

The background of the entire image is black, decorated with numerous small, teardrop-shaped confetti pieces in shades of purple and blue, scattered across the frame.

Extra Ingredients to A Life of Flavor

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Additions

When I wrote the book, *A Life of Flavor*, it was a good way to introduce you to my family and some of the hard times we've been through. But I often think of all the extra ingredients – or additions - to the recipe that makes my family what it is; that enhance the flavor of whatever bite of life we are in at the time.

One of those life enhancements were the additions to our family itself. No, no. I don't mean the kind the stork brings along; we had plenty of those additions already. I mean the *fur babies* that have come and gone.

Some people are dog people. Some people are cat people. Some people like both. And some like neither. Whatever you prefer, for us, our animals (not referring to The Kiddos) enriched our lives in a colossal way.

There was Mulligan. When we got her, her name was Maggie, but since we wanted to re-name her we thought the golf term for 'do-over' was appropriate. Of course, it also helped that it

was a golf reference for The Hubster's sake. (I sometimes jokingly refer to golf as 'The Other Woman'.)

Mulligan was an adorable mini-Schnauzer with a pink tongue that was always sticking out like a little nubbin from her snout. Her bump-of-a-tail was forever wagging, and her sweet demeanor was never lagging.

Mulligan was our first dog as a family. We weren't even sure we wanted a dog. We had tweens and teens to take care of and that was plenty. But when the idea came up, it just so happened that there was a family looking to find a good home for her. We went to meet her to see if it would be a good fit, and she jumped right up on my lap and got comfortable, as though to tell us that she knew it was.

We spent many years with Mulligan. And the entire time, she *stunk*. I don't mean she was a stinker. I mean she really, really stunk. She was so stinkin' cute, pardon the pun, but whether she was just getting in from an afternoon of play outside, or just getting out of the bath, that dog had the funk. We couldn't figure it out. The vet couldn't figure it out. We tried different foods, and different soaps. We tried medicine and essential oils. We tried shaving her, and we tried letting her hair grow out. Nothing we did removed the stench.

But we were already in love and knew she loved us, too. She loved us in a beautiful, unconditional way, so we did everything we could to return the favor, even though she was the smelliest member of our family. (Though we did have teenage boys at the time, which runs a close second.)

When we lost Mulligan, it happened to be at a time of blessing in our life. Sam and Chelsea (Schmooly Wooly & The Daughts) were getting married the very next day. We hardly had time to mourn the loss, considering the gain. Isn't that the way of life, though? To have losses and gains?

Putter was our cat. (Are you seeing a theme, here?) Putter was also a bit of a jerk. I got Putter for Adrian when we were courting. He made mention that he had always wanted a Russian Blue cat, and I took note. So as to impress that man-o-mine, I started searching high and low for Russian Blue kittens. I found a farm in California that had kittens of the age that coincided with getting one for him for Christmas, so I had a kitten shipped to me in Texas. (Is that considered an import?)

I tied the cliché big, red velvet bow around his neck and put him gently in a wrapped box. Don't worry, Readers. I did this only an instant before giving the box to be opened, and the lid was not secured tightly. That actually lent itself to the perfect moment because as I put the box in front of Adrian, Putter popped up, knocking the top off the box, and said, "MEOW!"

It was love at first sight for the two of them. I said Putter was a jerk, but not to his daddy. He rubbed him, licked him constantly, and purred contentedly in his lap every second he could. We had that cat for 13 years. He was one of the best additions to our family. And when he died, I did not take it well. In fact, I seemed to grieve harder than I have with humans I've known and lost in my life. I keened and lamented in such a way that even Adrian was surprised. He said he had never seen me that way before. But I realized it was because this cat had actually been part of our lives – our *family* – for a very long time. And when you lose a family member you are so close to, you mourn that loss.

It may seem weird to some of you to say we celebrate the time we were given with our pets. But it isn't weird to us. We look back quite fondly on the memories; even the not-so-good ones. We laugh about stinky Mulligan, or smile when we think about Putter being a bit of a jerk. I even look upon the losses tenderly. I am grateful to have had any time with them, no matter how short-lived, and though the losses were hard, I know they grew me.

Our latest addition is our dog, Bunker, golf theme remaining intact. We've had her for quite some time now. She is definitely a family addition that makes our life better. She may very well be the most amazing dog on the planet (She said, subjectively).

Though we are not looking forward to ever losing her no matter how far into the future that may be, we do know that the time we have gotten to spend with her has made us so happy. Of course there have been the times, like with all family members, she did things that annoyed us. That doesn't mean we stop loving her, nor does it mean we are not grateful for her. She would never do anything to hurt us on purpose and depends on us for that in return. In fact, though she requires the food and shelter we give her to live, the only thing she ever asks for is love.

When you make a meal, you add salt and pepper. The additions of those spices enhance the flavor. When you make a main dish, you add sides because the additions of those foods improve the meal. When you live life, you add the people (and non-people) that deepen the meaning of it to the mix to give it the perfect flavor.

SALT AND PEPPER CHICKEN

This recipe is less about the main protein and more about the additions. You can even trade the chicken for shrimp!

3 lbs chicken wings (I prefer all drummettes)

3 tsp sea salt

5 tsp pepper

1 tsp extra virgin olive oil (evoo)

3 tsp sesame oil

6 cloves garlic, chopped finely

4 green onions, chopped coarsely

1 jalapeno pepper, seeded, diced fine

Preheat oven to 450 degrees. Combine sea salt and pepper together in a bowl. Place chicken wings in bowl and shake to cover them all completely in seasoning. Bake for 15 minutes then turn and bake for another 15-20 minutes until crispy and cooked through. We happen to like our wings *very* crispy. Once removed from the oven, heat the evoo and sesame oil in a skillet over medium heat and add the garlic, onions, and jalapeno. Cook until the garlic is slightly brown. Toss the chicken wings with the garlic oil until completely coated. Place on a serving platter, ladling any left-over garlic oil over the top of the wings. These also make a great addition to any party!



Seasonings

Honestly, if it weren't for social media, I'm not sure I would be able to stay connected with people - past, present, and future. I know that there are still some of you left in this crazy, highly-visible society that are holding out and think Facebook is obnoxious, or Twitter is only for rants from politicians, but I am not one of those individuals.

I get to see all the fun things my friends in other states – and even other countries – are doing. I get to celebrate with them for their weddings and new additions to their families. I am able to show support for the people in my life fighting illness, or even those embarking on a new venture. It's truly amazing, and for someone (ahem) my age, it's like something straight out of Buck Rogers. Were it not for social media, I would have been living similar to The Three Monkeys: not seeing, hearing from, or speaking to any of the aforementioned people.

Remember pen pals? (Some of you youngsters will scratch your head at that phrase.) I've had quite a few in my yester-years. But the reason was because I got to meet them, or be related

to them or have them in my existence in some way and then, didn't. But what I am discovering is that pen pals then or social media now are a necessity because there are seasons in our lives; seasons that allow us to grow and change and develop, all while moving forward. That could mean you have to move away from your very best friend, or that your favorite cousin got married and life has changed in structure so much that you no longer see one another or speak to each other near as often as you used to, though they live right down the street.

The seasons of people that have affected me negatively have engrained in me to be positive. The seasons of people that have affected me positively have instilled a sense of community and love within me.

We have all had the relationship or relationships that have placed fear or mistrust in us at least once. We have seen seasons of loss and of life. Such is this broken-but-beautiful world. But the main point from all of it that I have learned and desire to pass on is that every single one of them are valuable and crucial to who we allow ourselves to become.

There are many different circumstances that cause season changes – some of them good and tasty; some of them not-so-good that leave a sour taste in our mouth. Either way, seasons come and go, and they consistently change us.

I have had so many seasonings sprinkled throughout my time here that have shaped me and helped create both my living legacy and the one I leave behind. I can tell you that not all of those seasonings have been ones that I care to recall, though it's important to my heart and as part of my faith that I do, so that they don't steal my joy.

Is there a friendship you used to count on daily that has fizzled out and you're not sure why? Or perhaps there is a family member you confided in that shared your vulnerability with someone else. Maybe it's just as simple as someone you love and admire moving to a different place.

And then there's the accountability factor: what if *you* are the person that doesn't feel the same toward a friend, or who abandoned a trust somehow – whether knowingly or not – or had to move away from a loved-one? These seasonings of life happen to all of us – no one is immune.

What do we do with that? We cannot allow these times to make us bitter, but rather to make us better. Making our tiny life mighty depends on that.

Whenever I refer to certain people or times or memories from my own past, I almost always call those seasons 'seasonings' because they craft the life of flavor we choose to live. Whether it's salty or sweet, they're important to the recipe that creates *you*.

CHOCO-CHILI COOKIE-WOOKIES

2/3 cup unsweetened cocoa powder

1 tsp ancho chili powder

1/2 tsp salt

2 1/2 cups flour

1 1/2 cups sugar

1 cup (2 sticks) butter, softened

2 large eggs

powdered sugar

additional ancho chili powder

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. In a medium bowl, whisk together cocoa powder, flour, salt, and chili powder. In a large bowl, beat together butter and sugar until light and fluffy. Mix in eggs and beat for another minute or so. Beat in flour mixture and continue to beat until dough has become smooth and cohesive, about two minutes. Split dough in two equal parts. Roll each half into a 1 1/2 inch wide log. Wrap each log in plastic wrap. Let dough chill in refrigerator for

about an hour. Cut dough logs into 1/2-inch thick coin-like pieces. Arrange coins on prepared baking sheets. Bake until evenly lightened in color but still chewy in texture, about 15 minutes. Let your cookie-wookies cool. Dust with powdered sugar and extra ancho chili powder, if desired.

This recipe is sweet, salty, and spicy all at the same time – much like the seasonings in our very own lives.



Fillers

I look at the ingredients on a package of food, and if there are fillers I can't pronounce, don't understand, or that seem to convey the message they are chemical or synthetic, I put it back on the shelf. We've been conditioned to know that when it comes to food, we should avoid those fillers. But not all fillers are bad.

For example, though my heart now feels I am rich beyond riches, my childhood was not one of privilege. So from a very early age, I found myself finding ways to spackle the cracks and fill the gaps.

Sometimes it was with people. I would seek out the authentic few and surround myself with them. I would find myself living vicariously through them; keeping a close eye on them; learning from them. I remember the pair of teenage sisters that lived in my apartment building in Queens, New York. Their names were Dina and Aristeia. As far as I was concerned, they were

the fairest in the land. They were a little older than me so I really thought they were kind of a big deal and I looked up to them quite a bit.

Dina, in particular, stood out to me because every morning at the same time, she would leave for work, her long, beautiful dark hair was always in a feathered back, curly type of 'do, and she would wear so much mascara, I thought she was wearing feathers on her eyes. She would strut down the street in her leather boots, jamming her hands into the pockets of her black, leather jacket. Her shiny, pink lips would always form a smile when she saw me, and she would stop and ask me how I was. Sometimes, she would ask if I wanted to play Frisbee across the street with her and her boyfriend, Tony, later in the afternoon or come listen to records with her sometime that week. She was always so kind and sweet and she invested in me as a little kid, even though she was just a kid herself. She knew and understood that I looked at her as a role model – a filler I definitely needed in my life at that time - and she took that responsibility very seriously.

I remember thinking, "I want to be Dina when I grow up." What an impact that filler had on who I have become. Not only the big eyelashes that I try not to leave the house without, but more importantly, she impacted me being an intentional person and how I treat others. Because of social media, I still get to keep in touch with her. She married Tony and they are still together to this day. The Hubster and I still go visit Tony and Dina in The Big Apple, and I still want to be her when I grow up.

Sometimes I filled the gaps with places. I lived across the street from the East River during that time, and there was a park where I would roller skate for hours. I would pretend I was a Roller Disco Queen (now I'm *really* showing my age!) or a famous ice skater like Dorothy Hamill, and pictured myself with a beautiful gold head piece that had fringe on it hanging down my head like gilded hair, and in my child's-mind filled with imagination, I was skating on ice that looked like diamonds and twirling to lovely music while everyone in the audience around

me oohed, aahed, and clapped to my fluid moves. Turns out in present-day, wearing gold headpieces, hats, and turbis are a part of my everyday life. And I still use my imagination to create, which has become part of my livelihood.

I have also learned to fill in the holes with things. Not things like expensive cars or fur coats. Things right in front of us, though we may not see them for anything other than what they look like. Things like food. For instance, there have been times I have had one package of ground turkey that needed to feed a family of five for dinner and stretch into lunches for the following day. So instead of looking at that one package of meat and thinking feeding my family was impossible, I found whatever I could scrounge up in my pantry and fridge to go with it and turned a measly package of meat into a delicious meatloaf that fed us all for several meals. Turns out that using food as fillers to stretch meals has facilitated the part of my business that helps me cook good, healthy food on a budget, and pass along recipes to You, The People, while also getting to do something I'm passionate about.

Through much experience, I have realized that when there are gaps in your life, they can be filled in a variety of ways and support who you are and who you choose to be. But no matter the way I've tried to plug the holes, my main filler has been my faith. I believe people, places, and things are strategically positioned in our life to grow us and show us how to appreciate this one life we have, if we allow it. Not all of us utilize that gift. As mere humans, we tend to hang on to the pits we've bitten into or look at life through bitter or sorrowful glasses, so we don't see the fillers that are right in front of us. Looking back, can you see what fillers have shaped the good parts that make up *you*?

I will be the first to admit that I am not perfect or wonderful, but I will also be the first to tell you that I was perfectly and wonderfully made. And that, Ladies and Gentlemen, is just the filler my heart needs for this life of flavor I'm living.

FILLER UP TURKEY MEATLOAF

This recipe is hearty and filling! It is great for all you Low-Carbers, too!

2 tbs extra virgin olive oil (evoo)

2 carrots, finely chopped

1 onion, finely chopped

1 stalk celery, finely chopped

2 large garlic cloves, minced

¼ tsp sea salt

¼ tsp pepper

¼ cup red wine or beef broth (or even coffee!)

2 lbs ground turkey

1 can ro-tel, drained well

½ cup steel cut oats

2 eggs

1 tsp sea salt

1 tbs pepper

1 tbs garlic powder

1 tbs paprika

In a skillet, heat evoo over medium heat for about a minute. Add all veggies, stir and leave to cook until they start to look brown and caramelized, about 2 minutes. Stir again, and let cook about another 2 minutes. Sprinkle with the ¼ teaspoons each of sea salt and pepper and stir.

Add wine, cook about 30 seconds longer, and then turn heat off. Allow the veggie mix to sit and

cool while you place remaining ingredient in a bowl, not mixing yet. Once veggie mixture is cool enough, combine with remaining ingredients in the bowl and mix. Take your meat mixture and place into a prepared 9x13 baking dish, pressing it out until it touches all sides and corners. Bake at 400 degrees for about 30 minutes or until the sides of the meatloaf are pulling away from the baking dish and the meat is brown on top. Let sit about 2 minutes, then slice and remove from baking dish. For an additional filler to the meal, pour the juices from the baking dish into a pot and heat on medium-high heat for three minutes, or until bubbling and thickened. Add a dollop of sour cream and stir until melted into the juices. Remove from heat and pour over meat! Let this filler-you-up, mind, body, and spirit!!

We will talk very soon, You Delightful Humans.