

From Alumnae Kitchens

by Joy Kimball Overstreet '62



The Art of Culinary Chicanery

Six o'clock. The handle on my briefcase has hardly cooled, and already the family is demanding to know when dinner will be ready. Warily I remove my jacket and don an apron. Even though I've prepared thousands of dinners over the years, the evening meal always takes me by surprise.

It's been five days since I bought groceries. I trowel through the refrigerator, hoping that somehow its contents will either have multiplied since last night, or arranged themselves into a configuration that can be placed immediately upon the table, with perhaps a moment's detour into the microwave.

No such luck. I'm going to have to fake it again.

Fortunately, I have been practicing culinary chicanery for so long that faking comes easy (although sometimes I marvel at the patience and gullibility of my audience).

The following guidelines should help you on your way to culinary fame, whether or not you can actually cook. Although facility with knife and whisk is useful, what you most need for success is *chutzpah*.

First, set out some cheese and crackers in the dining room to keep the family at bay; then shut the kitchen door. You cannot be interrupted during the creative process. Besides, your diners might balk if they saw your concoctions during the gestation period.

Next, take out the remnants of last night's dinner, the container of vintage

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cottage cheese, the lonely zucchini, the limpish carrots. Perhaps there are some mushrooms lurking behind the orange juice. Check the freezer and the canned goods cupboard for other hidden possibilities.

Arrange your raw materials on the kitchen counter and ask your higher self for guidance. At this point you must be willing to let your imagination run free as it mulls over potential combinations.

You are on your own in deciding what to combine or how to prepare it, because I don't know what is staring back at you from the counter. Nevertheless, current culinary fashion allows such strange plate-fellows as trout and raspberry purée, so don't feel restrained if you want to make omelets with a peanut butter and bean sprout filling.

At some point, the miracle will occur; your creations will emerge from the chaos and be ready to serve.

What you've done so far was actually the easy part. The real test is ahead: will the family eat what you've made?

You must be well prepared for the seven o'clock question: "Hey, Mom, what's for dinner?" If you hesitate, "It's —uh—well, its. . ." they know instantly that you've been experimenting and grow wary.

Follow these three rules and they'll at least try your creations:

1. Give your creations unusual names, preferably in a foreign language.

If your creation has a unique name, no one can compare the dish with something eaten before. When asked what's for dinner, be ready to announce with certainty, "It's 'Chacun à Son Goût!'" (Translation: "Each to his own taste.")

Other French titles to try include "Les Folies du Chef." ("The Cook's Madness"), "Mélange Fromage" ("Cheese Conglomeration"), "Soupe du Glacière Vide" ("Empty Icebox Soup").

If you speak a little Greek or Cantonese, all the better. Your spouse probably understands French.

2. Never name the dish until it's done.

If the soufflé falls, call it a frittata. A soggy cake is an English pudding.

3. Let everyone know that you're pleased with what you've made.

In presenting the dish, no matter what its condition, exclaim with conviction, "Ah, c'est magnifique! It came out perfectly!" Who would dare argue?

Sometimes you will find yourself feeding company as well as the family. The above rules still hold, but there are two additional ones that will help you achieve or maintain your reputation as a hostess.

4. Claim that what you've made is exactly what you intended.

If you burn the meat, tell your guests that you are treating them to a Cajun specialty, blackened steak. If the

entrée has cooled too much while everyone lingered over the appetizer, inform them that you're testing the hypothesis that the tongue is more sensitive to the flavors of lukewarm food; what do *they* think?

5. Act as if everything is under control, no matter what.

A famous hostess once invited several foreign dignitaries to her home to experience an American meal. As the butler was placing the turkey on the table, it slipped off the platter and tumbled to the floor.

"No problem, Harold," said the hostess to the mortified butler. "Just take the turkey back to the kitchen and bring out the other one."

The recipes that follow can be infinitely varied, depending upon the contents of your refrigerator.

Chacun à Son Goût
(Sautéed Fruit Pie)

Sautéed bananas and apples aren't particularly pretty, but covered with flavorful whipped cream their plainness doesn't matter.

- 3 or 4 ripe bananas, peeled and cut in 1/2-inch slices
- 3 Golden Delicious apples, cored and cut in 1/2-inch slices
- 4 tablespoons butter
- Grated peel of one lemon
- 1/4 cup brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- 1/8 teaspoon fresh grated nutmeg
- 1 cooked pie shell or graham cracker crust (or pie pan sprinkled with crunchy granola)
- 1 cup whipping cream
- 3 tablespoons powdered sugar
- 1 tablespoon Grand Marnier or Cointreau
- 1/4 teaspoon powdered ginger

In a skillet sauté the bananas in 2 tablespoons butter until they are just soft, about 3 minutes. Sprinkle them with half the lemon peel, and 1 tablespoon each sugar and lemon juice. Set aside in a bowl.

Rinse out the skillet and sauté the apple slices in the remaining 2 tablespoons butter. After all the slices are coated with the butter and are beginning to cook, add the remaining lemon juice and peel. Cover the pan and steam for four minutes, or until the apples become limp.

Add the remaining sugar, turn up the heat and continue cooking and stirring

until the apples begin to brown lightly and any juices are evaporated.

Sprinkle with nutmeg, and gently stir in the bananas. Cool, then place in pie shell.

Whip the cream until gentle peaks form, then beat in the powdered sugar, liqueur, and ginger. Spread the cream on the pie filling and serve immediately. Serves 6.

The use of baker's cheese offsets the salty richness of the goat's cheese in the recipe that follows, without compromising on flavor. This pie may also be made without the crust. Serve it with a platter of sliced tomatoes and boiled red potatoes drizzled with olive oil and garnished with chopped fresh basil.

Fromage Mélange
(Goat's Cheese Vegetable Pie)

Whole wheat crust:

- 2 cups whole wheat flour
- 1/2 teaspoon salt (optional)
- 8 tablespoons (one stick) frozen unsalted butter
- 8 tablespoons cold water

Cut the butter into 8 pieces and place in the bowl of the food processor with flour and salt. With a steel knife, blend with short bursts till the mixture is the texture of cornmeal. Add water. Process again until it forms a ball. Chill. Roll into 2 9-inch rounds. Pre-bake at 400 for 7 minutes. Cool. (Save one crust in the freezer to use at another time.)

Filling:

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 red or green pepper, seeded and diced
- 1/2 onion, chopped
- 1 clove garlic
- 2 carrots, peeled and sliced 1/8-inch thick
- 1 head cauliflower, cut into flowerets, or 3 stalks broccoli, including peeled stems.
- 8 ounces Montrachet cheese
- 8 ounces baker's cheese
- 3 eggs
- 1/2 cup grated Gruyère

Steam the broccoli or cauliflower chunks until tender-crisp, about 3 minutes.

In a skillet, heat the oil and sauté the onion, pepper, garlic and carrots till the onions are translucent and the carrots begin to lose their crispness. Add the cauliflower or broccoli to the skillet and remove from heat. In a separate bowl, blend the cheeses and eggs. Pour this mixture over the vegetables and stir to

combine. Put the filling in the pie crust; sprinkle with Gruyère and bake at 375 till set, about 30 minutes. Serves 6.

La Glacière Vide
(Empty Icebox Soup)

In 3 tablespoons butter sauté the following vegetables till wilted:

- 1/2 onion, chopped
- 1 stalk celery, sliced
- 1 carrot, peeled and sliced
- 1/2 head of cabbage, chopped (or Romaine, spinach, or broccoli, etc)

Sprinkle with 3 tablespoons flour and cook about 2 minutes more. Add 5 cups chicken broth (canned or homemade) and a potato, diced in 1/2-inch cubes. Cook 10 minutes.

At this point, you can add a handful of leftover rice, noodles, beans, frozen peas, or other cooked vegetable. For garnish, try croutons and grated cheese. Croutons: Dice two or three pieces of stale rye or French bread and bake them in a slow oven till dry. The soup may also be pureed in the blender and enriched with light cream. A teaspoon of curry powder may be added to the butter during the initial sautéing, or other herbs added with the broth. Serves 4 to 6.

Les Folies du Chef
(Peanut Butter Omelets for 4)

Filling — Mix together in a bowl:

- 1/4 cup crunchy peanut butter
- 1/2 cup plain yoghurt
- 2 tablespoons chutney
- 1/2 teaspoon cayenne
- 2 green onions, chopped
- 1/4 cup chopped cilantro
- 1/2 cup chopped crunchy vegetable (mung sprouts, celery, water chestnuts, etc.)

Omelets — In a bowl beat lightly with a fork:

- 8 eggs
- 2 tablespoons water
- Salt and pepper to taste

For each omelet melt 1 tablespoon butter in omelet pan. When hot, pour in one quarter of the egg mixture (about 1/3 cup). Cook till slightly set, then pull back the edges of the cooked egg while tipping the pan to let uncooked egg cook.

Spoon a fourth of the filling mixture into the center of the omelet and let it heat for a minute before rolling the filled omelet onto the plate. Serve with a dollop of sour cream, if desired.