

Agency's men 'treat the ladies' with homemade luncheon



Written by

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9:24 PM, Feb. 22, 2011|

There was something very beautiful about a potluck I was lucky to attend last week. It was an annual event at the Cincinnati-Hamilton County Community Action Agency in Bond Hill, an employee-cooked lunch for the agency that serves low-income citizens with programs such as Head Start and help with weatherization.

It wasn't just the food that was beautiful, though the spread of home-cooked lasagna and roasts, spicy chili, wings, salads and desserts was definitely appetizing. No, what looked great to me was that all the employees waiting in line to be served lunch were women. And all the employees dishing up the home-cooked food were men.

Sharply dressed men, I might add, in ties and crisp shirts, some in chef's caps, all wearing smiles and coaxing the women to try a little of the specialty they brought.

It's The Men's Cook, an annual event at the agency.

"It's nice to turn the tables like this, since women cook for men so often," said Janice Bradley, who works as a Head Start education coach. "We just really appreciate them cooking for us."

The event started 13 years ago as a way to build camaraderie among the men, who were outnumbered by women at the agency. They still are, with 208 women and 80 men working there. The cooking event was created to build unity and teamwork.

"It's good for the agency, it builds camaraderie, it's a bonding experience for the guys, and we get to treat the ladies," said David Blake, assistant finance director and organizer of the event.

These men - about 50 cook for this event - are not bringing a bag of chips to the

potluck: they have some serious cooking chops. There's a lot of meat being served: meatloaf, ham, pork roast, a lot of variations on chicken wings, including peanut chicken from Andre Wamba, something from his native Congo.

There's "too spicy for your mama detox chili" and a mystery meat mix. There's a bourbon sauce on bread pudding that Jimmy Brown claims has just a touch of bourbon, though the taste says he might not be fibbing. Larry Frazier brought a spinach salad, and he tells anyone he dishes it up for that it's a salad of love.

"I'm cooking this for the ladies, and it's still Valentine's Day," he said. "I love cooking. I enjoy being creative, making things for other people to enjoy. That's what it's about."

"Everyone here works all day long, every day, helping other people," said Gwen Robinson, CEO and president of the agency. "It's been a very busy season, with the recession, and so many people in need.

"We just want them to have a chance to breathe, to enjoy themselves for a while."

From the look of the paper plates piled high with everything from garlic cabbage to strawberry surprise, people are enjoying themselves pretty thoroughly.

As Erica Black, a source coordinator for Head Start, said, "As Ms. Robinson says, you spend a lot of time at work, you might as well have some fun while you're here."

Baked Salmon with Ginger Marinade/Glaze

Josh Fletcher brings this popular dish every year.

1 salmon fillet, about 2 to 2½ lbs.

1 cup of Italian dressing (Wishbone)

½ cup teriyaki sauce

1/3 cup plain yogurt (sour cream will also work)

¼ cup barbecue sauce

¼ cup water

½ of a freshly squeezed lemon (juice only)

2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar

2 tablespoons Caribbean jerk seasoning

1 tablespoon dill weed

1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce

1 teaspoon garlic powder

1/3 cup peeled and grated fresh ginger root

Place salmon in a rectangular baking dish. Blend other ingredients in a mixing bowl. Pour marinade over salmon and marinate for minimum of one hour (best if marinated longer, overnight if possible.) Remove salmon and drain remaining marinade into sauce pan.

Rinse baking dish and place salmon back in dish. Bake uncovered at 350 degrees for 25 to 30 minutes. (Hint: you can brown/glaze the top of salmon by drizzling marinade on salmon placing oven on broil for a few minutes until salmon is lightly browned. Leave oven door partially open while broiling).

While salmon is baking, bring remaining pan of marinade sauce to a boil and let simmer for 15 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Serve salmon over bed of favorite style rice and top off with ginger marinade sauce. Serves 4 to 6.

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Salad of Love

Two dishes at the potluck promised a little extra love: This salad is by Larry Frazier, assistant associate director, Head Start, which he customized for each person he served: I've approximated ingredients for one large salad.

2 bags fresh baby spinach

½ cup crumbled feta cheese

6 dates, sliced thin or 4 dried figs, sliced thin

1 pint fresh strawberries, sliced or quartered

½ mild red onion, thinly sliced

½ cup crushed or sliced almonds

½ cup strawberry vinaigrette dressing

¼ cup Ken's low-fat sweet Vidalia onion dressing

2 or 3 hard-boiled eggs, sliced

4 slices applewood smoked bacon, cooked crisp and crumbled

In large salad bowl, mix the spinach, feta,

dates, figs, strawberries, onion and almonds. Pour both dressings on the spinach and toss to mix. Add more dressing to taste. Serve and top each serving with a few slices of egg; sprinkle with bacon.

Baked Spicy Garlic Cabbage

Michael Mines, Home Weatherization Assistance Program. This is a great way to cook cabbage; it gets tender, but never completely breaks down.

3 tablespoons butter

1 head of cabbage, coarsely chopped

1 teaspoon garlic powder

1 large onion, sliced

3 cloves minced garlic

One each red, green and yellow bell pepper, sliced into rings

2 fresh jalapeno peppers, sliced (or more or less to taste)

1 pound smoked turkey links

Black pepper to taste

Heavily butter a glass casserole dish with two tablespoons of butter. Add cabbage to the dish and sprinkle with garlic powder. Add enough water to just cover the cabbage. Add onions, minced garlic, bell peppers and jalapeno peppers. Dot with the rest of the butter and season with black pepper. In a separate pan, boil turkey links about 5 minutes. Drain, then slice them and add them to the casserole dish.

Tightly cover dish with foil and bake in oven at 375 degrees until cabbage is tender and turkey links are cooked through. Monitor the dish and add more water when needed - never let the top of the cabbage go dry. The ingredients should be submerged in liquid the entire time.

Collard Greens with Steak

Rick Trimble, Weatherization Tech. Trimble made greens with smoked turkey and this hearty version, cooked, unusually, with beef.

2-pound thick steak (try a top round or bottom sirloin)

Kroger steak seasoning

12 bunches of collard greens

3 tablespoons of vinegar

1 teaspoon of lemon pepper

¼ cup diced onion

jalapeno peppers to taste

2 dashes seasoning salt

Season the steak well on both sides with the seasoning. Roast in 300-degree oven for about 2 hours. Cut steak into small pieces. Meanwhile, wash greens well and cut into pieces, discarding any thick stems.

Bring a large pot of water to a boil (about 6 quarts). Add the greens. Then add the steak, and any juices in the pan you roasted it in, along with the remaining ingredients. Turn to medium-low and slow cook until greens are tender and begin to lose shape, 15 to 45 minutes.

Strawberry Surprise

Jerrold Dowell, operations assistant. This is like a strawberry trifle, only in an unapologetically junk-food version.

1 box French vanilla instant pudding mix, made according to package instructions

1 box 10 Twinkies

1 12-ounce container Cool Whip

2 or 3 10-ounce containers of frozen sliced strawberries, thawed

Unwrap the Twinkies, lay them evenly in an 8½ inch pan. Pour strawberries, juice and all, over the Twinkies to cover them. Mix the pudding and pour over the strawberries immediately. Spread Cool Whip to cover. Place in refrigerator and serve cold.

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Michael Mines is among the servers who wear chef's toques at the Men's Cook event. / Photos by Leigh Taylor / The Enquirer