

A Cook's Journal
by Connie Tucker

Ditch the Trendy Meals

I love to cook, and I love to eat! I spend a lot of time online researching food facts, nutrition, and ingredients to create many of my own recipes. But ever since the elevation of the “celebrity chef” to near god-like status, trendy food styling and ingredients are out of control. Food topics are now “above the fold” and recipes are breaking news.

Don't get me wrong. I love the attention given to the wonderful variety of foods available in our modern grocery stores. And we're a long way from the meat and potatoes diet our grandparents lived on. Advances in nutritional science have created changes in that old “food pyramid” from an emphasis on carbohydrates to vegetables and fruit. It's just those pesky trends that continue to irk me.

I don't know about you but I'm pretty much done with the laundry list of fads that continue to assault this foodie's semi-purist sensibility.

Personally, I've had it with Buffalo-style anything, especially chicken wings—possibly the most unhealthy part of the beloved bird. Then there are chipotle peppers, chimichurri, salsa, red pepper flakes, and hot sauce in everything! Let's dial hot, spicy foods back a bit so we can taste the delicate flavors we love.

When did cilantro become a staple? TV chefs are putting the soapy, nasty herb in dishes that never rubbed elbows with it before! When I saw a cook assaulting some beautiful grilled salmon with cilantro, I wanted to—well, let's just say I was not happy.

And what's up with kale? Chefs are putting it in places it's never been before. Cooked, it has a strong, bitter, “cabbagey” flavor; raw, it's tough, like chewing on elephant ears. Yum. Give me more of that. Actually, I still prefer spinach, romaine, and leafy lettuces—so tender, crisp, and sweet.

Then there's presentation. Stacking food in the middle of the plate has been a popular serving style since the 1980s, but I hated it then, and I hate it now. It's pointless (you still have to level off everything to get at it), and it's dangerous (ever try carrying plates loaded with towers of food to a table of hungry teenagers?).

My recipes will never ask for kale, cilantro, food towers, or trendy anything. I can't guarantee gluten-free either. I try to buy organic vegetables, meat, and eggs, and steer away from foods that aren't non-GMO. I'm not perfect so I leave it to you to make food choices you are comfortable with. Here's an easy, quick, and delicious way to start. Happy eating!

Easy Non-Trendy “Tex-Mex” Orzo

Serves: 6

Always available, always a bargain, and always easy to prepare, orzo is rice-shaped pasta kids and adults alike enjoy. Combining beans with vegetables makes a nutritious dish you and your family will love. If you feel the need for a protein, add diced poached chicken or shrimp. No hot sauce required unless you like it!

Ingredients:

- 2 tbsp. olive oil
- 1 red bell pepper, diced
- 1 green bell pepper, diced
- 3 cloves of garlic, minced (or ½ tsp garlic powder)
- 1 yellow onion, diced
- 2 tsp. ground cumin
- 1 tsp. chili powder
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- 1 15.5-ounce can black beans, *drained and rinsed*
- 1 10-ounce can diced tomatoes
- 1½ cups frozen or drained canned corn
- 3½ cups chicken broth (or vegetable broth, or whatever you have on hand)
- 16 oz. orzo pasta

Instructions:

1. In a large pot over medium high heat, add olive oil and heat until shimmering.
2. Add red bell pepper, green bell pepper, garlic, and onions. Sprinkle with salt and sauté for 3-5 minutes, until just softened and fragrant. Add cumin, chili powder, salt, and pepper and stir until combined.
3. Add the black beans, diced tomatoes, corn, and orzo. Stir to combine.
4. Slowly add the chicken stock then bring mixture to a boil, turn the heat to medium low, cover and let simmer until orzo has fully cooked through and absorbed most of the liquid, about 13 minutes, stirring occasionally.
5. Serve hot with warm flour tortillas or in lettuce cups. Pass the shredded jack cheese.

Is there a food fad you love to hate? I'd love to hear from you. You can also send me your favorite recipes. If I use them in my column or blog I will credit you. Let me know at my new blog address, www.cooksjournalblog.com, where you can comment, follow me, and receive and print out every post sent directly to your inbox.