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blend the flavors. Remove the soup from the heat and carefully mash the beans a bit with a potato masher to thicken the mixture, being careful not to splash the hot soup. Stir the soup well. Add the lime juice and 1 tablespoon of the cilantro. Ladle the soup into bowls and top each serving with some of the chopped tomatoes, the remaining cilantro, and, if you like, a dollop of sour cream and some jalapeno slices.





Southwestern Casserole – Serves 6+

This is a sort of Southwestern lasagna, with layers of sauce, tortillas, and cheese. It's great served with corn muffins and zucchini, which can cook in the oven alongside the casserole. The leftovers make really good lunches. And yes, if you don't have any chicken or turkey, you can substitute a pound of lean ground beef. Just be sure to brown the beef before using it in the casserole.

1 16-ounce can of black beans, drained and rinsed

1 small onion, chopped

2 tablespoons of dried cilantro leaves

1 7-ounce can of green chopped chiles (mild or hot, your choice)

2 teaspoons of chili powder

1 teaspoon of salt

1 teaspoon of oregano

1 teaspoon of ground cumin

2 cups of chopped cooked chicken (or turkey)

2 15-ounce cans of diced tomatoes, with juice

1 4-ounce can of tomato paste

9 5-inch whole-wheat tortillas

2 cups (8 ounces) of shredded, reduced fat Mexican cheese blend

½ cup of light sour cream

1 tomato, chopped

1-2 cups of shredded lettuce

1 avocado, peeled and diced

Pre-heat the oven to 400 degrees and coat a 9 x 13-inch pan with non-stick cooking spray. In a large bowl, mix the beans, onion, cilantro, chiles, chili powder, salt, oregano, cumin, chicken, one can of diced tomatoes, and the can of tomato paste. Spread 1/3 of the mixture into the prepared pan. Cover the mixture with 3 tortillas, cutting them to fit



the pan. Sprinkle the tortillas with 1/3 of the cheese. Spread another 1/3 of the chicken mixture on top of the cheese, and cover the mixture with 3 more tortillas. Sprinkle the tortillas with 1/3 of the cheese. Spread the remainder of the chicken mixture on top of the cheese. Cut the last few tortillas into strips and distribute them evenly across the top of the chicken mixture. Pour the remaining can of diced tomatoes evenly across the casserole, on top of the tortilla strips. Coat a piece of aluminum foil large enough to cover the casserole dish with non-stick cooking spray and cover the casserole, sprayed side down.

Bake the casserole for 25 minutes. Remove the foil and bake the casserole for 10 minutes longer. Top the casserole with the remaining cheese and bake the casserole for another 5 minutes or until the cheese is melted. Let the casserole stand for 10-15 minutes to cool and firm up a little. Sprinkle the top of the casserole with lettuce and diced tomatoes. On top of the lettuce and tomatoes, dollop on the sour cream and sprinkle on the diced avocado.





Corn Muffins – Makes 12

Okay, these muffins are cheating. I use 2 “Jiffy” mixes with a bit of variation. Nonetheless, the muffins are quite good, quick, and go nicely with a variety of dishes. Try them.

2 “Jiffy” corn muffin mixes (or similar, 7-ounce, small box/bag mixes)

2 eggs

2/3 cup of low fat milk

2 tablespoons of honey

2 tablespoons of minced dried chives or chopped green onions (optional)

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees and coat 12 muffin cups with nonstick cooking spray or use cupcake liners spritzed with spray. In a large bowl, whisk the eggs and milk. Whisk in the honey until the mixture is a little frothy. Stir in the muffin mixes with a spoon and add the chives or green onions if you like. Divide the batter among the muffin cups. Bake the muffins for 15-20 minutes or until the muffins are golden and a toothpick inserted into a muffin comes out clean.





Mexican Wedding Cake – Serves 12+

This is a great cake for a celebration. The cake lacks eggs, oil, and butter.

Nonetheless, it is full of juicy pineapple, crunchy walnuts, and sweet coconut. The cake has just a touch of nutmeg and orange zest, giving it a bit more interest. A rich, albeit lower fat, cream cheese mixture tops and fills the cake. To help the flavors blend, making the cake ahead and refrigerating it is the best option. A couple of hours will do, but I like to make the cake at least a day ahead and let it sit in the refrigerator so that it will be at it's moist, creamy, pineapple-coconutty best. Plus, making the cake ahead reduces kitchen hassles.

2 cups of flour

1½ cups of sugar

1 teaspoon of baking soda

¼ teaspoon of salt

1 20-ounce can of crushed pineapple, undrained

1 cup of chopped or broken walnuts

1 cup of shredded coconut

¼ teaspoon of nutmeg

1 teaspoon of vanilla extract

1 teaspoon of grated orange zest

Filling/Topping

1 8-ounce package of low-fat cream cheese, softened

2 cups of confectioners' sugar

2 teaspoons of vanilla extract

1 teaspoon of butter flavoring

2-3 tablespoons of low-fat milk

2 tablespoons of chopped walnuts, preferably toasted



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Preheat the oven to 350 degrees and coat 2 9-inch cake pans with nonstick cooking spray, preferably the kind with the flour in it (if not, dust the sprayed pans with a teaspoon of flour and tap out the excess). Mix the flour, sugar, baking soda, salt, pineapple, 1 cup of walnuts, coconut, nutmeg, vanilla extract, and orange zest until combined. Don't beat the mixture, just mix it until everything is incorporated. Divide the batter between the pans. Bake the cake layers for about 30 minutes or until a toothpick inserted in the center of a cake comes out clean. Let the layers cool for 10 minutes before you try to remove them from their pans. Let the layers cool completely. For the filling/topping, beat the cream cheese until fluffy. Add the sugar gradually, creaming it with the cream cheese. Beat in the vanilla extract, butter flavoring, and enough milk to reach a spreading consistency. Spread the filling/topping between the cooled cake layers and on the top of the cake. Sprinkle the top of the cake with 2 tablespoons of chopped walnuts. Refrigerate the cake for at least a couple of hours before serving it (and refrigerate any leftovers).





December 15

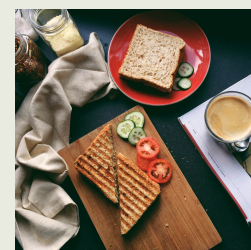
Pray then in this way: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one. For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Matthew 6: 9-15

We pray to God for the food that sustains our lives from day to day. So we believe, and so we pray. We ask God for bread, yet how well we know there often is much more than a simple loaf on that table before us.

We often choose among dozens of different varieties of loaves. Some are sliced, and some are not. Some are long and slim, some are round and fat, and others are long, flat sheets. Some are filled with fruit, while others shimmer with frosting. Some we will eat plain. Some we eat as sandwiches, expanded with a variety of meats and other goodies. Some we will eat with peanut butter and jelly. Some we will eat with full meals, alongside a multiplicity of other foods.

No matter the day, the time of day, the place at the table, or the place where the table is set, the bread and all that accompanies it is a gift from God's creation, made, raised, grown, or harvested by the hands of God's people. So we give thanks for bread and for much more, as we pray, "Give us this day our daily bread..."





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In the Kitchen, December 15

Broccoli-Bacon Salad

Cheeseburger Bake

Quick Brown Bread

Butterscotch Nut Cake

Tonight requires bread. So how about a simple brown bread made with whole grains? The kind you can eat plain, warm and crumbly from the oven. The bread goes well with a cheeseburger bake. Start the bread cooking while you put the casserole together, and then put the cheeseburger casserole into the same oven while the bread continues to bake. While the two dishes are in the oven, you can prepare the broccoli-bacon salad. It has lots of crunchy vegetables, apples, and a sweet-salty dressing. Serve the salad "as is" or atop whatever salad greens you have on hand. As long as you have the oven on for the bread and cheeseburger bake, you might as well add a butterscotch nut cake. It's simple to mix up and can bake while you eat dinner. The cake takes about an hour to cook and cool, so it should be ready to eat and enjoy while you relax with milk or coffee once the leftovers have been stashed (if there are any) and the dinner debris has been cleaned up (I recommend enlisting spouses/children/significant others for this).



DRAFT Broccoli-Bacon Salad – Serves 8+

This is a wonderful, nutritious salad made with vegetables that are easily available in the fall and winter. The salad serves a crowd or furnishes lots of leftovers, which keep quite well. In fact, the flavors of the salad seem to improve as the salad sits in the refrigerator.

1 medium-sized head of broccoli, trimmed and cut into bite-sized pieces

1 small red onion, chopped

3 tablespoons of bacon crumbles

¼ cup of dried cranberries

¼ cup of shredded carrots (or finely chopped)

1 medium red apple, cored and chopped

½ cup of chopped walnuts

¼ cup of light mayonnaise

¼ cup of cider vinegar

3 tablespoons of sugar

½ cup of fat-free Greek yogurt

In a large bowl, combine all of the ingredients and toss to mix and coat everything with the dressing. Serve the salad immediately or, better yet, chill it for at least several hours to blend the flavors.





Cheeseburger Bake – Serves 6+

This casserole is kid and adult friendly, easy to put together, and uses ingredients that are relatively inexpensive and readily available. The dish is perfect for a family dinner or for sharing with friends. The flavors of cheeseburger are all there—beef, tomato, pickles, mustard, onions, and cheese—and are nicely melded during a quick bake in the oven.

12 ounces of macaroni (or other pasta)

1 teaspoon of oil

1 medium onion, chopped

½ teaspoon of garlic powder

16-24 ounces of lean ground beef (93 percent lean)

2 15-ounce cans of tomato sauce or 1 29-ounce can of tomato puree

½ cup of chopped pickle relish

1 tablespoon of Worcestershire sauce

¼ cup of Dijon mustard

¼ teaspoon of pepper

½ teaspoon of salt

8 ounces of shredded cheddar cheese

3-4 chopped green onions, optional

3 chopped plum tomatoes, optional



Preheat the oven to 350 degrees and coat a large casserole dish or 9 x 13-inch pan with nonstick cooking spray. Cook the pasta in boiling water until barely tender and drain it.

While the pasta is cooking, heat a nonstick skillet over medium high heat and add the oil. When the pan is hot, add the ground beef and onion and brown them for about 10 minutes. Add the garlic powder, tomato sauce, pickle relish, Worcestershire sauce, mustard, pepper, and salt and stir to combine everything. Reduce the heat and simmer the mixture for about 5 minutes. Stir in the pasta. Pour the mixture into the prepared

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casserole dish, cover it with foil (to prevent sticking, coat the side of the foil you intend to place down on top of the casserole with nonstick cooking spray), and bake the casserole for 30-35 minutes until bubbling. Remove the foil and sprinkle the top of the casserole with cheese. Bake the casserole about 5 minutes more or until the cheese melts. Let the casserole stand for 10 minutes and, just before serving, sprinkle the top of the casserole with the green onions and tomatoes, if you're using them.

