



TRASH TALK

BARBARA O'NEAL

Rethinking how we (over)use plastics

We have talked at length in this column about the many ways plastic is harmful to us and our environment and we have talked about the three Rs — reduce, reuse and recycle. But plastic recycling is limited and so are our options for reducing and reusing plastic. Almost everything in the grocery store, and many items in the hardware store are encased in at least one layer of plastic. We are awash in plastic in our own homes. It is time to talk about some other Rs, namely redesign and rethink.

Obviously you and I cannot redesign packaging, but we can advocate with our purchases and with our pens. Both of which are working, at least incrementally. As consumer preferences change and as the fight against plastic pollution intensifies around the world, a cottage industry of plastic alternatives has emerged. These efforts are often legitimately sustainable and better for our future, such as tote bags that replace single-use plastic bags. Sometimes, however, what seems groundbreaking at first glance is not upon closer inspection. Not all plastic alternatives are created equally, and it's often confusing to draw distinctions.

For me, the “biodegradable plastic” and “bio” plastic claims are the hardest to decipher. Turns out, for good reason. Many plastics that carry the biodegradable label degrade only in very particular and controlled environments, which do not include your trashcan, home compost pile, or our landfills.

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BETWEEN THE ROWS

WENDY SCHMIDT

Let's get a little nutty

This is the time of year for fruitcake and pumpkin bread to be perfuming houses. A time for spices, warmth and never drinking coffee without something sweet to go with it.

Walnuts are a big part of baking in my house. It was interesting to me that English walnuts are native to Asia. They are also good for our health.

- Walnut (Juglans). Juglandaceae.

These deciduous trees are usually large and spreading, with leaves divided into leaflets. The nuts are oval or round in fleshy husks. English walnut is grown as an orchard tree in the West. Native walnuts are sometimes planted as shade trees with the edible nuts as a bonus.

Walnuts are notorious as hosts for aphids. Expect the trees to host the pests with the honeydew that falls from them. You shouldn't plant the trees where they will overhang patios or parking areas.

- Southern California black walnut is native to Southern California. It's a small tree, growing 15 to 30 feet. Leaves have 9 to 19 leaflets. Rough nuts with good flavor but thick, hard shells. It is drought-tolerant and will grow in poor soil.
- Butternut (J. cinerea). Zones 1-9. A 50- to 60-foot tree native to the eastern U.S. Nuts are elongated. Flavor is good but the shells are hard. It needs only a moderate amount of water in summer.

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A Simple Sausage Gravy



Abel Uribe/Chicago Tribune/TNS

Serve the gravy over biscuits, whole or split, as you prefer.

Good GRAVY

By **James P. DeWan**
Chicago Tribune

What's white and lumpy and hails from the American South? Besides me, I mean. That's right. It's our old pal sausage gravy, the dish for which the adjective “mucilaginous” was invented.

Sausage gravy is so much more than the spackley white glop of our misshapen youth, and today, we plumb its sublimity.

WHY YOU NEED TO LEARN THIS

What, I didn't have you at “spackley white glop”? OK, then, howzabout, besides being delicious and iconically comforting, it's also one of the easiest things to make ever. And, as if that's not enough, it's just as easy to make a huge pile of it as it is to make a couple of servings. Trust me: If your memory's as good as my elephant's, you'll remember this the next time the choir drops in for Sunday brunch and they'll literally be singing your praises. Literally.

THE STEPS YOU TAKE

Most of us know sausage and gravy as the more liquid half of that classic breakfast food, biscuits and gravy — the other half I'm guessing I don't need to tell you? You'll also find it napped with love across fried chicken, chicken-fried steak or pork chops.

By tradition, sausage gravy is a very simple preparation — pretty much just sausage,

a thickening agent and a liquid. Let's take a moment to examine those ingredients:

First, the most important ingredient: the thickener.

I'm kidding, of course.

It's the sausage. Now, what sausage you use is entirely up to you. Most iterations employ the Common American Breakfast Sausage (CABS), a fresh pork number flavored typically with a notable dose of sage.

On the other hand, you, being the soul of intrepidity, might want to set sail for Other Sausage Land and concoct your sausage gravy with something a bit more adventurous. Something like hot Italian sausage or a Cajun andouille. You could even try a (Yipes!) blood sausage like kishka, morcilla or Irish black pudding. Go ahead: It's your funeral.

If it were up to me — which, as we've just established, it's not — I'd use generic bulk breakfast sausage. If, for some reason, you can't find bulk sausage — like, say, you live on the planet Zebulorp 7 — purchase uncooked links or patties. Slit the links down the side to remove the sausage from its casing. Then, before cooking — and you can do this with patties as well — crumble the sausage like the Fates did my youthful aspirations. If you're using a precooked sausage like andouille, simply chop it into bite-size pieces.

Now, about that thickener: Flour is most

common, turned into what our Gallic pals call “roux” by cooking it in fat. The fat comes mostly from the sausage, though it never hurts to throw in a bit of butter as well.

Finally, the liquid. Traditionally, sausage gravy uses milk. Now, if you've eaten lots of biscuits and gravy, you know that the consistency of the gravy slips often to the far end of the American Standard Glop Scale (ASGS). If I had a nickel for every time I've been served a gravy that's so thick I could use it to wallpaper my elephant, or my elephant's bedroom.

That high level of gloppitude stems from the fact that starch thickens milk more than it does liquids like stock or water. Don't worry about why that is. (The short answer: Science!) Just know that if your gravy is too thick, you have the power to add more liquid and thin it out.

Or, you could be like me (and who doesn't want that?) and start with stock instead of milk. Not only is it less likely to englopulate, but, because stock has less fat, you'll get a much lighter end product. (See recipe.) You can still finish it with a splash of cream for richness.

Here's what you do, to feed four to six people:

1. Brown a pound of sausage in a little fat, then remove it from the pan to a clean bowl.

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Sticks and sweets: Philippines street food

By **Daniel Neman**
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

All you need to know about banana cue is that it is caramelized, fried banana, served on a stick.

Its cousin, camote cue? That's caramelized, fried sweet potato, served on a stick.

I know a guy who doesn't like sweet potatoes. “There is nothing you could do to a sweet potato that would make me like it,” he has said.

Even deep fry it and caramelize it?

“Even that,” he said.

So he has no interest in camote cue, although I still think he would enjoy it if he tried it. And that's fine. It just means more camote cue and banana cue for the rest of us.

Both of the cues, banana and camote, are popular street foods in the Philippines. You are especially likely to find them as a mid-afternoon snack, or meryenda. I imagine they are particularly popular among chil-



Hillary Levin / St. Louis Post-Dispatch/TNS

Fried sweet potato with brown sugar, on a stick.

dren coming home from school, but adults adore them, too.

Best of all, for our purposes, they are incredibly easy to make.

They may be a little bit messy, especially if you tend to be a messy cook anyway, like me. But clean-up is a pleasure when you

have a belly full of banana cue or camote cue.

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