

Blog Column for January

## **Out with the Old, In with the New**

It's ironic how efficient we are at throwing out week-old braised chicken thighs, sprouting potatoes, and wilted spinach, but most of us forget about the ancient jar of tarragon flavored mustard stashed on the shelf of the refrigerator door and crumbled bay leaves hidden in their tin. Is this food immortal? Will it taste the same two years down the road as the day it was purchased? Of course not! After the hustle and bustle of the holidays, my kitchen is pretty quiet. In January, my husband, Greg, and I hunger for healthy, vegetable-rich soups and one-pot roasts – comfort foods of the season that we savor for a few days without tiring of the flavors. Cooking with leftovers in mind gives me more time to organize the kitchen, refresh the pantry, and plan for another year of good eating: a cook's New Year's resolution.

The first culprit for past-expiration-date recipe killers has to be the spice drawer. If I can't remember when I bought the flip-top tin of ground cloves, or the aroma of the spice has dissipated to a stale, "I think it's cloves, but I'm not sure" essence, I throw it out. Continuing to use spices that have no flavor left, or worse, have developed a dusty, over-the-hill taste, won't add the desired effect to home baking. In fact, just a pinch can ruin a loaf of pumpkin bread. I wash the glass spice jars, take off the old labels, and replace the spices with fresh ones, buying smaller quantities in bulk from my local spice store. This way, I purchase just enough for a particular recipe or keep a little on hand for spontaneous cooking. I attach a new label, including the date.

Moving to the pantry, I'm confronted with two missions: the tedious (but necessary) task of checking dates on canned goods, and inspecting dry goods for freshness. On occasion I buy cans of soup to have on hand for a quick lunch or an emergency, but may decide that I didn't like the flavor profile or texture. If I know the second can of chicken vegetable soup won't be used but still has a current expiration date, it's donated to the food bank. Pasta, rice, and grains can attract little creatures – check to be sure that dry goods are bug-free before they make the cut. Also, it is the fats in some of these foods that go rancid, so brown rice will keep for a shorter time period than white – maybe only a few months.

The new year is the perfect time to explore unusual spices, different cuisines, and bigger flavors with enticing aromas. When I'm cleaning out my drawers and cabinets, I restock with interesting condiments that I've read about, stumbled across in the market, or clipped recipes with unusual spices I'd like to try. I just purchased Aleppo pepper. Thumbing through a cookbook, I saw a chocolate bark recipe calling for this dried chili from Syria. I'll try it in the coming weeks – maybe for Valentine's Day. But until I get around to it, it'll be stashed in the refrigerator with the other red spices – paprika, chili powder, pepper flakes. Storing red spices in the refrigerator keeps the flavors brighter and fresher for a longer time. And, while I'm in the refrigerator, I'll weed out some of the condiments that have passed their prime.

I'm also making a resolution to keep non-perishable dinner options on-hand for lazy winter evenings. After a long day of work, it's nice to have foodstuffs available that will inspire me to turn on the burner and whip up a simple, delicious dinner without a trip to the grocery store. If my pantry is stocked with tuna, capers, roasted red peppers or sundried tomatoes, it's easy to toss together a weeknight pasta dish with flavors fit for a trattoria. Hmmm, it's time to move

away from the keyboard and organize the kitchen. In this instance, action speaks louder than words.