – its marketing, preparation, serving, dish washing, etc."

Based on the image of Reddy Kilowatt, the corporate spokesman pictured on the front cover, it appears that this cookbook came out after 1946, but probably prior to 1958. The recipes here reflect both the era and the rural area in which the company was located. The recipes are very meat and fat centric, although they look tasty enough.

If anyone is interested in hearing/learning more about this part of kitchen history, let me know. I have a few more of these pamphlets hanging around.



Take care and I hoped you got a bit of a chuckle out of this month's newsletter. Stay cool and I'll see you back on the festival circuit next month. I'm looking forward to getting out there and connecting with all of you.

*Gwen*

## What's New?

We're back out on the road!

Come see us at:

### September 1 (Labor Day)

50<sup>th</sup> Annual International Day  
Good Shepherd Catholic Church  
8710 Mount Vernon Hwy  
12:00-4:00 PM

### September 6-7

Burke Centre Festival  
Burke Centre Festival on Facebook

### October 10-12

Fall Capital Arts & Crafts Fair  
Dulles Expo Center

<https://www.capitalartandcraftfestivals.com>



## Spice, The Variety of Life

Issue 31, September 2025

OK, not gonna lie. I kind of lost track of time and realized yesterday that I hadn't written this month's newsletter. In fact, I didn't even have any idea about a topic. So, I did what any respectable person would do. I went to bed and figured that I would deal with it tomorrow.

Well, as luck would have it, that turned out to be a pretty good idea because when I woke up, I had a brilliant idea! Read on to find out what it was.

*Gwen*



### Inspiration in the Kitchen

Those of you who have met me at various events, or have read a couple or more of these newsletters, know that I am just a little bit curious have a seemingly unlimited supply of useful/useless food facts in my brain. I also have a habit of getting lost when I am doing research. I can start off trying to figure out how much orange juice you can get from a fresh orange and end up reading about where "Scurvy Dog" came from.

[ Oranges – origin of citrus trees – lack of vitamin C and scurvy– origin of "Scurvy Dog"]

Last month ago, I shared some old school recipe booklets and pamphlets. I mentioned that I had more than a few of them. Well, the picture to the left is my cookbook collection. If you are looking for inspiration in the kitchen, there really is no better place to start. The internet is amazing, don't get me wrong. I use it myself when I am trying to create new blends, but for me, there is nothing like flipping through an old cookbook to get the juices flowing.





There is something about these old standards that just takes me to a place where I can hear the soup simmering away, I can smell the pie baking in the oven, and I can feel the love filling the room.

### **Joy of Cooking by Irma Rombauer & Marion Rombauer Becker**

One of the original classics, this book has sold over 20 million copies in its 90+ years in print. As you can see in the picture, I have two copies. The one on the left is the one my mother bought me when I moved into my first place. It has been to the wars and back with me. The one on the right, also a gift from my mother, is a more recent version. While I use both, I must admit that for the basics, my hand still reaches for the older version. Some of the information and recipes are laughable now, but for some things, it just feels right to trust an old friend.

### **Mastering the Art of French Cooking by Julia Child, Louisette Bertholle & Simone Beck**

For sheer notoriety, it might be hard to find another cookbook more famous. While most of the recipes in this book are not exactly in my wheelhouse, it is impossible to underestimate this book's impact on the world. While Americans were settling into the world of pre-made, processed, easy to serve food, Julia was reminding us of the importance that cooking our own food should have in our lives. She was the first "cooking good food doesn't have to hard" disciple.

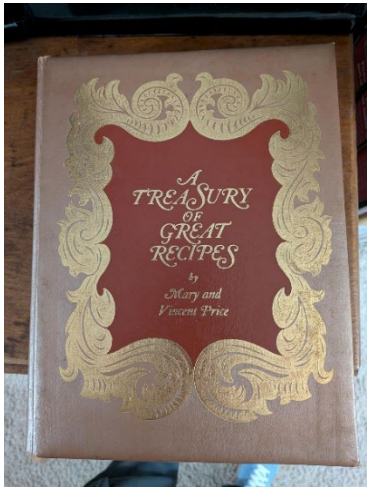
She may have very well have also been the first "celebrity chef", but she never took herself too seriously. Many of us remember, or have seen, the famous SNL routine in which Dan Akroyd plays Julia in the one of the funniest skits ever. Not only did Julia love it, but she is also rumored to have taped it so she could watch it when she needed a laugh.

### **Grocery The Buying and Selling of Food in America by Michael Ruhlman**

Jumping to a slightly different kind of book about food, this book tells the story of how we went from growing our own food and sharing with our tribe to shopping at insanely large entities like Bucc-ees and Costco. It is told in the first person as a journalist tries to understand the journey of his childhood local grocer through the years. Some of it is funny, (the invention that took us from the old school dry goods stores where you brought a bag and they scooped corn into it for you, turns out to be the inventions of the paper bag and cardboard box – go figure!)

It veers off into some sidebars such as how large food producers try to follow the health fad of the month, how the small craft food industry gets started and how the public opinion ultimately drives the business of food. It is not really a beach read, but it is chockful of things that will have you thinking about how and what you eat.

The last book I will share is one that just makes me smile. I found it at the Salvation Army and just had to buy it.



I know it is hard to read, but the book is written by Vincent and Mary Price. Like horror movie Vincent Price. He was, in actuality, a very refined gentleman and this book bound as elegantly as any book I've ever seen, is a look into his world. As he and his wife travelled the world, dining in some of the most famous places, they documented their travels and met with chefs who were willing to share recipes. There's not much in it I would like to cook, but as a memento of a different time, it is wonderfully entertaining.

In a nutshell, this book captures the best of what food brings to our world. Joy, friends, sharing, happiness with a little bit of personal attitude thrown in for good measure.

As we all try our best to navigate the world, we find ourselves in now, let's not forget what really matters. In the toughest of times, sharing your heart, through food or a hobby or anything else, is the greatest gift that brings with it the greatest rewards.

Be safe and well, my friends,

*Gwen*

## What's New?

September 6-7

Burke Centre Festival

Burke Centre Festival on Facebook

October 10-12

Fall Capital Arts & Crafts Fair

Dulles Expo Center

<https://www.capitalartandcraftfestivals.com>

October 25

Upton Hills Park Craft Market

More details to follow

November 8

Robinson High School Christmas Fair

November 15-16

Fairfax High School Holiday Fair

December 5-7

McLean Christmas Market

December 12-14

Winter Capital Arts & Crafts Fair

[ggattsek@gmail.com](mailto:ggattsek@gmail.com)



## Spice, The Variety of Life

Issue 32, October 2025

### Seasons in the Kitchen

Every year I have an internal debate. What is my favorite season? Like many I love watching the world wake up after a long cold winter. As a lifelong gardener, I look forward to getting out there, turning the soil and planning then planting my garden. The thrill of watching the first green sprouts never gets old.

That being said, that first crisp day after a stifling hot Washington summer is also exhilarating. The smell of the fall leaves, getting to wear hoodies and other snuggly clothes, and savoring the last of my harvest is one of my happy times.

I guess at the end of the day it's a case of "Love the one you're with" for me.

*Gwen*

Have you ever noticed how each season seems to have its own, unique menu?

**Spring** – Who doesn't love that first day when you realize that you can feel the warmth of the sun on your face? The world begins to wake up from its long winter sleep. The tender green sprouts of asparagus, spinach, peas, varieties of lettuce and other tender greens begin to appear. After months of warm soups, stews and other comfort foods it's time to start thinking about salads and other light foods. The appearance of many herbs directs flavor profiles to a much more herbaceous profile.

Pastas move from heavier tomato sauce based to lighter olive oil and lemon juice or alfredo sauces. Root vegetables give way to sugar snap peas, asparagus tips and spinach. Flatbreads with tomato, spinach and onions (fresh or roasted), even ramen noodles take on a different personality when you add fresh herbs.

Spring foods do not lend themselves as well to prepping large quantities for consumption throughout the week due to their fragile nature, but the compensation is that throwing a spring meal together is a quick and easy affair with little if any cooking required.

## Pasta Primavera

### Ingredients

10 oz. Pasta, uncooked  
4 C Asparagus, kale, peas, spring onions,  
artichoke hearts, mushrooms - in any  
combination  
1 Onion  
3 Garlic cloves, minced  
2 tsp **Italian or Tuscan Seasoning**  
¼ C Extra virgin olive oil  
2 T Lemon juice  
½ C Parmesan

### Instructions

Boil pasta to desired doneness, drain and set aside  
½ cup of the pasta water.

Heat oil and sauté asparagus, onion and  
mushrooms until tender, add garlic and simmer 2  
more minutes.

Place pasta, both the sautéed and uncooked  
vegetables, lemon juice and seasoning in large  
bowl and mix together.

Taste and add salt if necessary.

If the pasta is a little thick, use the reserved pasta  
water to loosen it up a bit.

Toss in ¼ cup parmesan and mix thoroughly.

Use remaining parmesan to top off the bowl or  
individual servings.

**Summer** – Nothing says summer quite like the  
smell of meat over an open fire. Beginning with the  
post WWII creation of suburbia, where everyone  
had a yard to cook in, the image of a family sitting  
at a cedar picnic table with red and white  
checkered tablecloth has become synonymous  
with wholesome American family fun. While the  
true roots of barbecue began centuries earlier as a  
means of preserving meat in hot, humid climates,  
Americans have, in our own unique way,  
integrated the diversity of our cultures into the  
tradition. The Carolinas with their Bavarian and

German influences leans towards a more acidic  
type of sauce. Whether vinegar or ketchup based,  
the tang is unmistakable. Kansas City was the  
gateway from the cattle ranches of the west to the  
cities of the east. It is no wonder then, that their  
barbecue focuses on the beef that was so plentiful.  
Likewise, Texas barbecue is beef centric.

Depending on the region, the treatments range  
from simple salt & pepper in central Texas to South  
Texas that still honors the original “barbacoa” that  
came up from the Latin American and Caribbean  
settlers.

## Barbecue Sauce

Turn any of your favorite Gwen’s Blends rubs into a  
thick, rich sauce in minutes.

### Ingredients

1 C Ketchup  
½ C **Gwen’s Blends Rub**  
¼ C Molasses/Honey

### Instructions

Mix together in a small saucepan on low heat.

Taste and adjust to your own preference.

**Autumn** -What makes so many traditional autumn  
recipes associated with comfort food? Is it the  
combination of warm spices and herbs, the  
addition of fall produce, or the heavier  
compositions? If you ask me, it’s probably all three  
combined. Each of those characteristics  
complements the other two in a way that is unique  
to fall cooking.

As the temperatures drop and the days get shorter,  
you can see the entirety of Nature getting ready  
for the desert of winter. Trees lose their leaves as a  
way of reducing their need for nutrients, squirrels  
scurry about burying caches of nuts and berries to  
tide them over the harshest months, bears and

other hibernating animals gorge themselves to build up the fat reserves to last them through their long sleep, and humans do a little bit of everything.

Fresh produce hits its peak as the last of the summer crops are harvested and the root vegetables and gourds that take so long to achieve maturity begin their season of dominance. Many of these late summer fruits and vegetables are enhanced by the warm spices we associate with autumn, cinnamon, cloves, allspice, and nutmeg. These spices are not just for baking, although they add wonderful flavors to quick breads and cakes, but they also complement poultry and red meats as well. Curries are an example of the savory use of these spices traditionally thought of in sweet applications.

Even the animal kingdom sees a bit of a spike in availability. The generation born the previous spring has matured and is ready to head to market. It is too cold out for a lot of family barbecues, though we all know those hardy souls who will stand out in a blizzard to keep the snow off of the coals. Slow cooking is the order of the day, both inside and outside. Smokers might need a bit more fuel to maintain temperature but still need less attention than open-flame cooking. In the kitchen, there is not much that beats the comfort of a pot of stew or soup slowly simmering on the stove.

So, allow yourself to follow Nature's guidance and shed the leaves of things you don't need to support, stock up your pantry with your comfort favorites, and maybe put on just a little bit of winter fat to tide you over.

## Roast Whole Chicken

### Ingredients

- 1 6-7 lb. Chicken
- 2 T Butter
- 2 T Lemon juice
- 3 Garlic cloves, minced
- 1 Small onion, cut in half
- 3 T **Gwen's Blends Seasoning**

### Instructions

Preheat oven to 400°.

Clean and rinse chicken and place the onion in the cavity.

Combine the remaining ingredients, mashing into a paste.

Loosen the skin from the breast to the drumsticks. Rub the seasoning mixture under the loosened skin and on top of the skin as well.

Place in roasting pan, breast side up.

Cook about 1 hour 20 minutes or until internal temperature of breast is 175° to 180°, basting occasionally.

**Blends to try: Smoked Chicken Rubs (reg or hot), Avo's Portuguese Allspice, Moroccan Blend.**

**Note: Try roasting root vegetables in the pan with the chicken. You can season them with the same blend, or a different one.**

**Note: Save the carcass for a nice pot of home-made chicken stock for another evening of comfort food.**

**Winter** – The season of reflection, where only the hardiest among us continue to explore and enjoy the great outdoors, most of us content to hunker down in front of the fireplace with a good book (metaphorically speaking). Much like autumn, the kitchen is a source of comfort and slow cooking still rules. The difference is the flavors. While there is no hard and fast rule, it seems that once the

holidays pass, the desire for some of the hardier savory herbs, like bay, thyme and rosemary increases. We also seem to gravitate to the cuts of meat that require longer, slower cooking. Perhaps this is due to our ancestors choosing to eat the most favorable cuts first and leaving the tougher cuts for last since they worked better in slow cooking recipes. In the heart of the spring and summer, working days are longer with less time set aside for cooking. Winter, with its shorter days, means more time inside to watch over the stove. In fact, much of our winter diets are holdover from years gone by.

Another remnant from our pioneer days, winter meals tend to be higher in calorie count. Not many people realize how much energy the body uses to stay warm. Add to that, any outdoor physical activity, such as shoveling snow, or caring for livestock and the body's caloric intake can be much higher in the winter.

As the winter draws to a close, it became important to consume the balance of the food in the root cellar. The canned foods and the remaining vegetables to make room for the upcoming spring and summer harvests. Waste not want not. This was the origin of stews and casseroles. You could throw almost anything in a pot with water and herbs and spices and create a delicious stew, or with a little less water and an ovenproof dish for a casserole. Making the most of your resources while taking care of your loved ones, is my definition of comfort food.

## Beef Stew

### Ingredients

2 lbs. Chuck Roast or stew meat, cut into 1" cubes  
½ C Flour  
2 tsp Salt  
1 tsp Black pepper

2 T Olive oil  
2 T Butter  
1 can Tomatoes, diced  
2 C Potatoes, peeled and diced  
1 Onion, chopped  
2 Celery ribs, sliced  
½ C Beef broth  
2 T **Gwen's Blend Seasoning**  
3 Garlic cloves, minced

### Instructions

Place the flour, salt, and pepper in plastic bag. Add the meat and shake until the meat is covered in flour.

Heat the oil in large skillet and brown meat on all sides.

Place meat and the rest of the ingredients in a slow cooker.

Cook 8-12 hours on low or 4-6 hours on high.

**Blends to try: Gwen's House Rub, Adobo Seasoning, Italian Seasoning, Tuscan Seasoning.**

## Casserole

### Ingredients

3-4 C Your protein of choice  
1 C Aromatics (carrots, onions, celery, etc.)  
2-3 C Your choice of Carbs (pasta, gnocchi, potatoes)  
1-2 C Vegetables of your choice  
1-2 C Sauce (soup, cheese sauce, gravy, etc.)  
1 C Topping ( breadcrumbs, cheese)  
2 T **Gwen's Blends Seasoning**

### Instructions

Preheat oven to 350°.

Mix everything except the sauce and the toppings in a bowl.

Slowly add the liquid until you get a consistency that you like.

Pour the mixture into the pan, Sprinkle with the toppings and bake for 30 minutes.

Check to make sure all ingredients are cooked through, especially the protein if it was raw.

**Blends to try: Greek Seasoning, Ranch Dip Mix, Gwen's House Rub, Italian Seasoning.**

**Note: Casseroles are the ultimate blank canvas. The recipe above provides some basic ratios, but you can substitute anything you want. The best part is that they keep well in the refrigerator and are even tastier the next day.**

## What's Coming up!

October 10-12

Fall Capital Arts and Craft Festival  
Dulles Expo Center

<https://www.capitalartandcraftfestivals.com>

October 18-19

Lorton Workhouse Fall Fest  
[9518 Workhouse Way | Lorton, VA 22079](https://www.workhousearts.org)  
[www.workhousearts.org](https://www.workhousearts.org)

October 25

Upton Hills Park Craft Market

More details to follow on my Instagram

November 8

Robinson High School Christmas Fair

November 15-16

Fairfax High School Holiday Fair

December 5-7

McLean Christmas Market

December 12-14

Winter Capital Arts & Crafts Fair

Dulles Expo Center

<https://www.capitalartandcraftfestivals.com>

Questions, comments, ideas?

Drop me a line.

ggattsek@gmail.com





## Spice, The Variety of Life

Issue 33, November 2025

It's finally Fall! The smell of the fall leaves, getting to wear hoodies and other snuggly clothes, and sleeping with the windows open far outweighs the shorter days for me. Most people think I'm crazy but, watching the sun come up over the horizon never ceases to fill me with a sense of beauty and calm.

Then of course, the sun's up and the day ramps up with work, school and, wait for it, Holiday shopping and cooking! WooHoo!

Yes folks, the holidays are just around the corner, so I, thought I would remind us all of how our favorite flavors and smells came to be associated with the holidays.

*Gwen*

### **Why are Nutmeg, Cinnamon and Ginger so closely associated with our Holiday Favorites?**

The Spice Trade is the single most powerful force responsible for the world we know today. The search for spices and control of their profits inspired thousands of expeditions of exploration. The traditional path across land, popularly known as "The Silk Road" was wrested away from European control by the Ottoman Empire in the mid 1400's. Columbus undertook his famous journey as a direct response to Ottoman Empire's attempt to control the trade of spices worldwide. With boats being built better, longer journeys were an option.

As the struggle for control of what had become a valuable commodity raged on, the tactics of the rivals reached more violent levels. Whereas the early traders worked hand in hand with the local merchants and growers, the Europeans were ruthless. They took what they wanted by force and plantations were established with the vanquished local populations being indentured to work the fields and forests.

With the plantation system, the levels of production reached new highs. While the Spice traders could control the prices somewhat, we all know that the balance between supply and demand is as reliable as the progression from day



to night. Items that were once only available to the wealthy became accessible to the general population. By the mid-1800's, cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves as well as cocoa and sugar were widely available.

But why did these items find so much usage over the holidays? Gingerbread, spice cake and other similarly flavored items can be found year-round, but take center stage during the final months of the year. The answer takes us back to the beginning of the spice trade saga. The European tradition of celebrating the holidays with your most expensive foods was widespread. Spices were expensive and so were the foods created with them. These items were the holiday staples of the aristocracy. As the prices and availability changed, they became the staples of all.

Nothing has captured the American palate quite like Pumpkin Pie Spice. It seems to be one of the most polarizing flavors, you either love it, or can't wait for it to go away. Well, you have McCormick and Starbucks to thank/curse for its existence.

Nutmeg, one of the foundations of Pumpkin Pie Spice has been known to be a part of our diet for thousands of years. Traces of nutmeg have been found on pottery from 3500 years ago.

Shooting ahead to the 1930's, McCormick released a ready made blend of nutmeg, cinnamon, cloves, ginger and allspice to make it easier for bakers. Pumpkin pie and spiced breads remained the predominant usage for the blend until Starbucks debuted a pumpkin pie spiced coffee around 2003. From there, like many things, if some is good then a lot is better! Pumpkin Pie cookies, doughnuts, coffee creamer, you name it, fill our grocery store shelves from September through December.

Many people have asked me if I have a Pumpkin pie spice blend and I do, but honestly when I took it to fairs in my early days, it appears that most of you are like me and are firmly ensconced in the

"can't wait for it to go away camp". If you are one of it's devotees, drop me an email and I will be happy to mix up a batch for you.

So all of that being said, here are some Fall spice forward recipes for you to try.

Enjoy!

## Winter Squash Root Vegetable Soup

### Ingredients

- 3-4 C Assorted vegetables, cut into 1" cubes (potatoes, turnips, acorn squash, carrots, etc.)
- 4 C Vegetable stock
- 1 Onion, chopped
- 2 T Oil
- 2 T Butter
- 1 C Milk or cream
- 2 T **Gwen's Blends Seasoning**
- 1 T Salt

### Instructions

Heat oil, butter and seasoning in a large saucepan over medium heat.

Once butter melts, add the vegetables, cooking until they become lightly brown.

Lower heat, cover and continue cooking for 15 minutes.

Add the stock and bring to a boil.

Reduce heat and simmer 20-45 minutes, until vegetables are tender.

Strain vegetables out of soup, puree in a food processor and return to the pot.

Stir milk in slowly as the soup returns to serving temperature.

Try Gwen's Blends Moroccan blend or Korma.

## Chicken Tagine

### Ingredients

- 3 lbs. Chicken, boneless, skinless

2 C Chicken broth  
 1 can Tomatoes, diced, undrained  
 2 Onions, chopped  
 1 C Apricots, dried, chopped  
 4 Garlic cloves, minced  
 1 T **Moroccan Blend**  
 6 Cilantro sprigs  
 1 T Cornstarch  
 1 can Chickpeas rinsed and drained  
 2 T Cilantro, chopped  
 ¼ C Almonds, slivered and toasted

#### Instructions

Place chicken in a slow cooker.  
 Combine the next 7 ingredients in a bowl and pour over chicken once thoroughly combined.  
 Cover and cook on low 4-5 hours until the chicken is tender.  
 Transfer the chicken to a serving platter and cover to keep warm.  
 Combine the cornstarch with 1 T of water and pour into the slow cooker.  
 Add the chickpeas, cover and cook high for 15 minutes or until the sauce thickens.  
 Pour sauce over chicken, sprinkle with almonds and cilantro.  
 Serve with rice or couscous.

### Spiced Quick Bread

#### Ingredient

2¼ C AP flour  
 ¾ C Sugar, white  
 ¾ C Sugar, brown  
 1 T Baking powder  
 ½ tsp Salt  
 6 T Olive oil  
 3 Eggs  
 1½ tsp **Gwen's Blends Seasoning**  
 ½ C Pecans (optional)  
 1½ C Buttermilk  
 ½ tsp Vanilla

#### Instructions

Preheat oven to 350° and grease and flour a 9x5 loaf pan.  
 Combine all dry ingredients, whisk until blended.  
 Add eggs and sugars to mixing bowl and beat until combined.  
 Add buttermilk and vanilla to the egg and sugar mixture and mix until combined.  
 Slowly mix in the dry ingredients and then add in any nuts.  
 Pour into the loaf pan and bake for 55-60 minutes.  
 Try this with Gwen's Blends Moroccan Blend, Lebanese 7 Spice, or Korma.

## What's Coming up!

### November 8

Robinson High School Christmas Fair

### November 15-16

Fairfax High School Holiday Fair

### December 5-7

McLean Christmas Market

### December 12-14

Winter Capital Arts & Crafts Fair

Dulles Expo Center

<https://www.capitalartandcraftfestivals.com>

Questions, comments, ideas?

Drop me a line.

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## Spice, The Variety of Life

Issue 34, December 2025

Wow! Another whole year gone by. I heard someone explain that the years seem to go by faster as you get older because each year is a smaller percentage of your life as you age. For example, when you are 5 years old, a year is 20% of your life. When you are 50 years old, however, a year is only 2% of your life.

I don't know if that really has any merit, but I will agree that it seems like just the other day, I was working on my December 2024 end of year musings.

So, without further ado, here are my random thoughts to close out 2025. May you all have a wonderful, safe and healthy holiday season and may next year bring us all more peace than ever.

**Gwen**

I'd like to start this off by thanking all of the federal workers. Whether you work for the government, or someone close to you does, I know it's been a roller coaster of a year. And with all of the crap that's been thrown your way, the grace, compassion and sense of community you have all exhibited has been amazing! So from me to you –

## THANK YOU!!!!

I know for many of us the COVID pandemic was a time of growth and introspection. Reevaluating priorities and taking time to build a future that promised more than just an entry into the rat race, helped us all cope.

In many ways, I feel like 2025 presented challenges that carried almost as much weight. And just like the pandemic, it appears that humanity as a whole has chosen to take the high road. While there will always be factions that don't align, it has been uplifting to see so many around the globe come together to stand up for each other. Empathy and compassion are coming back into fashion. There

are so many simple things we can do to take care of ourselves and our friends and neighbors.

One of the reasons I began my journey with Gwen's Blends was to share the love of food. Feeding others is a great big "I Love You!"

I bet you didn't know that cooking for others and eating together with those you love is also good for your health.

When I was much younger (back in the last century), cooking Chinese food at home in your own wok was very popular. I enjoyed it as much for the final product as for the food prep itself. All of the chopping was a really great way to wind down from the chaos of the day. I had several friends who shared my enthusiasm, so we began to have wok-a-thons, where we all gathered (bringing our own woks) at one house or another and cooked together. We discovered that Motown music helped create a great rhythm for chopping, so we would crank up the Four Tops or the Temptations and sing and dance around the kitchen as we cooked. Those were some of the best meals. Not only was the food terrific if I do say so myself, but the companionship, as well as the outright joy and fun of the evening, culminated in an experience that we all loved.

I think most of us will agree that food eaten with friends and family in a warm, happy, fun environment always seems to taste better. It is also better for us. I'll bet that most of you assumed that I was referring to eating low fat, or low salt, or vegetarian when I mentioned healthy eating and while cooking for yourself does make it easier to eat healthy food, it turns out that the benefits go way deeper than that.

I make no secret of the fact that I am total geek, so I am going to start off with some science here. Recent research is beginning to show that eating in a positive frame of mind is healthier than eating in a negative state of mind.

When you are happy at a meal, your hypothalamus sends positive vibes to your salivary glands and all of the other parts of your digestive system. This is the reason for that "mouthwatering" effect food can have on you. It also gets your whole digestive system amped to get going. This results in more complete digestion of the foods you have eaten as well as full metabolism of the nutrients.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, a negative environment sends out different signals and the result is often incomplete breakdown of the foods. This leaves food in your system longer and creates an environment for toxic byproducts to be released, the good bacteria in your gut being killed off and less that complete calorie burn. That last one can be a cause of weight gain since the calories not burned are stored as fat. Doesn't sound too ideal, does it?

So whether you prefer to gather around a giant bowl of spaghetti and meatballs, a slab of ribs from the smoker, or a good old-fashioned roast chicken, I hope that you find time to celebrate your life with those who make it special.

I hope that each and everyone of you have a wonderful December and I hope to see all of you next year.

May the Force be with you!

**Gwen**

What's Coming up!

December 5-7

McLean Christmas Market

December 12-14

Winter Capital Arts & Crafts Fair

Dulles Expo Center

<https://www.capitalartandcraftfestivals.com>

I'll be taking some well earned time off after the  
Dulles Expo Show. The store will be in full  
operation.

As soon as I hear what the plans are for the 2026  
Shows at Dulles Town Center, I'll let you all know.

Questions, comments, ideas?

Drop me a line.

ggattsek@gmail.com