

From the Heart. . .

...Lifeskills for Today's Family
By Sharon L. Benedict MS



Meals . . . The Spices of Life

(published in Boerne Star, Friday, August 7, 2015)

During my husband's glorious retirement years, John has become a fantastic cook. Or I should say "chef extraordinaire!" I rarely cook anymore and love it. Every time I hear "dinner is ready" I come running knowing I will enjoy a special culinary treat.

Whether he cooks Italian, Mexican, Indian, or Chinese cuisine, I always feel like I have traveled to some far off land. Both our favorite cuisine is Chinese, of course. I sometimes watch him play, chopping up all kinds of veggies originating from the orient. I also see him experiment with the herbs and spices . . . a pinch here or pinch there. And Walla! A gourmet dish appears. He even combines his "scientist" mind with his artistic "creative" side with every presentation.

Do you ever wonder how any dish prepared is directly impacted by the kinds of herbs and spices ones uses, with so many uniquely flavorful quantities in combination? Being the artist/scientist, John always excitedly shares the chemistry taking place when he combines some ginger, garlic, and chili, the orient's essential spices. Then throws in some freshly chopped basil and coriander, even the occasional lemon grass. Is your mouth watering now?

I know mine is. John always has on hand some black bean sauce, five spice (cinnamon, cloves, Szechuan peppercorn, fennel, star anise), hoisin sauce, honey,

oyster sauce, pepper, rice vinegar, rice wine, and soy sauce. He also uses balsamic vinegar and non-traditional additions that makes the dishes even more delicious. And, John always tastes as he cooks to insure the dish does what he wants it to do. This he learned after watching so many cooking shows and taking courses via many of the Great Courses DVD offerings. He is just finishing up one DVD, *The Everyday Gourmet: Essential Secrets of Spices in Cooking* by Chef Bill Briwa.

How's your herbs and spices know-how? According to the Food Lover's Companion book, herbs are "the fragrant leaves of any of various annual or perennial plants that grow in temperate zones and do not have woody stems. Herbs can be purchased in dried or fresh forms . . . They can be found at various times of year, depending on the herb."

Spices are pungent or aromatic seasonings obtained from the bark, buds, fruit, roots, seeds or stems of various plants and trees (whereas HERBS usually come from the leafy part of a plant). Spices were prized long before recorded history. Though they've always been used to flavor food and drink, throughout the eons spices have also been favored for a plethora of other uses including crowning emperors, making medicines and perfumes, religious ceremonies and as burial accoutrements for the wealthy.

According to the American Spice Trade Associations (ASTA), "Archeologists estimate that by 50,000 B.C. primitive man had discovered that parts of certain aromatic plants help make food taste better." Throughout the generations, spices have been a rich commodity in trade and commerce that even resulted in the discovery of the New World. The United States today is the world's major spice buyer.

Some examples of the more popular spices are ALLSPICE, CARDAMOM, CINNAMON, CLOVES, GINGER, MACE, NUTMEG, PAPRIKA, PEPPER, SAFFRON and TURMERIC. Spices are also sold in blends, such as CURRY POWDER. Spices are available whole and ground. Ground spices quickly lose their flavor, so keeping them stored in small quantities works best. Whole spices can be ground when needed. "Store spices in airtight containers in a cool, dark place for no more than six months. Spices are used to enhance a wide variety of food, both sweet and savory. They should be used sparingly so they don't overpower the foods being seasoned."

Although there is every brand and dry mix out there, fresh herbs and spices can make all the difference in bringing out the flavors of any meal. You will need to learn how to cook and garnish with them to bring out the greatest aroma, retain their flavor and preserve their high nutrition.

For most of us who are on the run at work and home, we do have a pantry cabinet full of the latest and best dry herbs and spices. Just remember to date them. Pantry herbs last about 1-3 years, whole spices 2-4 years, dried/ground spices 2-3 years, extracts 4 years (except vanilla lasts indefinitely), and rubs and blends from 1-3 years, depending on shelf life of components.

You can learn more about herbs and spices at Allspice online, (<http://allspiceonline.com/blog/old-spice/>), and Better Homes & Gardens, <http://www.bhg.com/gardening/plant-dictionary/herb/>. In addition, if you are like my husband, John, who loves to delve into the more scholarly history and use of herbs and spices, these references may be just what you were looking for.

- Culinary Herbs and Spices of the World by Ben-Erik van Wyk

- Where Our Food Comes From: Retracing Nikolay Vavilov's Quest to End Famine by Gary Paul Nabhan
- Cumin, Camels, and Caravans: A Spice Odyssey by Gary Paul Nabhan

Next article, we will spend some time learning how we can grow inside and outside your own herbs and spices, the easy way in this fast-paced world of ours.

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From the Heart. . .

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Meals . . . Growing Herbs & Spices

(published in Boerne Star, Friday, August 14, 2015)

Want to start an herb/spice garden? For some personalities, they start big. Yet, for most of us, starting small may be the smarter and easier way to go, at first. In this fast-paced world of ours growing herbs can be a simple way to add edible plants to your existing garden of flowers or vegetables.

According to Better Homes and Gardens, "Most herbs are very versatile, and grow well in the ground or in containers. Herbs, which generally are annuals except in very warm climates, make a great addition to a traditional flower garden, and are also a pretty, practical accent to window boxes or containers near a grill or outside a kitchen door."

You can find out more about growing less-familiar varieties of herbs at the Herbs section of the Better Homes and Gardens Plant Encyclopedia (<http://www.bhg.com/gardening/plant-dictionary/>). This resource includes details on growing requirements for each herb. You'll also get tips on growing the most delicious herbs and using them in your favorite recipes.

What are your favorite herbs and spices? My favorite herbs are basil, mint, thyme, cilantro, oregano. For spices, cinnamon and garlic are at the top of my list. And,

yes, they can be awesome together on many chicken dishes. Maybe you would like to try these recipes at <http://www.yummly.com/recipes/cinnamon-garlic-chicken>.

Remember, spices are pungent or aromatic seasonings obtained from the bark, buds, fruit, roots, seeds or stems of various plants and trees (whereas HERBS usually come from the leafy part of a plant). Spices are also mostly dried and can vary in taste, from hot, sweet, to spicy.

So, pick out your favorite herbs to begin your herb garden. How about starting with a container garden that can be placed on your deck, patio, balcony, even fire escapes, or front steps. According to Better Homes & Garden, with the right growing conditions the best container herbs are *basil, chives, cilantro, tarragon, lavender, lemon balm, lemon verbena, marjoram, mint, oregano, rosemary, sage, and thyme*. You can learn more about growing each of these herbs at <http://www.bhg.com/gardening/vegetable/herbs/best-herbs-for-container-gardens/>.

Some of the tips for growing herbs in containers include:

- Herbs need full sun for best performance, at least eight hours of direct sun. For growing indoors, place in the sunniest location.
- Avoid the fertilizer. Grow in lean soil for strongest fragrance and flavor
- Most herbs prefer dry conditions, but some need more moisture to thrive.
- Use a soil-less potting mix to provide excellent drainage and space for roots to grow.
- With large enough containers, perennial herbs can survive year-round (with at least 5 gallons of soil), good drainage, and grows well in your zone.

- Use plastic pots; ceramic or clay containers can crack from freeze-thaw cycles. Your potted perennial herbs can be transplanted in prepared ground with enough time to establish new root system for surviving colder climates
- Learn how to stock and store herbs and spices at <http://www.bhg.com/recipes/how-to/cooking-basics/how-to-store-herbs-and-spices/>.

When you have indoor herb gardens, you have easy access during cooking for freshly cut fragrances and flavors. There are all kinds of tips for growing indoors at <http://www.bhg.com/gardening/vegetable/herbs/>. Be creative about the types of containers you can use indoors, from strawberry jars, decorative bowls, large cups, canisters, baskets. Better Homes & Gardens even shows using an old pop-up toaster!

Whether starting from seed or seedlings, routine care is essential, such as dividing, pruning, and harvesting. Then it's time for cooking those wonderful herbs you so lovingly nurtured, or even simply tossing some in your salads and desserts. Here's one resource I found while writing this article, Gourmet Gardens, from Queensland (<http://www.gourmetgarden.com/en-us/matching-guide>), that offers a "pairing chart" for preparing a variety of cuisines, such as Chinese, Indian, Thai, French, Italian, and more.

Have loads of fun with experimenting with herbs and spices. According to the American Spice Trade Association & Alice Henneman, MS, RD, Extension Educator, Nebraska University Cooperative Extension, Lancaster County, an added health bonus can easily be adopted at the same time while reducing fat, sugar, and salt. You reduce fat by adding enhanced herb flavors instead of relying on batters, breading, and high fat sauces to bring flavor to your dish.

You can reduce or even eliminate sugar in recipes by using sweet-tasting spices like allspice, cloves, anise, ginger, cardamom, mace, cinnamon, nutmeg. Salt intake can be reduce using savory flavors with has a “bite,” such as black pepper, garlic powder, curry powder, cumin, dill seeds, basil, ginger, coriander and onion. Try omitting salt when cooking pasta by adding flavor with basil, oregano, parsley, pepper, an Italian seasoning blend, or powdered garlic and onion rather than the salt form.

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Setting & Sharing Mealtime Routines

(published in Boerne Star, Friday, August 21, 2015)

With school beginning just around the corner, I can imagine for many families they are madly buying school supplies, working on a before and after school schedule with extracurricular activities. How about making mealtime together an important part of that schedule?

What is meal time like for you? Does your family eat together at your dinner table at least once per day? Once per week? Do you have favorite dishes and menus you often repeat? Or is your meal time basically spontaneous with leftovers or TV dinner popped out of the freezer? Are you the only one in the kitchen slaving away – with your kids on their iPods, and your spouse at the computer?

When schools starts, does having meals together get lost along the way? If so, now is the time before you and your family's schedule gets too hectic to make mealtime something your family looks forward to in the morning and at evening meal together. Here are some tips we've learned over the years that you can to talk with your family—about creating meals and mealtime that say family is most important.

- Commit to eating at least 3 meals per week together at home, preferably the evening meal to encourage sharing of preparations and conversation.
- Put some music on to set a fun mood for your family's evening gathering.

- Sit down and write a basic healthy/whole foods menu plan for the week; and go grocery shopping for it all.
- Learn how to clean and preserve foods to avoid waste & spoilage.
- At meal time, ask how your children's day went? Try to keep the conversation positive and light, if at all possible. Offer a supportive comment about a more serious topic and suggest the conversation on that topic be continued later in the evening or at a more appropriate time.
- Whether you serve buffet style or at the dining table, use colorful serving items that make each meal together a little special.

How do you make mealtime special for everyone? In what ways do your mealtime routines get stalled? There are a number of lifestyle habits that hinder the enjoyment of meal time together. We often are not even aware these routines we develop make mealtime less inviting at home and when dining out. Think about some possible habits you or your spouse may have that you wish they didn't have, particularly at meal time.

For many of us we grab a bite and continue on the day's marathon. Meals may also be tied to high stress business meetings. Even at home our minds are going through that list of to do's. How we approach mealtime is definitely a mindset challenge. Any number of lifestyle habits hinders the enjoyment of meals and mealtime together. And if mealtime isn't scheduled as an important part of your day, most of the enjoyment can be easily lost.

Think back to your own mealtime experiences. Were they happy ones or filled with tension? What habits do you have you miss an enjoyable mealtime together with those you love and care for? What one action can you take to free you of that hindrance

and offer greater enjoyment in sharing mealtime together. Talk about those actions with a family member or close friend, giving them permission to hold you accountable for taking that action.

Be kind to one another when you communicate your thoughts. Certain habits may be somewhat touchy. I decided to pull from one of my articles five years ago a few examples common in this fast-paced world we live in. Are any of these familiar to you or someone you know?

- Because of years of business meeting meals, you bring the stress home and act the same business-like way with your family at mealtime.
- You repeatedly drink some form of alcohol (including wine) before, with, and after meals—causing you to either zone out or become obnoxious with those around you.
- You do not share in the preparation and serving of meals.
- You routinely complain about what is being served.
- You are always late for mealtime.
- You down your food in gulps between deep breaths and are done eating within the first five minutes at the table.

In the next article, more typical hindrances will be offered. During this coming week, be sure to send me example(s) of habits you or a family member may want to change. I will try to offer tips on how to improve your mealtime experience together. Feel free to sign with a nickname when you email me, such as “Forlorn & Alone in the Kitchen,” or “the Galloping Gulper,” or “Late for Lunch.”

Isn't it time to treat your family to a welcoming mealtime routine? May your mealtimes you share and celebrate together say "I love you and cherish you."

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Setting & Sharing Mealtime Routines, part 2

(published in Boerne Star, Friday, August 28, 2015)

Now that you and your family have survived the first week of the school marathon, how did your mealtime routines fair? Were you able to establish or even hold on to those important mealtimes that help your family stay connected and nice to each other? Or did you find yourself grabbing and gulping through the week?

In the previous article, a few typical hindrances were offered that get in the way of those enjoyable, “coming together” moments in the day. Have you nicknamed yourself something like “Forlorn & Alone in the Kitchen,” or “the Galloping Gulper,” or the always “Late for Lunch?” Here are those hindrances found in many American homes today when it comes to mealtime routines (including those previously listed):

- Because of years of business meeting meals, you bring the stress home and act the same business-like way with your family at mealtime.
- You repeatedly drink some form of alcohol (including wine) before, with, and after meals—causing you to either zone out or become obnoxious with those around you.
- You do not share in the preparation and serving of meals.
- You routinely complain about what is being served.
- You are always late for mealtime.

- You down your food in gulps between deep breaths and are done eating within the first five minutes at the table.
- You seldom if ever come home and offer to make the meal.
- You hide in your office at the computer answering emails before you even say hello to your family.
- You give no thought to the physical dining environment around you at home, making it unwelcoming for family, friends, and neighbors.
- You try to dissect or solve your life problems at the dining table.
- You argue and dwell on controversial topics at mealtime instead of waiting for a more appropriate occasion.
- You attack or accuse your children at mealtime about school or some unacceptable personal behavior.
- You don't ask questions that encourage friendly, lively conversation.
- You routinely leave the dining table the minute you finish eating, while others are still dining.
- You don't offer to help clean the kitchen after a meal.
- You would rather eat your meals on a TV tray while watching TV.
- You never call to tell your family you will be eating out or late for dinner.
You just show up later, then tell them after dinner was waiting for you.

I know this list goes on and on—more than likely with a number of creative habits garnered over the years and hard to break. I confess . . . I did a few of them over the years, such as gulping down my food between deep breaths and done eating within the first five minutes at the table. Another one was not asking questions that encourage

friendly, lively conversation and routinely leaving the table the minute I was finished, while others were still dining. I had this belief that I had to remove the dirty dishes from the table and start cleaning the kitchen. Sitting there was my family, still eating. My husband finally said, “please sit down and let me finish my meal in peace without the dish rattling! I want your company.”

I found that many of my mealtime hindrances were learned long ago as a child watching my mom scurry around wanting to get the dishes done and over with, while we were rushed into gulping down our food. Fortunately, today I have won over most of these undesirable habits and am still working on stopping myself from jumping up from the table to clear and rinse the dishes. My sweet husband continues to remind me that he wants my company and doesn't want to end up with indigestion stressed over all the dish clanging and busyness at mealtime . . . a meal that he so lovingly created. He makes most all the meals now in his retirement. So I better win over this hindrance so I too can enjoy his wonderfully creative cuisine prepared and his company. He even gave me another incentive. He would start helping to clear the table when we were “all” done and satisfied with our mealtime together. And it is working!

As you read this list, who wants to live with all this negativity anyway? If any of these are personally familiar to you, how about reframing that particular habit you want to change, such as “I will come home, and begin to offer to make the meal at least once per week while enjoying each other's company.”

You will gratefully begin to build cherished memories at mealtime for you and your family. Your adult children will then have sweet memories of mealtime they will create with their own families. Now, this is a legacy worth passing on.

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