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In the Kitchen, December 1

Pineapple Cabbage Slaw

Peanut Butter Chicken

Brown Rice

Peas

Pumpkin Muffins

Fruit Sherbet

How about something a little different with an African influence? The peanut butter chicken is cheap (it uses chicken thighs), quick to put together early in the day in the slow cooker, and nutritious. If you like heat, feel free to add some cayenne or, better, chopped fresh ginger. The amount of ginger depends on your taste, but start with a small amount—a teaspoon—and add more, if you like. The brown rice and peas (use frozen peas and zap them in the microwave) are low fuss, as is the pineapple cabbage slaw, which can be made in advance and tastes better if it's allowed to sit in the refrigerator before serving. The pumpkin muffins—which (oh, horrors, please don't tell!) start with a cake mix, can be mixed up in just a few minutes and baked while the rest of the meal cooks. The muffins are good enough for dessert, but they're low in fat and calories! And if anyone really, really wants something more for dessert, how about a small dish of fruit sherbet? Alternatively, isn't there still some cake left from yesterday's dinner? (Maybe not if you have lots of kids, teenagers, or you like late night/early morning snacking.)



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Pineapple Cabbage Slaw – Serves 4-6+

You can't get much easier than this. The slaw starts with a bag of shredded cabbage (you can certainly shred your own, if you prefer) and gets a tangy yogurt-vinegar dressing. The pineapple, dried cranberries, and red onion add sweetness, bite, and color.

1 16-ounce bag of shredded cabbage

½ cup of light mayonnaise

½ cup of plain, fat-free yogurt

2 tablespoons of sugar

¼ cup of cider vinegar

½ cup of drained crushed pineapple

¼ cup of dried cranberries or raisins

¼ cup of chopped red onion

Mix all the ingredients together and refrigerate the slaw, preferably for at least an hour before serving it.





Peanut Butter Chicken – Serves 4+

This is easy and quite good. You can certainly use chicken breasts, if you'd prefer, but I think the thighs hold up to the longer cooking better and stay moister. Serve this luscious chicken with rice to catch all the juices, and, if you'd like, sprinkle additional cilantro, green onions, and peanuts on top of the chicken for added color, freshness, and crunch.

1½-2 pounds of boneless, skinless chicken thighs

1 large red bell pepper, sliced

1 large onion, chopped

1 15-ounce can of chickpeas, drained and rinsed

½ cup of peanut butter (I like to use crunchy)

2 teaspoons of ground cumin

Zest and juice of one lime

1 15-ounce can of diced tomatoes, undrained

½ teaspoon of chicken flavored "Better than Bullion" or bullion granules

¼ cup of reduced sodium soy sauce

2 teaspoons of dried cilantro

½ teaspoon of garlic powder

¼ cup of fresh chopped cilantro (optional)

2-3 chopped green onions (optional)

¼ cup of chopped peanuts (optional)

Coat a large slow cooker with non-stick cooking spray. Add the chicken, bell pepper, onion, and chickpeas. In a large bowl, mix the peanut butter, cumin lime zest and juice, tomatoes, "Better than Bullion," soy sauce, dried cilantro, and garlic powder until well combined. Pour the mixture over the ingredients in the slow cooker and cook for 4-5 hours on high or 6-8 on low. To serve the dish, sprinkle the chicken with cilantro, green onions, and peanuts, if you'd like.

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DRAFT Pumpkin Muffins – Makes 18

These super-quick muffins are great for breakfast, brunch, dessert, snacks, or general hungries. You can certainly use a spice cake mix instead of a white cake mix, if you like, but I prefer the taste of the yellow cake with the “do it yourself” spices. Feel free to substitute raisins for the cranberries and other nuts for the walnuts. Or just leave them out. The muffins are great “as is.” The recipe makes a large batch, so you’ll have plenty to share.

1 15-ounce can of pumpkin puree

1 cup of applesauce

1 box (18-19 ounce) box of white or yellow cake mix

1 teaspoon of cinnamon

1 teaspoon of ginger

½ teaspoon of allspice

½ teaspoon of nutmeg

½ cup of chopped walnuts

½ cup of dried cranberries

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees and coat 18 muffin tins with nonstick cooking spray or line the tins with cupcake liners (and spray the liners). Mix the pumpkin puree and applesauce well.

Add all the other ingredients and mix them together gently until just combined. Divide the batter among the muffin cups. Bake the muffins for 20-25 minutes until a toothpick inserted in the center of a muffin comes out clean.



How to Decorate on the Cheap—and Fast!

Decorating your home without spending a lot isn't hard. Although the ideas below may not pass muster with the decorating doyennes—who want you to go out and spend money—the tips will help simplify your holiday preparations without bashing your budget

- First, don't waste money on lots of plastic thingies (that includes abominable snowmen statues, snow globes, inflatable Santas, and, my favorite this year, the \$130 inflatable Christmas tree with a pop-up Minion). Instead, cut some greenery outside or ask at a Christmas tree sales lot for the trimmings from the bottom of the trees. Place the greenery around the house in vases or other containers (jars will do fine) with water to bring color and fragrance to your rooms. You can always tuck in a few ornaments or ribbons, if you like, without going overboard. Put a wreath or greenery swag on the door. Inexpensive. Classy. Beautiful.
- Use last year's decorations (or the ones you've had for years). Who says you have to have new, trendy ones every year? That is, who says so besides the home improvement, department, and big box stores? Consider that some members of your family may look forward to the arrival of the old decorations, those that appear year after year to herald the Advent season. I have a 30+ year-old nutcracker that my son expects to be on the mantle each year, despite the fact that the nutcracker's paint has faded and he's lost some of the fur on his hat.



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- Use reusable bags and decorative boxes for gifts rather than expensive wrapping paper. You'll save money and time. I have sets of decorative boxes that nest together for storage. I got some of them for 60 percent off their list price at a local craft store a week or so before Christmas



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one year. The other boxes I got at the dollar store. When the time comes, I put the gifts in the boxes, close the lids, and I'm finished. No wrapping. No searching for scissors or tape. If a gift doesn't fit in a box, it goes in a reusable decorative bag (or a note goes in a small box about where to find the gift, which has led to some interesting Christmas morning hunts around our house...). No one has complained about the lack of wrapping paper, and we haven't sent toxic smoke up the chimney from burning the used paper, which my husband insists on doing. The boxes go back in the attic after Christmas.



- Don't feel compelled to buy Christmas paper products—plates, tablecloths, napkins, etc.. They are expensive, and you don't really need them. See what you have lurking in your cabinets and drawers that you can use. If you don't have enough dishes, even after you've done the expedition through the backs of your cabinets, consider checking out what's available through Ebay or the local thrift shop before plunking down money for paper products or Christmas dishes at a department store. Yes, the china or dishes you find on Ebay or in the thrift store may be used, perhaps old, but they can be beautiful, far less expensive, and washed and reused many times. Someone else may not appreciate or have room for their grandmother's old china, but you and your family will. Adopt it. And imagine the stories those dishes could tell you about family gatherings during Christmases past! (Hmm...is that a conversation starter?) A simple tablecloth or placemats that can be washed are fine. They don't have to have Santa and his reindeer jogging about their borders to look Christmas-like. Decorate the table with some greenery, some candles (flameless are best, particularly if you have children and pets!), or a family nativity set, and you'll have something very special and

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memorable that will cost you little and not involve rushing out to buy decorations at department, homegoods ,or big box stores. Plus,you can use the time you save to cook!





December 2

*To you, Oh Lord, I lift up my soul.
O my God, in you I trust;
do not let me be put to shame;
do not let my enemies exult over me.
Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
Let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.*

*Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth, and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation;
For you I wait all day long.*

Psalm 25: 1-5

Once more the Psalmist, in the opening days of Advent, leads us in worship and deep into the presence of God. God receives us as we are, even though we are anxious about the things needing to be done and the people we need to remember. By God's grace and by the patient love we find in others, we are taught God's way and come to know God's truth.





In the Kitchen, December 2

Slow Cooked Pork Chops with Sweet Potatoes and Apples

Country Green Beans

Fresh Oranges or Clementines

Chocolate Pound Cake

This is an easy one. Put all the ingredients for the pork chop dish into the slow cooker and let it do its thing. The green beans are the type your grandmother used to make (if you were lucky), though lightened up a bit, so your arteries stay intact. The oranges or clementines have lots of great fiber and vitamins in them, but feel free to substitute another fruit of your choice or a simple salad. I will confess to tinkering—a fair amount—with the recipe for the chocolate pound cake, which came from a good friend of the family. The original was a dense, chocolaty, real old-fashioned pound cake. My effort, when I made it according to the original recipe, didn't taste quite as good as our friend's, perhaps because I knew what went into it (a significant amount of Crisco solid shortening and butter) and how long I'd have to spend on the Stairmaster for each piece I ate! So, I decided I might as well try the recipe again with a healthier slant. I think the result is pretty good and also easier than the original. No mixer needed! The cake is wonderful, as is. Or you may want to dust the cake with powdered sugar or cocoa powder and serve each slice with a handful of berries.

