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Around the Table  
Chef's Apron

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[susannye@tds.net](mailto:susannye@tds.net)  
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More information the web at  
[www.susannye.com](http://www.susannye.com)

We're in the homestretch, the final countdown to Christmas. With only a few days to go, it's time to follow Santa's example and take one last look at that too-long-to-do list. There's a pretty good chance that a few checkmarks will be missing. But at this point I'm ready to breathe a sigh of relief and figure if it ain't done, it probably doesn't need doing. It's time to relax and enjoy the long weekend with family and friends.

Christmas has always been a special time in our house. Without question, we have had more than our fair share of chaos and excitement. Lots of wonderful memories were born out of all that pandemonium. When we were very small, there were the visits from Santa. Every year a neighbor dressed in a red suit and white beard stopped in for a last minute naughty and nice inspection. We then spent the rest of the night before Christmas in overdrive, antsy with anticipation. When we got a little older, we spent Christmas on Pleasant Lake. We loved spending Christmas in the country, especially when it snowed.

And there were all the presents. Dad was in sales and he was good at it. When sales were up, we all enjoyed a bountiful Christmas. My mother shopped for the three kids, her parents, his parents, the cousins, the mailman, the paper boy and who knows who else. Dad shopped for her. He was always tight lipped and never asked for help or opinions. By Christmas Eve speculation about Dad's gift to Mom ran high. Guesses were thrown about but he kept silent.

I was ever so proud the year I guessed right. I was eight and out of the blue I blurted out that he had bought her a mink stole. (It was quite a long time ago, when women still wore stoles and fur was not yet politically incorrect.) Everyone laughed and thought I was adorable.

Until the next morning when my mother let out a shriek of joy and danced around the living room with the soft, warm fur draped over her bathrobe. After the excitement died down, all eyes turned to me. How did I know? I just shrugged. The fur had been hidden next door at the Caruso's, had I overheard something? "Absolutely not," I protested, "No one told me anything. I just knew."

Unwilling to throw caution to the wind, the next year Dad pulled me aside a few days before Christmas. He wanted to know if I could again divine his plans for my mother. I thought for a minute or two and then gave an answer close enough to the truth to make him nervous and cement my reputation as a Christmas psychic.

And so began a little father-daughter tradition. I became his sidekick and he took me with him when he picked up Mom's gift. I rarely, if ever, helped him pick it out. No, that he did alone. The fur stole aside, jewelry was his gift of choice for Mom. Sometime over the long Thanksgiving weekend he would sneak away for a few hours. He would visit Dana's Jewelers and pick out a special treasure. In exchange for my silence, I was invited to join him on the return trip to fetch the bauble just in time for Christmas.

Mr. Dana would always unveil the pin or pendant, ring or bracelet with a subtle and stately flourish. My Dad stood proud and pleased as I gave the appropriate ooh and ah. Driving home, Dad would remind me that this was our secret and I was again sworn to silence.

He needn't have worried. I never dreamed of telling. I didn't want to be left at home on the next clandestine visit to Mr. Dana's. And even more important, I felt a fierce rivalry with my older sister. I would have carried those secrets to the grave. Knowing something that she didn't was just too good to give up. Enjoy a lovely Christmas filled with fun and surprises!

Bon appétit!

*Cook like a chef or just look like one!*

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## Savory Butternut Squash & Swiss Chard Bread Pudding

*Take a break from a traditional stuffing, this dish goes beautifully with poultry or pork. Make it a part of one of your holiday feasts and enjoy!*

Serves 6-8

- 1 pound butternut squash, cut in cubes
- 1 teaspoon dried sage
- 1/2 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1/2 teaspoon paprika
- Kosher salt & freshly ground pepper
- 1-2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 8 ounces mild Italian sausage, casings removed
- 12 ounces Swiss chard, chopped
- 4-6 cups day old country-style bread, cut in cubes
- 8 ounces goat cheese, crumbled
- 4 eggs
- 1 cup half & half
- pinch nutmeg

1. Preheat oven to 425 degrees.
2. Put the squash in a large ovenproof skillet and sprinkle sage, thyme, paprika, salt and pepper. Toss to combine. Drizzle with olive oil and balsamic vinegar, toss to coat. Roast at 425 degrees for 15 minutes. Add the onion to the skillet and toss to combine. Return to the oven, reduce heat to 375 degrees and roast for 10 minutes. Remove the squash from the oven. Let cool.
3. While the vegetables are roasting, brown the sausage in a large skillet over medium high heat, breaking up the meat as it cooks. Add the Swiss chard to the skillet and continue cooking until the Swiss chard has wilted. Let cool.
4. Put the bread cubes, sausage and vegetables in a large bowl; toss to combine. Add the goat cheese and toss again.
5. Generously butter a 2 quart casserole dish. Put the bread mixture in the dish. Whisk together the eggs, half & half and nutmeg. Carefully pour the liquid over the bread mixture. Cover with plastic wrap and let sit overnight in the refrigerator.
6. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Remove the casserole from the refrigerator and bake until piping hot and golden brown, about 45 to 55 minutes. Remove from the oven and let sit for 10 minutes before serving.

