

Foods of Yesteryear

Peanut Butter Jelly Time

BY ELAINE SPECHT

With kids already back in school, chances are the annual dilemma of whether to buy or take lunch has been handled. When I started kindergarten, the solution was to buy lunch. Every Monday morning, my classmates and I bought a pink lunch ticket from Mrs. Burgio. At 11:30, we went through the cafeteria line, pink tickets in hand, and one of the “lunch ladies” punched a hole through the day on our ticket before we sat down to eat.

Already labeled a finicky eater, I really lived up to my reputation at school. While I’m sure meals have improved, back then, I disliked the rubbery brown canned peach halves, despised the pizza, which I wasn’t even sure had actual cheese on top, and detested what was served as turkey and gravy. Since when did turkeys grow in perfectly round circles?

I would eat the chocolate pudding and could tolerate gelatin squares thanks to the dollop of canned whipped cream on top. Surprisingly, I actually liked fish sticks, probably because we seldom had fish at home so I had no home-cooked version to compare them to.

Unfortunately for me, the women who prepared the meals in the kitchen and served as cafeteria monitors all went to our church across the road from the school. Of course, they knew me. So, when I refused to eat the macaroni and cheese one day claiming I felt sick (it wasn’t a total lie, since I was convinced I’d be sick if I really ate it), by the time I got off the bus back home after school, Mom already knew I hadn’t eaten my lunch. Busted.

By third grade, I’d had enough. One night, I woke up and decided to fix my own lunch for school the next morning. I made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, put it in a plastic sandwich bag, found a paper sack to put it in, and went back to bed.

The next morning, as it approached time to go wait for the bus at the end of the driveway, I began searching for the lunch I had made. It was nowhere to be found.

Mom, who had little tolerance for missing the bus, didn’t believe I had made a lunch during the night. “Yes, I did. I really did!” I insisted.

Sensing crisis about to erupt, Dad got involved. “Maybe the dog ate it,” he suggested.

“Impossible! It was in a bag. It’s got to be here,” I wailed, frantically looking for evidence of a chewed-up paper sack or plastic sandwich bag.

“You must have dreamt it,” Mom said growing more impatient as she tried to push me out the door to the bus.

“No! No, it wasn’t a dream. It was real.” I was distraught, bewildered, frustrated, and indignant all at once. Having no other choice, I gave up the search, made the bus, and endured another day of cafeteria food.

But it wasn’t all for naught. After that morning, Mom started making lunch for my sister and me to take to school. I could hardly believe my good fortune, and was even more excited when we got to pick out our first-ever lunch boxes. Mine had horses on it because what pre-adolescent girl didn’t go through a horse phase? My sister opted for a more mature red plaid design. Sometimes Mom packed tuna fish sandwiches for us. Occasionally we had my favorite: egg salad. Most of the time, though, our lunches featured the classic peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

And what happened to that PB&J I made in the middle of the night? We never found it. I guess it really was a dream, but it seemed SO REAL at the time.

Classic Peanut Butter Jelly Sandwich

You probably are thinking, “Who needs a recipe for making PB&J?” Until recently, I would have agreed. Some wise friends informed me that, yes, indeed, there is a right way to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and here are their directions. (Thanks, Mike and Mary Jane!)

Ingredients

- 2 slices of bread (Mom bought Hillbilly brand, “the softer multigrain bread,” until she went through a phase of making homemade wheat bread. It certainly was filling and quite the chewing workout. *No one* ever wanted to trade me for it.)
- peanut butter (I grew up on chunky Peter Pan but today I prefer Smucker’s Organic.)
- jelly (Of course, homemade—any variety—is best!)

Directions

1. Spread a layer of peanut butter on one side of both slices of bread.
2. Smear jelly over the top of the peanut butter on one of the slices of bread.
3. Slap the two pieces of bread together with the peanut butter and jelly facing each other.
4. Enjoy your sandwich without the jelly bleeding through the bread.

Have Fun with an Old Standby

My sister will not deny that most of the drama in our house during our growing up years was of her making. Often it had to do with her overzealousness in completing homework assignments. She was a very intense student right from the beginning, so much so that as a kindergartener, she felt it necessary to warn my mother that I probably wouldn’t be able to hack it when I started school two years later. (I’m happy to report that I managed just fine, albeit with considerably less enthusiasm.)

One of the assignments my sister obsessed over in middle school that we still talk about today was from her home economics teacher. Her task was to list 100 different types of sandwiches. I suppose it was a lesson in creativity and resourcefulness.

Since I’m not the over achiever she was (and is), I am not going to list 100 kinds of sandwiches here, but I will offer some variations on the PB&J theme so you can bring some variety to this year’s lunches, whether it’s for school or home.

Instead of jelly or jam, try peanut butter with:

- apple
- apple and bacon
- banana, either sliced or mashed
- cinnamon
- honey
- Marshmallow Fluff
- potato chips
- raisins
- toasted coconut

Family Discord and Turkey Leftovers

BY ELAINE SPECHT

Grandpa John, my Dad’s father, was a sentimental and sensitive man—a trait he covered with a gruff bravado that I didn’t understand until long after he was gone. He also was superstitious, a fact he simply denied. And yet, he never embarked on

a trip on a Friday and certainly not when Friday fell on the 13th.

He came by his superstitions honestly. When the fire whistle blew a mile away in town, his mother, my Great Grandma Mary Sartwell, always put her hand on the wall to make sure it wasn’t hot and her own house wasn’t the one on fire, a gesture akin to tossing salt over your shoulder to avert bad luck.

Long before my time, Thanksgiving at my great grandparent’s home was a stormy occasion. We think the politics of our time are divisive, but it wasn’t much different when Great Grandpa Earl, a staunch Republican with a strong temper, and his daughter, Marian, a steadfast Democrat who was equally strong willed, were in the same room. They disagreed on pretty much everything and weren’t afraid to espouse their views at shouting level. To say the least, it made for tense family gatherings.

Throw Grandma Mary’s superstition into the mix, and we have one of my family’s legendary stories from a Thanksgiving of the past. On this particular year, when everyone gathered, the group numbered 13. Grandma Mary refused to join the family at the table, sparking a new disagreement. Fed up with the discord, her daughter-in-law, my Grandma Dorothy, abruptly left heading to her home across the road. There were a few moments of consternation as the family wondered if she was gone for good. That question was answered when a few minutes later, Grandma Dorothy stomped back in with Tony, her medium-sized black poodle, in tow. She pulled another chair up to the table, plopped the dog in it, and said, “There, Mary. Now we have fourteen. We can all sit down and eat!”

May you have peace at your Thanksgiving table and good luck throughout the year.

Turkey Tetrazzini

Ingredients

7 oz. package of spaghetti

1 cup fresh mushrooms, sliced

1 cup peas

1 small onion, chopped

3 tablespoons butter

1 can (10-3/4 ounces) cream of mushroom soup, undiluted

1 cup whole milk

1/2 teaspoon poultry seasoning

1/8 teaspoon ground mustard

1 cup shredded cheddar cheese

2 cups cubed cooked turkey

1 cup shredded part-skim mozzarella cheese

1 tablespoon shredded Parmesan cheese

Parsley (optional)

Directions

1. Preheat oven to 350°.
2. Cook spaghetti according to package directions. Drain and place in a large bowl.
3. In a large skillet, sauté the mushrooms, peas, and onion in butter until tender.
4. Whisk in the soup, milk, poultry seasoning, and mustard until mixed.
5. Add cheddar cheese and turkey; cook and stir over medium heat until cheese is melted.
6. Pour warm vegetable, cheese, and turkey mixture over spaghetti and gently stir to combine.
7. Pour into a greased baking dish or enameled Dutch oven and sprinkle with mozzarella and Parmesan cheeses.
8. Bake uncovered for 25 to 30 minutes or until heated through.
9. Sprinkle with parsley.

Turkey Pot Pie

Ingredients

- 1 package refrigerated pie crust
- 1 10-oz. package frozen peas and carrots
- ½ cup chopped onion
- ¼ cup margarine
- ½ cup flour
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon dried sage
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- 2 cups chicken broth
- ¾ cup milk
- 3 cups cubed turkey
- ¼ c minced parsley

Directions

1. Preheat oven to 450°.
2. Place one crust into the bottom of a pie plate; set aside.
3. Cook peas and carrots according to package directions and drain.
4. In a saucepan, cook onion in margarine until tender.
5. Stir in flour, salt, sage, and pepper, and cook until browned.
6. All at once, add chicken broth and milk. Cook, stirring constantly, until thickened and bubbly.
7. Stir in peas and carrots, turkey, and parsley and cook until heated through.
8. Pour chicken mixture into bottom crust. Place top crust over and flute the edges.
9. Cut slits into top crust. Bake for 12 to 15 minutes until crust is golden brown.
10. Cool 10 to 15 minutes before serving.

The Year Santa Came Back

BY ELAINE SPECHT

Late on a cold Christmas Eve, Dad drove our family home from the holiday festivities at my aunt's suburban Rochester, New York, home. It had been a jovial gathering where Santa himself made an appearance to pass out gifts. At five years old, I firmly believed in the magic of Santa Claus, and seeing him in person on Christmas Eve only cemented my conviction. My encounter with the jolly old elf plus being up much later than usual and coming down from a sugar high of Christmas cookies likely all played into the drama that was soon to unfold.

My sister and I were drowsing in the back seat when Dad pulled into the driveway after the long drive back to our farmhouse in the country. Partway up the drive, Dad stopped the car. "Look at that, girls," he said to wake us from our slumber. "I can see the tracks from Santa's sleigh." We stood on our tiptoes peering over his and Mom's shoulders from the backseat. A bit blurry-eyed from sleep, I thought the driveway looked like frozen mud marked with tire treads. Still, I reasoned, it wasn't unusual for him to point out animal tracks in the woods that I couldn't quite make out, so it made perfect sense that he would recognize sleigh tracks. His certainty was contagious, and within mere moments, I was charged with excitement. I convinced myself that I, too, could see where Santa had come up the driveway.

Just as I grabbed the line, Dad set the hook: "Too bad I locked the door so Santa couldn't get in," he said.

And just like that, exhilaration turned to horror. We didn't have a chimney so I knew the only way into our house was through the door. With the realization that our Christmas was ruined, the waterworks began. I cried as we went into the house. I sobbed while Mom, not appreciating Dad's sense of humor one bit, got me ready for bed. I wailed while Dad, whose practical joke had epically failed, came to my bedside trying to console me that Santa would give us a second chance. Eventually, I cried myself to sleep, knowing full well that there would be no Christmas presents the next day.

Christmas morning my older and wiser sister, who had not been duped by Dad's

joke, burst into my room as cheerful as the bright sun streaming through my window. "Santa was here!" she exclaimed. I awoke dazed and incredulous. How could that be? But, sure enough, she was holding her Christmas stocking filled with many gifts and another stocking laid filled at the end of my bed. Santa did come back to our house after all.

We took our stockings into Mom and Dad's room to open them together. Soon we were all seated at the table for the special breakfast Mom made for Christmas morning, and later opening the gifts Santa left us under our tree.

Best wishes, readers. May the magic of Christmas find you wherever you are this year!

Kuchen

For years, Mom had been on the lookout for a recipe to make Christmas breakfast extra special. Once she came across kuchen, which she had as a dessert at a church supper, she knew she'd found the winner. To offer some semblance of nutrition, before we could dive into the kuchen on Christmas morning, we first had to eat an orange.

Years later, when the Head Cook became part of the family, he learned this tradition and simultaneously started a new one. He and Dad would try to eat their oranges as quickly (but politely) as possible to beat the other to the first piece of kuchen.

Ingredients for the bottom layer

- 1 cup flour
- ½ cup (1 stick) margarine
- 2 Tablespoons water

Ingredients for top layer

- 1 cup water
- ½ cup (1 stick) margarine
- 1 teaspoon almond extract
- 1 cup flour
- 3 eggs

Ingredients for frosting and decoration

- 3 cups confectioners' sugar
- ½ cup (1 stick) butter, softened
- 1½ teaspoons almond extract
- 1–2 Tablespoons of milk
- Maraschino cherries
- Pecan pieces or almond slivers

Directions

1. Heat oven to 350°.
2. For bottom pastry layer, in a medium-sized bowl, cut 1 stick of margarine into 1 cup of flour as if making pie crust. Sprinkle in water and toss with a fork until dough sticks together. Divide dough into two equal parts and spread each onto an ungreased cookie sheet into two thin ovals

each measuring approximately 7½ by 9 ½ inches. Coat fingers with flour to make spreading the dough easier.

3. For top puffy layer, in a saucepan, bring water and 1 stick of margarine to a boil. Remove from heat and add almond extract and 1 cup flour. Beat in eggs one at a time. Spread fluffy mixture over both pastry layers.

4. Bake at 350° for 1 hour until golden brown.

5. Allow to cool completely.

6. Meanwhile, in a medium bowl, beat together butter and confectioners' sugar. Add almond extract and 1 Tablespoon milk. Add additional milk if necessary to reach a smooth, spreadable consistency. Spread frosting over both ovals.

7. Decorate with maraschino cherries and nuts to emulate holly berries and leaves.

8. Cover overnight and serve at room temperature the next morning.

Raspberry Coffee Cake

My sister is a big fan of coffee cake, and this is one of her favorite recipes. Red raspberry jam makes it look especially festive for Christmas.

Ingredients for batter

- 2½ cups flour
- ¾ cup sugar
- ¾ cup butter
- ½ teaspoon baking powder
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ¾ cup sour cream
- 1 teaspoon almond extract
- 1 egg

Ingredients for filling

- ¾ cup raspberry jam
- 8 oz. cream cheese, softened
- 1 egg
- ¼ cup sugar

Ingredients for topping

- 1 cup of reserved crumbs mixture
- ½ cup sliced almonds

Directions

1. Thoroughly grease and flour the bottom and sides of a spring form pan.
2. In a large mixing bowl, combine flour and sugar.
3. Cut in butter with a pastry blender until mixture is crumbly.
4. Set aside 1 cup of the crumb mixture for the topping.
5. To the remaining crumb mixture, add baking powder, baking soda, salt, sour cream, almond extract, and egg. Mix well.
6. Spread the batter over the bottom and up 2 inches of the sides of the spring form pan, forming a bowl.
7. Fill the "bowl" made with the batter with the raspberry jam to make the first layer of filling.

8. In a medium bowl beat the cream cheese, egg, and sugar together and spread over the jam to make the second layer of filling.

9. In a small bowl, combine the reserved crumb mixture with sliced almonds and sprinkle over the top.

10. Bake at 350° for 40–50 minutes, until the top is browned. The center will still be slightly jiggly.

11. Cool 10–15 minutes and remove sides of pan.

12. Best if served warm or at room temperature.