

Diane's Blog 4.29.2009

Three Quick Steps

What if dinner every night involved just three quick steps? Would you make an effort to cook and eat better tasting, healthier, and more nutritionally sound foods? However much we may want to incorporate "locally grown," "seasonal," and "sustainable" into our lifestyle and budget, the desire to cook at the end of the day comes first, and simple recipes are the key.

This past week I taught a private cooking class to sixteen professional women—almost all of whom juggle work and family life with demanding careers. I asked them to raise their hands if they cooked dinner most nights of the week. Only a handful raised their hands. I queried them further as to what went on their dinner tables and the responses included takeout, eating out, convenience foods, and even Captain Crunch cereal. As they watched me cook, learning some simple techniques and tips, I sensed they were becoming encouraged and motivated to turn on something besides the microwave.

One of the recipes I demonstrated was, by sheer coincidence, the Featured Recipe for this week. In less than ten minutes, I had pounded chicken breasts and lined up three plates, one containing flour, one containing a couple of beaten eggs, and another with a mixture of panko breading mixed with crushed dried tarragon, salt, and pepper. Then it was a quick 1-2-3: dip the chicken into the flour, then the egg, and finally the seasoned bread crumbs. With a mixture of butter and olive oil heating in a large sauté pan, I had moist and delicately crisp chicken breasts ready to serve six minutes later. A squeeze of lime over the top is the "sauce." At the same time, I used a grill pan and prepared seasonal asparagus spears lightly brushed with olive oil. Dinner was ready in no time flat. These women felt empowered and confident.

I embellished the plate with basmati rice pilaf, demonstrating the basic technique of sautéing aromatics in olive oil (in this instance onion and garlic), stirring in a few spices, then adding the rice to slick it with oil. The right proportion of stock is added and simmered, plumping the grains of rice. When tiny bubbles form on the top, the pot is covered and placed in the oven to finish cooking.

Though all of this could be done for one night's meal, my point was to demonstrate the possibility of making a double batch of the rice one night and serving it with, say, a prepared rotisserie chicken. The leftover rice, easily reheated in a microwave, would be ready for a second meal with the panko-crust chicken breasts. Beyond that, the rice freezes well ... what a great item to pull from the freezer for another quick-fix meal.

Now that you've learned the three-step breading technique, drop it down to two steps and dip fillet of sole in melted butter and then seasoned panko. I'd be inclined to substitute lemon zest for the tarragon and have a wedge of lemon to squeeze over the top.

These are the weeknight meals I think about and plan when I know I am going to be tired and crunched for time. I have a whole repertoire of meals that require "three quick steps" and my goal is to share them with you.