

# TAKE THE LEAP

One day while visiting Queenstown, New Zealand, I could swear I saw pterodactyls flying over the skylight in my shower. Granted, without my glasses I'm fairly blind, but there was something huge hovering overhead watching me soap up. As it turned out, I was in the flight path of landing paragliders. As they swooped down from the mountains, they gently landed across the street in a local soccer field, simply taking a step or two before coming to a complete stop.

"I wonder where they're coming from?" I asked my husband, Dan, as we sipped our coffee, watching glider after glider come down.

"It's hard to tell. It seems like they're circling down. They must have started on top of one of these mountains," he surmised.

We didn't think much more about it as we went out to play tourist. Eventually, like everyone else, we made our way to Coronet Peak to check out the views. As we got closer and closer, it was clear that the top of the peak was the launch pad for the paragliders. One after the other, tandem riders would take a few running steps and jump off the side of the mountain. Like birds, the wings would fill with air and they would glide over the abyss.

"We should do that," I said to Dan.

"Are you crazy?"

"It's like flying. I've always wanted to fly like a bird."

"Since when?"

"Since I was a little girl. Didn't you want to fly?"

"Yeah, but I'm not six-years-old any more."

“Good point,” I reluctantly admitted.

It kept gnawing at me. This could be one of those experiences of a lifetime. I should do it. I knew I’d regret it if I didn’t. On the other hand I could die. You see the dilemma?

“I think I’m gonna do it,” I say.

“Really? You’re sure?”

“No, but let’s check it out. There’s the sign-up kiosk.”

It didn’t take long for the agent’s sales pitch to sell me. Dan – not so much.

“You go, I’ll take pictures of you,” Dan said, pretending not to be horrified at my choice.

Within minutes I was being harnessed while an amiable guy named Guy worked very quickly to spread out the wings, leaving me little time to chicken out. He exuded confidence, a very important trait at a time like that.

“So, what instructions do I need to know? What do I need to do and not do?” I asked shakily.

“It’s pretty simple. When I say run, run,” he answered matter-of-factly.

I expected some type of safety chat, some emergency string pull lesson – something. But, that was it. Once he completed checking the lines, checking me, and checking his gear, he strapped himself to me from the back. He was easily a foot taller than me, so I nestled in rather comfortably against him.

“OK, on the count of three, start running towards the edge.”

I gulped, trying to swallow my anxiety, and looked straight ahead over a cliff that had a one-thousand foot drop.

“One, two, three!”

And with that, I took three steps. The wings immediately filled with air and the ground dropped out from beneath us as we soared out over the canyon. I half-expected some jarring moment, but it was seamless and gentle. We literally had a bird’s eye view of the entire mountain range, lake and city. It was magnificent. Thankfully I have no fear of heights because this would have been a really bad time for that to emerge.

The experience of flying was so exhilarating that all I could feel was pure joy. I think Guy noticed how much I was loving it and asked me if I wanted to go a tad faster. Up until then, we had been lightly soaring about, as he slowly dipped a wing to turn us one way or the other.

“Sure, why not?” I exclaimed.

Within seconds, he turned one of the wings a bit more sharply, plunging us into a free-fall that made me feel like I was on the Cyclone at Coney Island. As my stomach rose in my throat, I kept it together, trying to enjoy the thrill of the ride. After a few minutes, I did ask him to dial it back a bit, bringing us to a happy medium.

I had lost all sense of time by that point. We had circled down from the mountain and now we were over the lake just as the sun was beginning its sunset. Our reflection in the water looked exactly like a seagull passing by. He pulled one of the wings to the left, and we headed back over land. The houses were starting to get a bit too close for comfort. Before I knew it, that same field across from our hotel came into view. He circled overhead as I lifted my feet, trying not to touch the leaves of the approaching treetops. Within seconds we were over the field. Just as we were about to land, he dropped the wings. We took two steps forward and we were down – as simple as that.

Handing Guy a generous tip for not killing me, I thanked him profusely. As he gathered his gear, I made my way back across the street to my hotel, and waited for Dan to get back to tell him about my adventure.

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## QUATTRO COLORE FARFALLE IN VODKA SAUCE

One of the downsides of my passion for fancy food markets is coming home with a bag of unusual ingredients that I end up sticking in the back of my pantry only to throw out five years later when I get the urge to purge.

But I did manage to salvage a bag of four-color farfalle before its expiration date and I thought it might go well with a vodka sauce. I added some spicy turkey sausage and mushrooms to give the dish a bit more depth. Buon appetito!

### INGREDIENTS

3 tablespoons olive oil

1 pound ground hot turkey sausage

1 Vidalia onion, diced

1 cup mushrooms, sliced

4 cloves garlic, minced

1 28 oz. can crushed tomatoes

$\frac{1}{2}$  cup vodka

$\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon dried oregano

$\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon crushed red peppers

salt and pepper, to taste

1 lb tri-color farfalle (or any pasta)

4 quarts of water, salted

3 tablespoon heavy cream

$\frac{1}{2}$  cup parmesan cheese, grated

### **PREPARATION**

Heat two tablespoons of olive oil in pan. Brown the turkey sausage, breaking it up into small pieces. Remove and set aside.

Add one tablespoon of olive oil and the onion. Sauté over medium heat for three minutes. Add mushrooms and sauté another minute. Add garlic, sauté one minute. Add back cooked ground sausage. Add crushed tomatoes and vodka. Season with dried oregano, crushed dried red peppers, salt and pepper. Stir and bring to light boil, then simmer for 30 minutes. (This can be made in the morning, or day before. Just reheat when ready to eat.)

Bring salted water to a boil. Add in pasta and cook as per instructions. Drain well.

When ready to serve, add 3 tablespoons of heavy cream to the sauce. Stir until incorporated and heat through for one minute.

Serve pasta in bowls. Add sauce on top of pasta. Sprinkle pasta with parmesan cheese. Garnish with sprig of basil.

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# Asian Black Bean and Asparagus Salad

I'm a big Costco fan. Knowing that I'm getting a bargain by buying in bulk is very satisfying, even if that means I have to convert my coat closet into an overflow food pantry. One day, behind the thirty rolls of toilet paper and eleven remaining paper towel rolls, I found an eight-pack of black beans. There's only so much chili a person can eat, so I came up with this recipe as an alternative. Now I have room for the ten-pound bag of basmati rice I just bought.

## **INGREDIENTS**

$\frac{1}{2}$  cup red onion, thinly sliced

$\frac{1}{4}$  cup cilantro, chopped

2 cans black beans, rinsed and drained

2 tablespoons rice wine vinegar

2 teaspoons soy sauce

1 teaspoon Asian hot oil

$\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon Asian sesame oil

$\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon sugar

1 bunch asparagus

$\frac{1}{2}$  red or yellow bell pepper, diced\*

2 teaspoons white and black sesame seeds

## **PREPARATION**

In a large bowl, combine onion, cilantro, and beans. In a small bowl, combine rice wine vinegar, soy sauce, oils, and

sugar. Pour vinegar mixture over bean mixture and gently mix. Marinate at room temperature for 20 – 30 minutes.

Steam asparagus until al dente, about five minutes. Run asparagus under cold water when ready. Cut asparagus spears into quarters.

Mix asparagus together with bean mixture and add in red or yellow pepper. Garnish with sesame seeds and serve.

*\*NOTE – If you like heat, substitute a hot red pepper for the bell pepper.*

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## SHRIMP LAKSA

One of my favorite Singaporean treats is a steaming bowl of Laksa. It's a spicy noodle soup that is made throughout Southeast Asia with each country having it's own spin on it. People will argue for hours over which version is the best, but my vote always goes to this classic Singaporean recipe.

To make it completely from scratch is quite a commitment, particularly since many ingredients can only be found in Asian markets or on-line. So my version has a few key cheats that will guarantee the flavor without losing too much authenticity, as well as saving you some time in the kitchen.

**INGREDIENTS** – serves 6

*(Most of the unusual ingredients can be found in an Asian market or on-line)*

2 Tablespoons *Better Than Bouillon* Lobster base

6 cups water

2 tablespoons cooking oil

1 7-oz jar of laksa paste

1 tablespoon sugar

1 tablespoon fish sauce

1 14-oz can of coconut milk

18 large shrimp, tails on, deveined

18 fish balls

6 tofu puffs, tau pok, halved

1 lb vermicelli rice noodles, cooked per package instructions

1/2 cup bean sprouts

3 tablespoons chopped scallions

3 tablespoons dried shallots

1 Serrano chili, sliced thinly (optional)

### **PREPARATION**

Bring 6 cups of water to a boil. Add two tablespoons of bouillon base and dissolve. Lower to simmer for five minutes. *(NOTE: the bouillon is very salty, so no need to add any additional salt to dish.)*

Heat 2 tablespoons of cooking oil in a large saucepan. Add the laksa paste and cook for 5 minutes on low heat. Add sugar, fish sauce, coconut milk, and stock stirring to combine. Simmer the mixture for 15 minutes then add the shrimp, fishballs, and tofu puffs, cooking for 5 minutes to finish.

To serve, add cooked vermicelli noodles to bowls. Ladle in laksa, dividing the shrimp, fish balls, and tofu puffs between 6 bowls. Garnish with bean sprouts, scallions, and dried



shallots. For a little extra kick, garnish with sliced chili.

Enjoy!

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## SALSA FOR WIMPS

In honor of Cinco de Mayo, here's a fun recipe from my book, GETTING SAUCED. I had the great pleasure of working with Susan Feniger and Mary Sue Milliken on a special for Food Network. While we were scouting, Susan took me down to the Grand Central Market in downtown LA and insisted I buy up every dried chili I could fit in my suitcase. When I got back home, I tried one of their salsa recipes, but idiotically mistook habaneros for chili de arbol. It was so hot, it nearly blew my head off. Eventually I got the dish right, but as the years have passed, I can't take the heat as well as I used to, so here's a much milder version.

### INGREDIENTS

$\frac{1}{2}$  pound Italian Roma tomatoes

$\frac{1}{2}$  pound tomatillos, husked and washed

1 medium sweet onion

2 Tablespoons olive oil

3 garlic cloves, crushed

$\frac{1}{3}$  small can chipotles in adobo sauce, chopped

1 cup water

1 teaspoon salt

$\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

$\frac{1}{2}$  bunch cilantro, leaves only, roughly chopped

### **PREPARATION**

Preheat broiler. With a sharp knife, lightly pierce the skin on the tomatoes and tomatillos by making an "X" on each end. Quarter the onion. Drizzle with olive oil and season with salt and pepper. Place all on a baking sheet and broil, turning occasionally until charred, 10 to 12 minutes. Set aside to cool for ten minutes.

Peel the tomatoes and tomatillos. Rough chop the tomatoes, tomatillos, and onions.

In a saucepan, heat the oil, then add garlic and cook for one minute until fragrant. Add in tomatoes, tomatillos, onion, the chipotles in adobo sauce, water, salt, and black pepper.

Bring to a boil and then simmer for 10 minutes. Turn off heat and let cool for 10 minutes.

Transfer to a food processor or blender. Puree and strain. Fold in the cilantro. Serve at room temperature or slightly chilled. The salsa can be stored in the refrigerator for 3 to 5 days, or frozen for weeks.

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## **KATSUDON**

I find Japanese cuisine to be one of the most difficult to master. The flavors are often so subtle that you really need to balance them perfectly. But that doesn't stop me from trying.

In Japan, Katsudon is not one of the more high-end dishes. It's actually a comfort food that is almost as popular as ramen with the Gen-Z crowd. It's basically schnitzel with sushi rice. It's worth the trip to your local Asian market to get your pantry stocked. All of the ingredients below can be found on-line too:

Nori Fume Furikake Rice Seasoning

Marukan Rice Vinegar

Annie Chun's Organic Seaweed

Original Dashi Stock Powder

Shichimi Togarashi

Sushi Rice

## **INGREDIENTS**

### **FOR RICE**

2 cups uncooked sushi rice

2  $\frac{1}{4}$  cups water

2 tablespoons Japanese rice vinegar

1 tablespoons Japanese rice seasoning (Nori Fume Furikake)

### **FOR STOCK**

2 cups dashi soup stock, prepared as per instructions

$\frac{1}{3}$  cup soy sauce

2 tablespoons mirin

2 tablespoons sake

1 tablespoon sugar

## **FOR BREADING**

flour (for dusting)

2 eggs beaten

panko (for coating)

salt and pepper

## **FOR CHICKEN KATSU**

canola oil (for frying)

2 onions thinly sliced

3 boneless chicken thighs, skin removed and pounded to  $\frac{1}{2}$ " thickness

Sea salt

3 eggs beaten

## **FOR GARNISH**

1 sheet nori, crumbled (Annie Chun's Organic Seaweed)

1 scallion, thinly sliced

shichimi



**PREPARATION**

**FOR RICE**

Rinse sushi rice in strainer until water is clear. Combine with water in a medium saucepan. Bring to a boil, then reduce the heat to low, cover and cook for 18 minutes. (Note: If using a rice cooker, only use 2 cups of water.) With wooden spoon, cut in rice vinegar and rice seasoning. Cover and keep warm.

### **FOR STOCK**

In medium saucepan, heat dashi until boiling. Add soy sauce, mirin, sake, and sugar. Simmer for 5 minutes.

### **FOR KATSU SAUCE**

In large skillet, add one cup of stock and sliced onions. Bring to boil, then simmer for ten minutes. Onions should be translucent.

### **FOR CHICKEN**

While katsu sauce is simmering, season chicken with salt and pepper. Dredge chicken first in flour, then eggs, then panko.

Fill medium sized pot with 1" canola oil. Heat until oil is 350 degrees. Carefully place one piece of chicken at a time into pot. Fry for three to four minutes each side, or until nicely browned. Drain on paper towels. Lightly season with sea salt. When cool enough to handle, slice into  $\frac{1}{2}$ " strips.

Gently place chicken pieces on top of onions and stock in skillet. Drizzle three beaten eggs over all and gentle toss until eggs are cooked, about two minutes. If all of stock has been absorbed, add some of remaining stock. You don't want the dish to be soupy, just moist.

Over a bowl of rice, place chicken pieces and top with onion and egg mixture. Drizzle with more stock if still too dry.

Garnish with crumbled nori, scallions, and shichimi.

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# KICKED UP THROWBACK COOKIE BARS

Some people call these “Hello Dolly Cookies.” The gang at Eagle Brand calls them “Magic Cookie Bars.” I call them just plain delicious. I’m sure many a mom had these waiting for their kids after school. They are classics with a great combination of textures and flavors thanks to the condensed milk and candy morsels.

As most of you know, I’m not the baker in the family, but my husband does his own version with a new find – espresso chocolate chips. Thank you Nestlé Toll House for creating these amazing new treats. My husband was lucky that the bag wasn’t empty by the time he decided to bake his last batch!

## INGREDIENTS

1 sleeve + 3 graham crackers

9 tablespoons salted butter (melted)

1 14-oz can of sweetened condensed milk

1/2 cup chocolate chips

1/2 butterscotch chips

1/2 cup white chocolate ships

1/2 cup espresso chips

5 oz flaked coconut

1 cup of chopped nuts (optional)

## **PREPARATION**

Heat oven to 350.

Line a 9 x 13 baking pan with non-stick aluminum foil.

Crush graham crackers and combine with melted butter. Press into bottom of prepared pan.

Sprinkle coconut, chips and nuts over graham crackers.

Evenly pour sweetened condensed milk over the coconut, chips and nuts.

Bake for 25 – 30 minutes.

Let cool.

Lift out by aluminum foil and place on cutting board. Cut out desired sized squares.

*Note: Nuts are optional and chips can be added in any combination as long as they equal approximately 2 cups in total. You can also substitute dried fruit or M&M's for any of the candy chips.*

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## **EASTER DINNER RACK OF LAMB**

Are you thinking about serving lamb for Easter? How about this simple rack of lamb? Rack of lamb can be expensive but try your local Costco. I promise – I'm not getting a kick back from them. Their lamb is grass-fed from New Zealand and it won't break the bank. It's a little fattier than some of the racks you might find at your fancy butcher shop, but it's worth doing your own trimming to save a few bucks. And did I mention it's delicious?



## **INGREDIENTS (Serves 4-6)**

2 racks of lamb

6 tablespoons olive oil

$\frac{1}{2}$  cup Dijon mustard

1 cup panko

$\frac{1}{4}$  cup parmesan, finely grated

2 cloves of garlic, finely minced

salt and pepper

## **PREPARATION**

Preheat oven to 400 degrees.

Trim as much fat off lamb as possible. Between the bones and joints, cut racks of lamb into individual chops. Season liberally with salt and pepper.

In a large skillet, heat 3 tablespoons of olive oil. Do not crowd the pan. Sear lamb for two minutes on each side, until lightly browned. Drain on paper towels.

Pour panko into shallow bowl. Season with salt and pepper. Add parmesan and garlic, then combine. Drizzle 3 tablespoons of olive oil on top of mixture and combine.

Brush each chop with mustard. Dredge each in panko mixture, covering entire chop.

Place chops on oven-proof grill pan. Roast in oven for sixteen minutes. Let rest for five minutes and serve.

Serving suggestions: Great plated over bed of wilted spinach or creamy polenta.

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# CHEESY BACON POTATO CAKE

Potatoes are having a moment of celebrity thanks to Stephen Colbert's "Is potato" joke. And why shouldn't we celebrate them? They are easy to grow, nutritious, inexpensive and delicious when fried, baked, or mashed. I'm always looking for new ways to use them, so here's my take on a cheesy bacon potato cake. I'll admit, I borrowed the technique from a Claire Saffitz's New York Times recipe, but I've tweaked it quite a bit substituting yogurt for sour cream and adding in bacon and cheese.

## **INGREDIENTS**

6 large Baking Potatoes  
4 strips bacon  
5 Tablespoons of butter  
6 garlic cloves, minced  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  cup gruyere, large grate  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  cup full-fat yogurt  
salt and pepper to taste  
 $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon ground cayenne pepper  
Chopped chives for garnish  
Sour cream for garnish

## **PREPARATION**

Pre-heat oven to 400 degrees. Wash the potatoes and poke with

a fork. Place on baking sheet and bake for 75 minutes.

Remove from oven and let cool for ten minutes.

In a cast iron skillet, render 4 strips bacon until crispy. Drain on paper towels. When cool, crumble and set aside. Remove all but one tablespoon of bacon fat.

Melt the butter. Add the garlic and cook for about three minutes until it starts to brown. Remove pan from heat,

Scoop out the flesh from the potatoes and place in a large bowl. I like to include the skins from two potatoes for texture, so chop them into  $\frac{1}{2}$ "-inch pieces and add them to the bowl. (If you're not a fan of skins, you can leave them out.)

Add in  $\frac{1}{2}$ -cup of the gruyere, the yogurt, bacon, salt, pepper, and cayenne. Gentle fold together.

Place the skillet back on the stove and turn the heat to medium-high. Add the potato mixture to the skillet and gently fold it into the butter/garlic mixture. Flatten the potato mixture to even it out in the pan. Cook for about six minutes until the bottom begins to brown.

Shake the skillet to loosen the potato cake. If it doesn't move, cook for one more minute. If it still doesn't move, gently use a spatula to loosen it from the pan.

Place the skillet into the oven and bake for 30 minutes until lightly browned.

Remove from oven and let cool for ten minutes. Shake the pan to make sure the cake is loose. If not, use a spatula to loosen the bottom. Flip over onto a plate and garnish with sour cream and chives.

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# MUSHROOM CHICKEN STEW

For those nights when I want something hearty, but I don't want to fuss too much, I like this one-pot recipe. Mushrooms are always a huge hit in my house and I'm always looking for something new to do with chicken, so I came up with this mushroom chicken stew recipe. It's great paired with a dry white wine or a nice Pinot Noir.

## **INGREDIENTS**

3 tablespoons olive oil

1 onion, sliced

3 cloves garlic, minced

6 boneless/skinless chicken thighs, cut into 1" pieces

2 cups potatoes, 1" cubes

2 cups mushrooms, sliced

1 cup dry white wine

2 cups mushroom or chicken stock

Chives for garnish

Freshly grated Parmesan cheese for garnish

A few drops of truffle oil (optional)

Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

## **PREPARATION**

In a three-quart pot, heat the olive oil and sauté the onion

for about five minutes until it begins to brown. Add in garlic and sauté another minute. Add in chicken and stir until beginning to brown, about four minutes. Add in potatoes and mushrooms and sauté for another two minutes. Season with salt and pepper. Add in white wine, bring to a boil and let reduce for 5 minutes. Add in stock, bring back to a boil, then lower to a simmer for 25 minutes. Re-season to taste.

### **TO SERVE**

Ladle into bowls, garnish with a few chives, Parmesan cheese, and a few drops of truffle oil.