

CURE- WHAT- AILS- YOU VEGETABLE- BEEF SOUP

My friend Susan uses this basic recipe but substitutes 93 percent lean ground beef for the beef stew. Susan is a true friend, arriving with a gallon of soup, a bottle of wine that she bought at an actual wine store, and a box of Sam's Club frozen chocolate éclairs on my doorstep one evening when she heard I was feeling puny. She so rocks.

2 pounds (more or less) beef stew
1 onion, chopped
2 ribs celery, sliced
2 tablespoons olive oil
6 cups beef broth
1 or 2 potatoes, cut into chunks
3 carrots, sliced
5 cups water
1 medium can tomato sauce
2 cans tomatoes
3 teaspoons salt
1 (10- ounce) bag *each* frozen lima beans, corn, cut green beans, and (optional) okra

In large pot, saute beef stew with onion and celery in 2 tablespoons olive oil until beef is browned; drain off nearly all the fat, but leave a little in the pot for flavor. Remove beef, onion, and celery from pot and set aside. Pour broth into the same pot and cook potatoes and carrots a few minutes in the broth until they're softened. Return the beef, onion, and celery to the pot along with water, tomato sauce, tomatoes, salt, and frozen veggies. Simmer for at least a couple of hours; longer is better. In the last 20 minutes, you can throw in some uncooked rice or noodles if you want it to be even heartier. Serve with hot corn bread or saltine crackers if you're pinched for time and drained of energy.

ROBERT DUVALL'S MAMA'S CRABCAKES

Here's a recipe that I've made in my own lovingly seasoned cast-iron skillet, which I keep in the oven 365 days a year, where Duh will never find it.

*Sure, you could catch your own crabs down at the dock with some string and a chicken neck or two, but it's OK to cheat and buy it at the fish house. Serve this with shredded slaw and hush puppies. The recipe comes from actor Robert Duvall who bragged about them on Oprah one day many years ago and I've been making them ever since. When he came to film *Rambling Rose* in our town, I got to interview him for the newspaper. Nice guy, fabulous crabcakes...*

1 pound backfin crabmeat
1 tablespoon mayonnaise (Duke's, if possible)
2 eggs, lightly beaten
½ teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
½ teaspoon cayenne pepper
¼ teaspoon salt
½ onion, grated
½ tablespoon dry mustard
18 Ritz crackers, smashed up (I like to put them inside a Ziploc bag and then roll over them with the rolling pin a few times)

Combine everything in a big bowl. Form into six patties. Fry in enough butter to keep everything from sticking, over medium- high heat for about 10 minutes per side. Garnish with lemon and tartar sauce.

PECAN PIE FIT FOR A QUEEN

Now here's something wonderful from the N.C. Pecan Harvest Festival queen's friend Mabel to try with that hot coffee. This pecan pie isn't as cloyingly sweet or as rich as some. Try it sometime.

If you're showing off for the circle meeting, be sure to top each slice with a generous dollop of freshly whipped cream and a dusting of cinnamon. If you must use the canned stuff, remember—it makes a racket coming out of that nozzle thing so you'll need to turn up the radio preacher so the ladies won't realize you're fixing to serve them whipped cream out of a can.

1/2 cup sugar
1 tablespoon all- purpose flour
2 eggs
1 cup light Karo syrup
1/4 teaspoon salt
1 1/2 teaspoons vanilla extract
1 tablespoon butter, melted
1 cup pecan halves
1 unbaked pie shell

Preheat oven to 300 degrees. Sift sugar and flour together. Beat together eggs, syrup, salt, vanilla, and melted butter and add to mixture. Pour into unbaked pie shell. Arrange pecan halves in a pretty pattern on top. Bake for about an hour. Cool completely before cutting or it'll be a royal mess.

A VERY NICE CHICKEN SALAD, I PROMISE!

This fabulous chicken salad comes from my friend Mabel Halterman, who knows her way around the Senior Center and used to live across the street from me. Mabel was one of ten children and she learned how to cook when she was just a sprout growing up in rural Sampson County, North Carolina. She said to remind y'all that this chicken salad is good hot or cold. Serve it with some fresh snap beans and sliced tomatoes in the summer.

3–4 cups cooked chicken, cubed
1 cup chopped celery
1 tablespoon minced onion
1 can sliced water chestnuts
1 small jar pimientos
1 cup chopped fresh mushrooms
1 cup mayonnaise (Duke's, if possible)
1 tablespoon lemon juice
1 teaspoon lemon pepper

Topping:

½ cup slivered almonds
1½ cups Pepperidge Farm CornBread Stuffing Mix

Mix everything together in a big bowl and pour into a greased casserole dish. Add almonds to stuffing mix and toss around a bit. Pour on top of chicken salad and bake for about 30 minutes at 350 degrees, covered.

NANCY AND ALICE'S "HOWDY NEIGHBOR" PEPPERS

Try this fabulous Southern creation the next time you need to impress the new Yankee neighbors. It's practically vegetarian, give or take a half- pound of bacon, and comes from my mama-in-law Nancy Whisnant by way of her late sister Alice Armfield.

Make the biscuits yourself if you're not too triflin'. And don't even think about using canned tomatoes or substituting chicken broth for bacon grease. This is the real deal, Gomer; don't screw it up.

6–8 bell peppers
½ pound bacon, fried crisp and crumbled (save drippings!)
6 tomatoes from somebody's garden, peeled and chopped
1 bar Cracker Barrel sharp cheddar cheese, grated
¼ cup chopped onion
8–10 day- old biscuits, crumbled
Salt and pepper to taste

Cut peppers in half and parboil them 'til they're softened up but not mushy, about 10 minutes. Drain; set aside. Combine all the rest of the ingredients in a big bowl and add about 4 tablespoons of bacon drippings (OK, grease) 'til things are moist but not mushy. Form into balls and stuff the peppers with this fabulous mixture. Set the filled peppers in a shallow pan and add water to cover the bottom of the pan so your pepper bottoms don't scorch. Bake at 325 for about 20 minutes or until lightly browned on top.

WICKED EASY CHOCOLATE KID PLEASER

Here's the perfect way to lure kids out of the road and into the house, although I'm sure Kate Gosselin wouldn't approve of all the processed ingredients. Then again, who cares? Your kids will love this.

1 (16- ounce) can chocolate syrup
¾ cup peanut butter
19 ice cream sandwiches
1 (12- ounce) container Cool Whip
1 cup salted peanuts

Pour chocolate syrup into a medium microwave- safe bowl and heat two minutes on high, making sure it doesn't boil. Stir peanut butter into hot chocolate until smooth. Let this cool until it's room temperature. Line the bottom of a 9- $\frac{1}{2}$ - 13- inch baking dish with a layer of ice cream sandwiches. Spoon half the chocolate mixture on top; spoon half the Cool Whip on top of that, then half the peanuts. Repeat layers. Freeze until firm, about an hour. To serve, cut into squares. Makes about eighteen kid- sized servings, six grownup servings.

HEAVENLY DEVILED EGGS

I've never met a deviled egg I didn't love. They're a pure pleasure and you can dress them up as much or as little as you like. Here's one of my favorite variations.

1 dozen hard- cooked eggs
6 tablespoons mayonnaise (yes, Duke's again)
2 teaspoons prepared horse radish
2 tablespoons sweet pickle juice
1 teaspoon black pepper
¼ teaspoon salt

Split the eggs lengthwise; remove yolks and mash 'em up with the mayo, horse radish, pickle juice, pepper, and salt. If you want to get fancy, you can blend this together in a food processor 'til creamy, pour it into a cake- decorator bag (or a Ziploc bag with one corner cut) and pipe the filling into the egg- white halves. Garnish with paprika 'cause it just looks more festive.

CLASSIC RED VELVET CAKE

In the South, we love our artificial red food coloring and we're not ashamed to admit it. You won't care about the health and safety of it once you taste this Southern classic, which is always welcome at wakes and weddings alike.

This recipe makes enough to frost one fabulous cake. When you get really expert at red velvet cake, you might want to try your hand at making one in the shape of an armadillo like they did for the groom's cake in Steel Magnolias.

2½ cups flour
½ cup cocoa powder
1 teaspoon baking soda
½ teaspoon salt
2 sticks butter, softened
2 cups sugar
4 eggs
8 ounces sour cream
½ cup milk
1 (1- ounce) bottle red food coloring
2 teaspoons vanilla extract
Cream cheese frosting (recipe follows)

Sift flour, cocoa powder, baking soda, and salt; set aside. Beat butter and sugar in large bowl with electric mixer for 6 minutes or until fluffy-looking. Add eggs in, one at a time. Add sour cream, milk, red food coloring, and vanilla. Gradually beat in the flour mixture until blended. If you overdo it, your cake won't be as moist and soft, so just don't. Pour batter into two greased and floured 9-inch cake pans and bake for about 35 minutes at 350 degrees. (Use a cake tester to make sure it's done.)

Cool the layers on a wire rack and frost with classic cream cheese frosting made by mixing together these ingredients 'til fluffy:

8 ounces cream cheese, softened
½ stick butter, softened
2 teaspoons vanilla extract
4 cups confectioner's sugar

EVERYONE'S-A- WINNER PRIME RIB

Dink, Duh, and I are crazy about a good steak and even crazier about my almost- famous perfect prime rib with horsey sauce. It's supereasy but most people think it's a really big deal to make. I served this to friends for dinner one night when we rented an oceanfront cottage at Bald Head Island, a one- hour drive and twenty- minute ferry ride from my house. Bald Head doesn't allow any cars, so you ride around in little golf carts all day, exploring the island's maritime forest and beaches. At sunset, there's nothing like sipping cocktails on the porch of your cottage, listening only to gulls and the distant purring of golf carts while the amazing scent of this fragrant roast fl oats onto the deck and away on the ocean breeze. This recipe will always be in my culinary hall of fame, and it should be in yours, too.

1½ teaspoons kosher salt
1 teaspoon pepper
1 tablespoon olive oil
6-pound prime rib roast (3 ribs)

Combine salt, pepper, and oil and rub evenly over roast. Place roast on wire rack in a foil- lined roasting pan. Bake at 450 degrees for 45 minutes; reduce heat to 350 degrees and bake 45 minutes longer (or until meat thermometer reads 145 degrees). Remove from oven; cover loosely with foil. Let stand 20 minutes before carving. Serve with horse radish sauce made by combining 3 tablespoons prepared horse radish with ¼ cup sour cream, a tablespoon of mayonnaise, and a teaspoon of Dijon mustard. Supereasy and supergood.

MICHELLE'S BELLY- BUSTIN' SUPER SUPPER

Here, in honor of my friend Michelle, who just ran her first half marathon, is her favorite meal when she camps out. I prefer to cook it indoors like God and Kenmore by Sears intended. It's a tried- and- true recipe that perfectly illustrates the curious Southern ability to create shockingly tasty meals with canned ingredients. I call it...

This is a nice way to sober up quickly if you have overindulged in the aforementioned Firefly vodka during the cocktail hour. Listen, y'all: Run, do not stagger, to your local likker store and ask if they've got Firefly yet. If not, demand that they look into it, and yesterday. This unspeakably delicious hooch is going to replace the mint julep as the Southerner's "getcher drunk on" beverage of choice; just watch. Drink it on the rocks, if you're brave, but I prefer it mixed with two parts spring water, lemonade, or orangeade. Garnish with mint or lemon and orange wedges if you're feeling show- offy. Simply the best, I do declare.

1 can corn
1 can kidney beans
1 can black beans
1 can diced tomatoes
1 can refried beans
2 cups water

1 envelope ranch dressing mix
1 envelope taco seasoning

Don't drain any of the canned stuff ; just pour all the ingredients into a big pot and heat through. If you want to get "faincy," you can garnish with shredded cheese and sour cream and serve it with a big ol' bag of blue-corn tortilla chips.

NAN'S WASSAIL BOWL

My friend Nan doesn't cook often, but when she does, it's always delish. When Duh and I were newlyweds, we rented an apartment on the third floor of a beach house smack-dab between the Intracoastal Waterway and the Atlantic Ocean. The North Carolina Holiday Flotilla, held on the first Saturday after Thanksgiving every year, cruised right by our front porch on the waterway and we drank this wassail and watched the parade in the company of all of our rowdy friends. As any beach Bubba will tell you, "It don't get no better'n that."

Serve Nan's wassail in those cute snowman mugs you probably paid too much for at Pottery Barn last year.

6 cups apple cider (not juice)
1 large can pineapple juice
2 tablespoons honey
2 sticks cinnamon
1 orange with cloves stuck in it
Juice *and* grated zest of two lemons
Dark rum

In a large pot over medium heat, combine everything but the rum and bring to a near boil. Keep on low and add the rum about a half hour before you're serving, stirring to mix. Ahhhhhh.

BETTER- THAN- SEX-365-NIGHTS CAKE

There are tons of recipes for better-than-sex cake out there and most of them involve chocolate. My Duh prefers fruity spice cakes, so this has become the BTS cake of choice at our house.

3 cups flour
1 teaspoon soda
1/2 teaspoon salt
2 cups sugar
1 teaspoon cinnamon
3 eggs
3/4 cup oil
1 1/2 teaspoons vanilla extract
8 ounces pineapple (with juice)
1 cup pecans
1 3/4 cups mashed bananas

Combine flour, soda, salt, sugar, and cinnamon. Add eggs, oil, and vanilla. Stir 'til moist. Do not beat! Stir in pineapple and juice, pecans, and mashed bananas.

Pour batter into three 8-inch cake pans that have been greased and floured. Bake at 350 degrees for 25 minutes.

Frost layers when cool with this Nutty Cream Cheese Frosting: Beat together 'til fluffy one stick butter and 8 ounces cream cheese. Add a box of confectioner's sugar, 1 teaspoon vanilla, and half a cup of chopped pecans, and mix 'til it's good and spreadable.

FABULOUS OATMEAL CRISPIES

Here's a great reason to avoid buying your kid a bento box. The little compartments are too small to properly contain these amazing cookies, made by my mother-in-law, Nancy, for her grandchildren since they were old enough to chew. They're ridiculously crisp and buttery and take a bit of time to master but you're smart (else you wouldn't have bought this book or associated yourself with someone who did) and I have great faith you can do it. When you do master them, be sure to mail me some so I can let you know how they stack up. I know some of you are getting all nervous because of the two sticks of butter but, hell, that's just the morning toast allotment for Paula Deen, and everybody loves her cooking. Besides, the oatmeal balances everything out, am I right?

2 sticks butter
1 cup *each* white and brown sugar
2 eggs, beaten
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1½ cups flour
1 teaspoon *each* baking soda and salt
1 cup finely chopped nuts
3 cups oatmeal

Cream butter and sugars; add eggs and vanilla. Set aside. Sift together flour, baking soda, and salt and add to egg mixture. Fold in nuts and oatmeal and mix 'til everything's smooth. Form into a roll the size of those store-bought refrigerated cookies. Wrap the roll in wax paper and refrigerate until the dough is firm enough to slice. Using sharp knife, slice ¼-inch wide (more or less) cookies and place on cookie sheet. Bake at 325 degrees until lightly brown (about 12 minutes). Remove from pan and cool on wire rack.

They'll stay fresh in an airtight container for a week or so, although we've never tested that theory. Nancy usually gives us a big Ziploc bag of 'em to take home from our Christmas visit to her house four hours away and they don't even last half the drive.

“YOU AIN’T TOO GOOD TO EAT THIS” TUNA NOODLE CASSEROLE

Here’s a budget- conscious recipe for the current economic climate that Duh and the Princess just love. Added benefit:

You can give the drained tuna juice to the cats and they’ll whisper loving thoughts back to you. I swear.

1 large can tuna (drain and pour juice into cat’s bowl)
½ cup *each* chopped celery and onion, sautéed ’til translucent
2 cups shredded cheddar cheese
1 can cream of celery soup
½ cup mayonnaise
½ cup milk
8–12 ounces wide or curly egg noodles, cooked

Mix all that together and pour into a greased casserole dish that’s big enough to hold it all. Sprinkle with bread crumbs. (Make your own from Wonder Bread; your fancy-ass Panko crumb days are over.) Bake at 350 degrees ’til bubbly, about 30 minutes. Serve with hopes for a brighter future.

“YOU BROKE MY HEART SO I BUSTED YOUR JAW” APPLE ENCHILADAS

*Has your heart been broken or maybe just bent up a little?
The ultimate indulgent comfort dessert is close at hand.
Like all my favorite go-to recipes, this one is ridiculously
easy but doesn't taste that way.*

1 (21- ounce) can apple pie filling
6 (8- inch) flour tortillas
1 teaspoon cinnamon
1 stick butter
½ cup sugar
½ cup light brown sugar
1 pint vanilla ice cream (I prefer Ben & Jerry's)

Spoon pie filling evenly down the center of each tortilla.
Sprinkle with cinnamon; roll up, placing seam
side down in lightly greased 9X13-inch baking dish.
Bring butter, sugars, and ½ cup water to a boil.
Reduce heat and simmer, stirring constantly, for about
3 minutes. Pour over enchiladas. Let stand at least 30
minutes so it can soak in good. Bake at 350 degrees
for 20 minutes. Serve hot, topped with a scoop or two
of vanilla ice cream. Cheers up six despondent gal pals.