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At Your Table

An abundance of hearty food for a holiday tradition

By Maria Gallagher
FOR THE INQUIRER

Chef Adam is playing a kazoo — loudly — while Rachel Ezekiel-Fishbein struggles to concentrate on making Asian marinade for her barbecued chicken wings. The music and the cooking muse are not compatible.

"Adam, do you want to take that into another room?" she asks sweetly.

"No!" her tooling assistant replies with all the defiance that a 2½-year-old can muster. He's wearing a child-sized apron with a "Chef Adam" monogram, but right now the only thing Adam Fishbein wants to make is mischief.

Rachel knows if she waits just a minute, her son will move on to another activity — with luck, a quieter one. And he does.

Rachel and Joel Fishbein are used to coping with pint-sized interruptions while cooking. This morning, they eventually finish the marinade, a baked shrimp dish, and a mocha-fudge cake, dishes for the couple's annual New Year's Day open house in Elkins Park.

The party began on a small scale in 1994, before Adam and his brother Danny, 5, were born. This year Rachel and Joel invited 80 adults and many children to the buffet-style feast, which is preceded by nearly two weeks of shopping, cooking, freezing and thawing.

"This is not a gourmet thing," said Rachel, 36, a public-relations consultant. "People marvel at the amount of food. It's hearty food. It's bad-for-you food. It's plentiful, and it's fun. Most of our baking we do at 7 a.m. in our pjs."

"I never cooked before we were married two years ago," said Joel, 36, a partner with the Center City law firm Abrahams, Loewenstein & Bushman. He's now comfortable enough in the kitchen to take charge of several dishes for the party: guacamole, beef chili, vegetarian chili, sesame noodles and hot apple cider.

The menu, drawn up a month in advance, always incorporates the Fishbeins' love of Asian flavors (sesame noodles, Thai beef salad, barbecued chicken wings) and Rachel's fondness for chocolate and toffee (mocha buttercrunch pie, chocolate toffee cake, chocolate mousse brownies).

The recipes are drawn from several sources, including friends, Bon Appetit magazine, and a well-thumbed copy of *The Frog Commissary Cookbook*, a beloved touchstone for Philadelphians whose palates were honed by those two adventurous restaurants in the 1980s.

The book includes a phone number that cooks can call for help with a recipe. Although both Frog and the Commissary have closed, callers are directed to Frog Commissary Catering, which still serves many of the cookbook's dishes.

"Every year I call them at least once or twice and ask, 'Can I make this ahead or can I freeze this?'" Rachel said.

The Fishbeins always take a vacation week in late December to get ready for the open house.

The party foods they make, with a little help from Danny and Adam, aren't difficult, but they are labor-intensive in the quantities required for a large gathering.



Rachel Ezekiel-Fishbein and son Adam, above, pour dressing on a Thai beef salad as they prepare for a New Year's feast. Below, Rachel chats with guests at the party, an annual tradition started in 1994.



This year, they made more than 200 cheese twists and more than 200 pigs in a blanket (Hebrew National hot dogs cut into thirds, wrapped in crescent-roll dough, and baked). Cakes and cookies were baked and frozen. There were many trips to the supermarket and a nearby Korean specialty grocer for ingredients.

By the morning of the party, they are ready. Because it snowed the night before, Joel takes the boys sledding, leaving Rachel plenty of time to get ready. The family dog, an 8-year-old yellow Lab named Montana, is dispatched to Rachel's mother's house. Joel carries a cooler outside and fills it with snow to chill a few bottles of beer. A college-age friend, hired to help serve and take coats, arrives early.

Savory foods and nonalcoholic drinks are set up in the kitchen, while the dining room table is given over to the lavish dessert display. As the first guests come to the

front door, which is flanked by snowmen made by Danny and Adam, the young woman helping at the party asks where their coats should go.

"In the room at the top of the stairs that I want to paint desperately," Rachel tells her.

Oriental Barbecued Chicken Wings

- ¼ cup Chinese fermented black beans
 - ¼ cup soy sauce
 - ¼ cup sesame oil
 - ¼ cup rice wine vinegar
 - ¼ cup brown sugar
 - ¼ cup molasses
 - ½ cup hoisin sauce
 - ¼ cup horseradish
 - ¼ cup Dijon mustard
 - 1 tablespoon minced garlic
 - ½ cup ketchup
 - 4 pounds chicken wings
- To make the marinade, combine all ingredients except chicken

wings in a bowl. Add wings and toss to coat. Refrigerate at least 6 hours or overnight.

Arrange wings with sauce in a single layer on foil-lined rimmed baking sheets. Bake in a preheated 400-degree oven, basting every 10 minutes, until well-glazed and deep reddish-brown in color, about 45 minutes.

Serve hot or at room temperature. Serves 20 as an hors d'oeuvre.

Note: Wings may be frozen after cooking. Thaw overnight in the refrigerator. Reheat, covered with foil to prevent overbrowning, in a preheated 350-degree oven about 20 minutes.

— From *"The Frog Commissary Cookbook,"* by Steven Poses, Anne Clark and Becky Roller (Doubleday 1985)

Per serving: 357 calories, 26 grams protein, 15 grams carbohydrates, 21 grams fat, 77 milligrams cholesterol, 866 milligrams sodium.

Debbie Bernstein's Spicy Baked Shrimp

- ½ cup olive oil
 - 1 tablespoon Cajun seasoning
 - 2 tablespoons lemon juice
 - 2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
 - 1 tablespoon honey
 - 1 tablespoon soy sauce
 - 1 teaspoon cayenne pepper
 - 1 pound large uncooked shrimp, peeled and deveined
- Combine all ingredients except shrimp, mixing well. Pour over shrimp and toss to coat. Refrigerate 1 to 4 hours.

When ready to cook, arrange shrimp in a single layer in a 13-by-9-by-2-inch baking dish. Pour marinade over shrimp. Bake in a preheated 450-degree oven for 5 minutes. Turn shrimp, then bake 5 minutes longer.

Drain. Serve hot. Serves 6 as an hors d'oeuvre.

Note: Shrimp may be frozen after cooking. Thaw overnight in the refrigerator. Then reheat, uncovered, in a preheated 350-degree oven for 10 minutes.

Per serving: 255 calories, 16 grams protein, 4 grams carbohydrates, 19 grams fat, 117 milligrams cholesterol, 286 milligrams sodium.

Hilda Gross' Cheese Twists

- Butter
 - 1 (8-ounce) tube crescent-roll dough
 - 4 ounces cream cheese, at room temperature
 - 3 tablespoons finely grated Parmesan cheese
 - Paprika
- Lightly butter a cookie sheet, set aside.

On a sheet of waxed paper, unroll dough (it will be a long, flat rectangle). In a mixing bowl, beat cream cheese with an electric mixer until soft and spreadable. Using a spatula, spread cream cheese thinly over entire surface of dough. Sprinkle with Parmesan cheese.

Fold dough over in half. With a very sharp knife, cut dough into 16 strips. Give each strip a twist.

Place on prepared cookie sheet and sprinkle lightly with paprika. Bake in a preheated 325-degree oven until golden, about 12 minutes. Immediately remove twists from pan and cool on a wire rack. Makes 16 twists.

Note: Twists can be frozen before baking. Thaw overnight in refrigerator, then proceed with recipe.

Per twist: 83 calories, 2 grams protein, 6 grams carbohydrates, 6 grams fat, 9 milligrams cholesterol, 162 milligrams sodium.

Joel Fishbein's Guacamole

- 2 ripe avocados
- 1 tablespoon sour cream
- 1 tablespoon medium-hot salsa
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic
- 1 teaspoon lime juice, or more to taste

Peel avocados and dice the flesh, discarding pits and any discolored areas. In a bowl, stir avocados with remaining ingredients until well-blended but still slightly chunky. Cover with plastic wrap; chill. Serve as a dip for tortilla chips. Makes 1 cup.

Per tablespoon: 42 calories, 0.5 gram protein, 2 grams carbohydrates, 4 grams fat, 0.4 milligram cholesterol, 10 milligrams sodium.

Chewy Pecan Squares

- For the Crust:**
- 1¼ cups all-purpose flour
- ¾ cup confectioners' sugar
- ¼ cup cornstarch
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ cup (1½ sticks) chilled unsalted butter, cut into ½-inch pieces

For the Topping:- ¼ cups firmly packed light brown sugar
- ½ cup light corn syrup
- ¼ cup (½ stick) unsalted butter
- 4 cups (about 1½ ounces) coarsely chopped pecans
- ½ cup whipping cream
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract

To make the crust: Line a 13-by-9-by-2-inch baking pan with foil, leaving a 1-inch overhang on all sides. Butter the foil.

Combine flour, confectioners' sugar, cornstarch and salt in a food processor fitted with the steel blade. Add butter and process continuously until mixture begins to clump, about 1 minute.

Press dough evenly onto the bottom of prepared pan. Bake in a preheated 350-degree oven until set and light golden, about 25 minutes. Remove from oven and let stand while preparing topping. Reduce oven temperature to 325 degrees.

To make the topping: In a heavy, medium saucepan, stir brown sugar, corn syrup and butter over medium-high heat until sugar dissolves and mixture comes to a boil. Boil for 1 minute. Stir in pecans and cream. Continue boiling until mixture thickens slightly, about 3 minutes. Stir in vanilla. Pour hot topping over warm crust.

Bake nut-topped crust until caramel darkens and bubbles thicken, about 20 minutes.

Transfer pan to a rack. Let cool completely in pan before cutting. (Topping will harden.)

Lift foil out of pan onto a cutting board. Using a heavy, sharp knife, cut crust into squares. Makes about 48 bite-sized pieces.

Note: Recipe can be made up to 1 week ahead. Store squares between sheets of waxed paper in an airtight container at room temperature.

Per piece: 159 calories, 1 gram protein, 15 grams carbohydrates, 11 grams fat, 14 milligrams cholesterol, 30 milligrams sodium.

Jody Danolis' Peanut Butter Pie

- 8 ounces cream cheese, at room temperature
- 1 cup creamy peanut butter
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
- 1 cup whipping cream
- 1 (9-inch) graham cracker or pastry pie crust

Using an electric mixer, beat cream cheese in a large bowl until smooth. Add peanut butter, sugar and melted butter; beat until smooth.

In another bowl, whip cream until soft peaks form when beaters are lifted. Fold cream into peanut butter mixture.

Pour filling into pie crust. Chill until firm, several hours, or overnight. Pie may be frozen; thaw before serving. Makes 8 servings.

Variations for chocolate-lovers

Spread a thin layer of chocolate on crust before adding filling. Melt three 1-ounce squares of semisweet chocolate in a saucepan set over simmering water (or in a microwave oven at high power for 1 to 2 minutes). Stir well to ensure chocolate is melted, then spread over crust. Let cool slightly before adding filling. Chocolate will harden as pie firms; use a very sharp knife to cut pie.

Or, stir ¼ cup mini chocolate chips into pie filling before pouring filling into crust.

Or, top with chocolate shavings.

Per serving: 627 calories, 12 grams protein, 43 grams carbohydrates, 46 grams fat, 80 milligrams cholesterol, 387 milligrams sodium.

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