

Variety—the Spice of Life

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From Aunt Olivia's Kitchen

by Lydia Lovell

Unless there's some variety, almost everything sooner or later grows boring. The most beautiful melody ever played, repeated endlessly, would drive one daft. The loveliest sight in all the world, photographed, reproduced by the thousands, and hung on every wall, would catch the eye of nobody. There's nothing attractive about a city where block after block of identical buildings stretch in all directions.

Most people hate monotony. Most people enjoy life to its fullest when changes mark their days. Students respond best to teachers who bring fresh approaches to classrooms. Employees grow more creative, contribute more, and produce more when offered new and exciting ways to achieve work-goals.

This same principle carries over, of course, into everything having to do with food. Improving methods of growing food not only gives the farmer larger yields, but stimulates other agricultural innovations; modifying methods of preparing food challenges the experienced chef; perhaps most important of all, varying methods of serving foods gives those who cook and those who partake new and delightful experiences at the table. Everyone loves a pleasant surprise.

Cooking becomes as creative as composing music, as painting a portrait, as conceiving a new invention. Cooking is important to every one of us because whatever else we may or may not do, to live we must all eat. Yet we tire of even favorite foods if they appear too frequently on the menu. Our needs to eat combine with our desires for the new and different to explain why an end to experimenting with foods and flavor combinations will never come.

In Aunt Olivia's day, as in our own, the search went on. She found her hours of standing at the kitchen counter, mixing and measuring, or stirring a pot over a hot fire, lighter and brighter for putting her imagination to work. With successes . . . which were judged by the reaction of the family . . . she wrote out the recipes. The second time she made one of her new dishes, Aunt Olivia usually served it to company. Or perhaps she would take it to a covered-dish-supper at the church or make it so Uncle Henry could carry in a new dish when the firemen put on a benefit.

Best suited for suppers and benefits are casseroles that can be reheated or salads to be served cold. Among casseroles that became our own favorite was one that produced a dozen ample servings. Aunt Olivia called it simply **Hamburger Vegetable Casserole**.

4 C. peeled and sliced raw potatoes
3 C. celery, cut in ½" slices
2 lb. raw ground beef
2 C. sliced raw onions
2 C. chopped green pepper
2 16-oz. cans whole tomatoes with juice

Season with:
1 t. salt
½ t. pepper
1½ t. poultry seasoning
3 T. chopped fresh parsley
Bread crumb topping

Stir seasonings into tomatoes and their juice. In a large, well-greased casserole, layer ingredients in order given. Top with bread crumbs and bake two hours at 325°.

Another unusual casserole, one the Lovells hailed as superior to most but that may present a challenge to people less adventurous than we, Aunt Olivia called **Pineapple Noodle Pudding**. She served it often with pan-fried ham steak and fresh garden peas. We find it excellent with baked fish filets (see below).

1 stick margarine, melted
1 8-oz. pkg. raw noodles
3 beaten eggs
2 C. milk
½ C. dark karo syrup
1½ t. vanilla
1 8-oz. carton cottage cheese
1 12-oz. can crushed pineapple
Crushed corn flakes

In a 9" x 13" baking dish, melt margarine. Add uncooked noodles in an even layer. In a medium bowl, combine slightly beaten eggs, milk, sugar, vanilla, cottage cheese, and pineapple. Spread over the noodles. Sprinkle surface with corn flakes and bake at 350° for an hour.

Especially popular at covered dish suppers was Aunt Olivia's **Baked Bean Salad** which she usually prepared a day ahead except for the garnishes.

4 cans baked pea beans, drained and rinsed
½ C. minced onion
2 cloves garlic, crushed and mashed with ½ t. salt
½ C. olive oil
½ t. black pepper
2 t. oregano
1 T. poultry seasoning
½ C. finely snipped fresh parsley

Empty beans into a large sieve and rinse under warm running water. Pour them into a large saucepan, add 2 cups water, bring almost to a boil, remove from heat, and set aside. In a large bowl, combine all ingredients except beans. Mix well. Pour hot beans into sieve; discard liquid; add beans to bowl of dressing. Toss gently. Let stand about an hour, tossing gently every 15 to 20 minutes. Refrigerate over night. Remove from refrigerator at least two hours before serving. Prepare garnishes: onion rings, green pepper rings, tomatoes cut in eighths, and green and ripe olives. Serve beans in lettuce cups and pass garnishes. Eight servings.

Although Uncle Henry was a man courageous among men when it came to taste-testing gustatory trials, he seldom encouraged Aunt Olivia to press her luck by sending truly unusual dishes to church suppers. He knew that most husbands were unaccustomed to the joys of experimentation and would reject the unfamiliar. Better, he believed, to restrict to luncheons for the ladies her more out-of-the-ordinary concoctions. He declared **Oriental Salad** fell into that category, but I've yet to find a man who doesn't like it.

Greens . . . any combination of lettuces, a few peeled and sliced cucumbers, and a peeled avocado cut in one-inch chunks and tossed gently in lemon juice to prevent discoloration . . . make a good base. Arrange a bed of greens on six

luncheon plates, top each with about one-quarter of a pound of cold boiled, shelled and deveined, shrimp. Cover each plate with plastic wrap and refrigerate until serving time.

In blender, or food processor bowl equipped with steel blade, combine the following ingredients:

¼ C. chopped onion
¼ C. peanut oil
2 T. rice wine vinegar
2 T. water
1 T. grated fresh ginger root
1 T. chopped celery
1 T. soy sauce
1½ t. tomato paste
1½ t. sugar
1 t. lemon juice

A dash each of salt and pepper

Process until almost smooth. Just before serving, pour dressing into a bowl and allow people to ladle as much as they please on their salads.

To complete a luncheon that commences with such a simple salad, you might choose to prepare **Filet of Sole In White Wine** according to Aunt Olivia's recipe. This serves six.

2 lbs. filet of sole
¼ t. paprika
2 T. melted butter
1 T. parsley, chopped
¼ t. dried thyme
1 T. lemon juice
½ C. dry white wine

Divide fish into six serving-size pieces; arrange in a shallow baking pan; sprinkle with paprika. In a small bowl, combine remaining ingredients and pour around fish. Bake in oven preheated to 375° for 15 minutes.

Tiny new potatoes, boiled in their skins until tender, drained, and shaken over low heat with a tablespoon of butter and two of snipped parsley complete this course.

Dessert? Imagine . . . **Cranberry Pie**.

2 C. fresh cranberries
1½ C. sugar, divided
½ C. chopped pecans
2 eggs
¼ C. flour
¾ C. melted margarine

Mix cranberries, ¼ C. sugar, and pecans. Spread mixture in a greased 10" pie plate. In a medium bowl, beat eggs, add rest of sugar, flour and margarine. Mix well. Spread over berries. Bake at 325° until golden, about 45 minutes. Serve hot or cold with whipped cream or ice cream.

Bon appetit.