



DORY'S DIARY

DOROTHY SWART FLESHMAN

Birthdays that last longer than 24 hours

When I re-read my last column after publication about linking thoughts one to another through association — video tapes to travel to genealogy to birthdays — I decided it wasn't one of my better ones.

Why didn't I just say "Today is my birthday, folks! I've made it to 92 years of age and am completely amazed by the fact."

No, I took the long way round and hid the fact in words like a puzzle.

Actually, I didn't need to because it wasn't a secret and turned out to be one of my nicest days, maybe because I was receptive to it.

"You're a funny little thing," my sister used to say, and she hit on that truth as others can verify, for I stayed up the night before until the clock changed over at midnight to be sure I knew when I became one year older. Then I saw it out at the end of the day.

In between those 24 hours, it was filled with a solo, a duet, and a trio of singing the birthday song to me by relatives and friends, phone calls, cards in the mail and by email, a card in my door and a happy rock at the mailbox, a picking of pears at my doorstep, happy meetings throughout the day, and dinner with friends, so much of it just an unexpected happening.

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BETWEEN THE ROWS

WENDY SCHMIDT

Soil polymer adds plant support

While planting the three perennials I got on sale and being observed by a nongardening friend, I used some of the soil polymer I had purchased at a local retailer.

He asked what it was and couldn't believe what all it did. Using the polymer had become natural to me when planting things that I want to last. It is a wonderful thing, (like a lot of the miracles in this modern world such as cellphones and technology) and I have been callous in taking it for granted after getting used to it.

Soil polymer is sold as a dry crystal. This is a water-absorbing polymer called a hydrogel. Think of these hydrogels as long chains of molecules (called polymers) that absorb incredible amounts of water, only to release the water to the roots of plants at a later time.

Water molecules are drawn into the network across a diffusion gradient — formed by the sodium neutralization of the polymer backbone. The polymer chains want to straightened but cannot due to the cross-linking. Thus, the particles expand as water moves into the network.

Polymer crystals gel very similar to a gelatin dessert. Add water to the white crystalline flakes and they absorb many times their size in the polymeric gel that forms. One pound of the crystals holds about 50 gallons of water!

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Autumn Is The Season For Slow-Simmered Hearty Meals

BOUNTY OF BEANS

By **JeanMarie Brownson**
Chicago Tribune

I never want summer to end, so I look on the bright side: Autumn weather practically begs for slow-simmered foods. Yum.

Beans, for example. Beans prove an excellent source of lean, inexpensive protein. Their versatility and adaptability means they can play prominently in main-dish salads, creamy soups and hearty stews. They pair terrifically as rustic side dishes to our fall grilling and roasting recipes.

Canned beans top my list of great convenience foods. They save the day for many a meal. But I posit that cooler days prove a perfect time to master cooking dried beans.

First, know that all dried beans are not created equal. The fresher the dried bean, the more flavor it will have and the less time it will take to cook to perfect tenderness.

I buy beans in stores that sell a lot of them — black and pinto beans from a bustling Hispanic market are far more likely to be fresher than the beat-up, plastic-bagged beans sold on the bottom shelf of the local supermarket. I also buy beans at specialty stores so I can experiment with variety. Check out Rancho Gordo online. I joined its Bean Club and receive a quarterly supply of super-interesting dried beans. From the giant stunning Scarlett runner to the itty-bitsy alubia blanca, these "fresh" dried beans inspire me to simmer a potful for the week's meals.

No matter where you procure dried beans, always rinse them well and pick through them carefully for stones. Soaking is really up to you. They certainly cook faster if soaked. Many older recipes



Terrence Antonio James/Chicago Tribune-TNS

The red beans and chorizo stew tastes great topped with a scoop of red rice.

instruct us to discard the soaking water to prevent gas. Current thinking advises us to retain the soaking water lest we discard vitamins and flavor. When the beans have a luscious dark color, such as black and red beans, I always cook them in the soaking water for maximum color retention. (Note that for less bitterness, I do recommend discarding the soaking water when cooking dried garbanzo beans.)

In the end, cooking dried beans proves easy — they simply need water and time to soften into goodness. I usually cook 1 pound of beans in my 5½-quart stainless steel Dutch oven. When I'm not around to stir the beans and check water levels, I employ my slow cooker.

When pressed for time, I use a pressure cooker or Instant Pot, always following manufacturer's directions.

When the beans are tender to

the bite, the fun begins. Beans take to seasonings like ducks to water. Just know that it's best to add the seasonings after the beans are soft; some acids and salt can interfere with the softening process.

Bean cooking liquid proves a useful commodity. It can enrich soups and stand in for water when cooking rice and other grains. My daughter's favorite childhood side dish uses the black bean cooking water to make a stunning black rice much enjoyed in Mexico. Seasoned with a little garlic and finished with chopped fresh cilantro and green chile, the black rice is gorgeous next to a piece of grilled fish or steak. She stirs in spoonfuls of cooked black beans and shredded cheese for a main meal.

These days, I'm crazy for beans and greens — slow-simmered, meltingly tender beans enriched

with something green near the end of cooking. That might be from leafy greens, chopped green vegetables or a green salsa or sauce. Think pintos and kale, garbanzos and pesto, red beans and okra, white beans and arugula. The green element adds rich flavor, textural variation and nutrients. Believe me, this recipe will take the sting out of autumn days.

KITCHEN NOTES

1 pound dried beans yields 6-plus cups cooked beans (it depends on the size and shape of the beans) and about 4 cups bean cooking liquid.

These recipes can be made with canned beans (a 15-ounce can yields about 1½ cups beans) but at some point play around with cooking dried beans.

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Decadent, delicious: Butterscotch pudding

By **Noelle Carter**
Los Angeles Times

Rich butterscotch pudding topped with a light, slightly tangy mascarpone cream and toasted candied pecans. Reader Mickey Fielding from Baldwin Hills, California, calls it one of "the most deliciously eyes-rolling-back-in-my-head dishes I've ever tasted."

Mickey, we understand.

To get that incredible butterscotch flavor, chef Ben Ford caramelizes brown sugar, which he then combines with heavy cream, milk, eggs and cornstarch to form a velvety custard base. He then incorporates almost a half-stick of butter, and stirs in a little dark rum just to gild the lily. Try, if you can, to chill the pudding before digging in. It's a perfect dessert when you're planning for company and looking for something you can make ahead of time.

Ford was happy to share the recipe so you can savor all that deliciousness in the privacy of your own home.

FORD'S FILLING STATION BUTTERSCOTCH PUDDING

About 40 minutes, plus chilling time. Makes about 4 cups pudding

MASCARPONE CREAM
½ cup heavy cream
¼ cup fine granulated sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
8 ounces mascarpone cheese

In the bowl of a stand mixer, or in a large bowl using a hand mix,



Ricardo DeArmanha/Los Angeles Times-TNS

The butterscotch pudding recipe from Ford's Filling Station.

whip the heavy cream with the sugar and vanilla to soft peaks. In a separate bowl, whip the mascarpone until loosened and fluffy. Carefully fold in the whipped cream. Set aside.

BUTTERSCOTCH PUDDING AND ASSEMBLY
2¼ cups cream
1 cup plus 2 tablespoons milk
1 egg
3 egg yolks
6 tablespoons cornstarch
1 cup plus 2 tablespoons brown sugar
1 1/8 teaspoons salt
¼ cup water
3½ tablespoons butter
1½ ounces dark rum (not spiced)
Prepared mascarpone cream, recipe above

¼ cup (about 1 ounce) crushed candied pecans

1. In a bowl, combine the cream and milk. Set aside.
2. In a separate bowl, whisk together the egg, yolks and cornstarch until smooth. Set aside.
3. In a large pot, combine the brown sugar and salt, along with the water. Heat the mixture on high heat until the sugar has caramelized, 5 to 7 minutes, gently stirring with a spatula.
4. When the sugar mixture is caramelized, whisk in the milk and cream mixture until smooth. Bring to a boil. Meanwhile, place the butter in a strainer set over a metal bowl which is placed in a larger bowl of ice water.
5. Once boiling, stir a little of

the hot cream mixture in with the eggs and cornstarch to temper, then add the egg/cornstarch mixture to the pot. Continue whisking in the pot until the pudding has thickened.

6. Remove from heat and immediately strain into the metal bowl set over a bowl of ice water to stop the cooking. Stir in the rum, then continue gently stirring the pudding until it has cooled.

7. Remove the metal bowl from the bowl of ice water, cover with plastic wrap and chill.

8. To serve, spoon the pudding into serving dishes or bowls, top with a dollop of mascarpone cream and a sprinkling of candied pecans.

Note: Adapted from a recipe provided by chef Ben Ford.