



COMFORTS FROM THE KITCHEN

A new cookbook from an openly gay chef suggests that exotic and familiar can be one in the same By Kirk Hartlage



If there's anything Floridians have learned lately when it comes to culinary delights, it's a re-discovery of comfort foods. Send a couple of hurricanes through the state and watch everyone scramble for things to eat and drink to make them feel safe, when their roofs and walls may not.



The concept is certainly not lost on Robert Meyers-Lussier, an openly gay chef and author who's just written an eclectic collection of international comfort foods. But these aren't all the comfort foods from your mother's recipe book. Nor are they recipes on salted snacks and cookies to bake when, thanks to an impending natural disaster, Publix has run out.



Instead, they're the comfort foods of the Lopezes down the street, the Tortellis around the corner, Mrs. Stephanopolis at work and the mothers of the diverse mini-U.N. you call your friends. His book *This Is Delicious! What Is It?* introduces chefs of all skill levels to various exotic flavors from around the world.



On night while stationed with the Army in then-West Germany, Meyers-Lussier watched a rented copy of the 1989 film the romantic -- and extraordinarily food-laden -- Belgian film, *Babette's Feast*, and it immediately inspired him to dive head-first into the culinary arts. Having no more experience than cooking boxed macaroni and cheese, he designed five nights of international feasting, each with multiple courses, for his fellow soldiers in his barracks.

"Literally, the day after I was like a crazy man," said Meyers-Lussier of the overnight change in his approach to kitchen work. "It was an illuminating experience, especially having such a great opportunity to experiment with interesting ingredients from other countries."

Though he joked that becoming a gourmand overnight could have raised a few red flags in the pre-Don't-Ask-Don't-Tell days of military service, Meyers-Lussier said that the discovery occurred during his final six months in the service and no one batted an eye.

With initial ambitions of becoming a diplomat, Meyers-Lussier attended school but also began working in catering on the side, quickly gaining a good reputation.

"I loved the reactions to the dishes I would prepare. It was, and still is, a lot of work at the front end, but the back end of cooking, where you get to see people's reactions, that's what makes it a fun experience," he said.

Knowing that the back end of cooking – the menu planning, the shopping for ingredients, the slicing and dicing – is what typically scares many away from experimenting, Meyers-Lussier focuses on keeping his book's recipes easy to follow. He advises those just getting started to find simple recipes to keep from getting

bogged down.

“It really is about the back end, doing stuff to bring people together,” he said.

Meyers-Lussier knows that while the book’s recipes are comfort foods from other places, they may need gentle explanations and references for those whose palates are not as broad. He compares moussaka – a Greek dish with eggplant -- to lasagna to get some diners to expand their culinary habits beyond their comfort zones.

Meyers-Lussier, who sees himself as a teacher at heart, explained that the book’s recipes are comfort foods for a reason.

At a time when many home gourmets set a tone that suggest preparing as much beforehand as possible when cooking for and entertaining others, Meyers-Lussier recommended the opposite. He sees prep work providing for a very social process, one that allows diners to discover what’s in a new dish they’ll soon be sampling.

But for one-on-one encounters, the chef knows that an at-home dinner date should provide for a far more personal experience.

“Focus on dishes that allow you to focus on the other person -- possibly a dish you can marinate ahead of time and just pop in the oven,” he said. He suggested his Salmon Pinwheel appetizers topped with one of his fun salsas as something easy to prepare beforehand that allows plenty of time to get to know the other person – time that may lead to creating a different kind of heat in the kitchen.

Meyers-Lussier cited research done on the true definition of what defines a comfort food and, interestingly enough, science shows that it differs between men and women.

“For men, comfort food is what they were served when they were young. It provides something to fall back on,” he observed. Meyers-Lussier said he grew up on meat loaf and mashed potatoes – foods he still finds comforting today – but those tastes can vary by region.

“Women, however, are more dependent on the type of food, such as chocolate or ice cream that provides certain comfort feelings,” he noted. He sees it, however, as any food that gives one the feeling of “warm fuzzies” and provides a sense of recall, bringing back memories.

But Meyers-Lussier knows that not all cooking experiences bring back positive memories. In one of his early group dinners, he set about creating a menu, not thinking about the impending guest list designed by his female roommate. About halfway through the meal, he was mortified to realize he had planned an entire multi-course meal around seafood – including a seafood pie main course – for a dinner party where he was the only male among several lesbians.

“It was an all-girl dinner party,” he laughs now in retrospect at the meal he served. “Maybe it was my subconscious at work. But everyone had a wonderful time. The food was wonderful ... and no one said a word to me!” W

TEQUILA PORK CHOPS

2 tablespoons tequila

¼ cup jalapeno jelly, melted

2 tablespoons fresh lime juice

¼ teaspoon salt

1/8 teaspoon pepper

4 pieces boneless pork center loin chops

Combine all of the ingredients except for the pork in a large, sealable plastic bag. Add pork and seal. Marinate in the refrigerator for at least eight hours. Remove pork from the bag and reserve the marinade.

Prepare the grill or broiler. Place pork on the grill rack or broiler pan covered with non-stick cooking spray. Cook 7 minutes on each side or until the pork is done. Baste with reserve marinade. Serve with Mango-Tequila Salsa (recipe follows).

MANGO-TEQUILA SALSA

2 cups mango, peeled and diced

2/3 cup red bell pepper, chopped

3 tablespoons tequila

2 tablespoons orange juice

1 tablespoon jalapeno pepper, minced

2 teaspoon fresh mint, chopped

¼ teaspoon salt

Combine in a small bowl, cover and chill. Serve with Tequila Pork Chops. W

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