

Cooking Parties & Classes Winter/Spring 2007-2008

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5 Tapas & Finger Food

January

11 French Country Cooking

25 Italian Country Kitchen

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15 Mediterranean Easter Feast

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6 Summer Salads

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The Friday after Thanksgiving marks the start of the holiday shopping season. Sometime in the 1970's it was christened "Black Friday". Some say the name refers to the heavy traffic and chaos in the stores. Others contend it is the busiest shopping day of the year and ensures profitability for retailers, putting them in the black. Without question it is a dangerous day to go shopping. All the big stores promise huge, super-fantastic sales. Many open their doors at 5 a.m. with lots of fanfare, colorful decorations and holiday songs booming over loud speakers. Mobs of shoppers with long lists jam store aisles. Jostled by crowds, assaulted by noise and confusion, shoppers face special challenges as they try to keep their wits about them. Of course we might all question the wisdom of shopping while recovering from the excesses of a Thanksgiving feast and nursing a tryptophan hangover.

Black Friday aside, there is something quite wonderful about choosing and buying Christmas gifts for the first time. I think that I was five when I first shopped for my family but I might have been six. Before heading downtown I counted out my nickels, pennies and dimes and came to a grand total of one dollar, more or less. I was shopping on a shoe-string and had to stretch my dollar to cover gifts for my entire family. At the time, that included two sets of grandparents, my great Aunt Bess, my Dad and sister. My brother was born a few years later and I made my Mother's gift in art class. Every year our teachers came up with creative ideas for gifts for one or both of our parents. Our class photos, Popsicle sticks and plaster of Paris were often involved.

My Dad took me to Woolworths for my first Christmas shopping adventure. With my dollar in change jingling in my pocket, we headed out. My Dad stayed a discreet distant away while I wandered the aisles. For a five year old on her first semi-solo shopping trip, the store seemed pretty daunting with its bright florescent lights and many aisles packed with potential presents. I found little a lace handkerchief, a pin cushion and a miniature bottle of cologne for my grandmothers and aunt. I called my Dad over for advice on gifts for my grandfathers. A pen and a note pad went into my basket. I then shooed him away and proceeded to the tool aisle for his gift. Tools were my gift of choice from my Dad throughout my childhood.

When you are five, there is something quite wonderful about giving gifts. It doesn't really matter whether your gift comes from Woolworths or if you it made it from construction paper and bits of yarn, glue and glitter. On Christmas morning when you present your family with their carefully wrapped packages, you discover that you are more excited about giving a gift than receiving one; at least for a minute or two.

For the past few years I have helped my nieces with some of their Christmas shopping. Now it is my turn to keep a discreet distance while they wander through department store aisles. A dollar doesn't stretch as far as it did when I was five so last year we set up shop around my kitchen table a few days before Christmas. I pulled out paper and paints, clothespins, felt and glue as well as bits of wood, pine cones and beach glass. We listened to carols; the girls sipped hot cocoa and we all munched a Christmas cookie or two while making reindeer and snowman decorations, picture frames and magic.

A lot has changed since I was five; or may not. Yes, Woolworths went out of business a long time ago and a dollar will no longer buy presents for the entire family. But the joy of giving never changes or gets old. Don't let holiday shopping and preparations drive you crazy. I hope that you are able to stay away from crowds and malls on Black Friday, enjoy the holiday weekend and the gift of time with family and friends,

Bon appétit! ~ Susan





Black Friday Opens the Holiday Shopping Season

Fall 2007/volume 62

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Black Bean Soup

Make a big pot of soup for the hectic holiday shopping season. It will be ready when you are. What could be better after a crazy, busy day? Enjoy.

Serves 8-12

1 large onion, finely chopped
4 cloves garlic, minced
1 yellow bell pepper, finely chopped
4 stalks celery, finely chopped
3 carrots, finely chopped
1 tablespoon minced jalapeño pepper or to taste
1/2 teaspoon ground cumin
1 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon freshly ground pepper
1/8 teaspoon dried chipotle chili pepper flakes or to taste
2 (15-16 ounce each) cans black beans, rinsed and drained
1 (28 ounce) can crushed tomatoes
1 1/2 pound boneless, skinless chicken breast
1 tablespoon fresh sage, chopped or 1 teaspoon dry
1/2 tablespoon fresh thyme or 1/2 teaspoon dry
1 bay leaf
4 quarts chicken stock
1/2 cup dry white wine
4 cups fresh or frozen corn kernels
Olive oil

1. Heat a little olive oil in a soup kettle; add the onion, garlic, bell pepper, jalapeño pepper, celery and carrots; sprinkle with cumin, pepper flakes, salt and pepper. Cook over medium heat for 10-15 minutes, until the vegetables are tender.
2. Add the beans, tomatoes, chicken, chicken stock, wine, sage, thyme and bay leaf to the soup pot; bring to a simmer and cook for 20 minutes or until the chicken is cooked through.
3. Remove the chicken from the pot, when it has cooled enough to handle, shred the chicken into bite sized pieces and add back to the soup. Add the corn kernels and heat until steaming. Serve.

The soup is even better if made ahead. It can be made 2-3 days ahead; let it cool a bit and then refrigerate covered. Reheat over medium-high heat until steaming and serve.