

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!