



BOB’S
THOUGHTS

BOB BAUM

Recalling Greece and Rome

■ Reminiscing about a pre-Olympics vacation trip in the summer of 2004

Watching snowflakes flutter from a late March sky, I sit here in these so-uncertain times wondering what to write about next.

Whatever I conjure will be silly drivel compared to the weighty issues of a pandemic. But boy do we need some distractions, and I’m here to serve.

What follows is a recollection of what probably was the best assignment/vacation I ever had in 43 years with The Associated Press. It involves Athens, Rome and the island of Crete, all over a glorious summer in 2004.

As we had done four years earlier in Australia, my wife Leah and I decided to take a vacation in advance of my assignment at the Athens Olympics. Part of that assignment had me as the only reporter embedded with the U.S. track and field team at their training camp at a resort on Crete, an island that may have been the most beautiful place I’ve been in my travels around this planet.

For two weeks, we stayed in an all-inclusive resort with a balcony overlooking the Mediterranean.

The trip began with a nonstop British Airways flight from Phoenix to London, where we switched to Olympia Air for the journey to Athens.

There, we had the good fortune of getting a jolly cab driver from the airport.

In one of the wisest moves I’ve made in traveling, we hired him to show us around the city the following day. He took us to places we’d never have seen on our own. We drove to a spot high above Athens, the Acropolis looking almost small down below.

Our driver said he learned English simply by 24 years of driving a cab in Athens. He laughed at his city’s attempt to spruce up for the Olympics, scheduled to begin in another few weeks.

“Look at how clean,” he’d say. “Look at the flowers. They’re not here before.”

For lunch, he drove us to a cafe along the waterfront in the nearby port city of Pireaus. The server brought out a plate of raw fish and we each picked one. They returned cooked to perfection.

That day he left us in scorching heat to explore the Acropolis, whose immense beauty seemed overwhelming.

From there, we went to Rome (on my money, not the AP’s).

We stayed at the Westin Exelcior, a gorgeous old hotel. I loved sipping coffee at a table outside watching the people walk past.

One evening we took a long walk, past the Trevi Fountain (where we tossed the obligatory coin over our shoulder into the water), down the Spanish Steps and all the way to the Vatican.

It was very late and I decided to splurge (150 euros if I remember right, or about \$170) on a carriage ride back to our hotel. Unfortunately, our driver had spent a good share of the evening in celebration and was quite drunk.

We careened down the narrow streets, us clutching the carriage before finally arriving in one piece thankfully at our destination.

The next day we visited the St. Peter’s Basilica, where I saw Michelangelo’s Pieta, the statue of Mary cradling the crucified Jesus.

It was covered with protective glass after a knife attack. It might be the most beautiful human-made thing I’ve ever seen.

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Reassuring Recipes



Rick Nelson/Minneapolis StarTribune-TNS

Banana bread

COMFORT FOOD IN THE TIME OF CORONAVIRUS

By Rick Nelson
StarTribune (Minneapolis)

The moment I started making banana bread, a sense of calm began to wash over my jittery, anxious self.

Moving through those familiar rituals — measuring flour and sugar, cracking eggs, greasing a pan — turned out to be the kitchen equivalent of a deep cleansing breath.

Once the house began to fill with the tantalizing scent of this childhood favorite, I was certain that I’d made the right decision to pull out the mixer and preheat the oven.

I’ve always been aware of the concept of stress baking, but only as an intellectual abstraction. But in this time of ongoing crisis, baking has become a new meditation of choice, an emotional salve.

I highly recommend it.

Start with these time-tested crowd-pleasers, reliable for their uncomplicated nature. No ingredients that stretch beyond pantry staples, no challenging techniques, no out-of-the-ordinary equipment. Also, they’re delicious.

One peek into a refrigerator drawer filled with Braeburns and McIntoshes and my imagination immediately dashed to fragrant, cinnamon-scented baked apples, and to “Comfort Me With Apples,” the second (and best, in my opinion) of food writer Ruth Reichl’s series of memoirs; I think I’ll download it on Kindle and reread. And because it’s fruit, it’s good for you, right?

I’m baking coffee cake because it’s not just for breakfast, and because I happened to have sour cream on hand, and blueberries in the freezer. And cinnamon, always; my spice rack is never without it. Coffee cake also has a long shelf life, a key selling feature for the housebound.

Cookbook giant Dorie Greenspan’s World

Peace Cookies have been a fixture in my baking repertoire ever since 2006, when Mary Eckmeier entered them in the Star Tribune’s annual holiday cookie contest, and won. They exude a deep chocolate aura, one that’s accentuated by sea salt (even more so with the addition of espresso powder). They follow a basic cut-and-bake formula, yet taste as if you fussed.

There are almost always a few ripe bananas in our freezer, waiting to be converted into smoothies. Or, better yet, banana bread. This recipe is adapted from the one that my late mother-in-law used to feed her family.

As for the pudding, yes, technically, it’s not baking. But it is dessert, and who doesn’t like butterscotch pudding? This recipe requires just a few steps beyond the instant boxed mix variety, and the results are far more impressive.

The recipe hails from a foolproof collection of comfort foods that New York Times food writer Marian Burros published in response to an earlier tragedy, the Sept. 11 attacks, and I’ve been cooking and baking from it ever since. Now I realize that I reflexively reach for it during times of stress.

CINNAMONY BAKED APPLES

Serves 6.

Note: Calvados is apple brandy from France’s Normandy region. If you don’t have it, you can substitute apple juice, brandy or even water. From “The Silver Palate Cookbook: 25th Anniversary Edition” by Julee Rosso and Sheila Lukins.

- 2½ cups brown sugar, divided
- 1½ tablespoons ground cinnamon, divided
- 1½ tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice

- 6 medium-to-large tart baking apples, washed (do not peel)
- ¾ cup raisins
- ½ cup chopped pecans
- 1 tablespoon freshly grated lemon zest
- 3 tablespoons Calvados, divided (see Note)
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 6 pieces of equal size

Preheat oven to 375 degrees and line a 9- by 13-inch baking dish with parchment paper.

In a saucepan over medium-high heat, combine 2 cups water, ¾ cup brown sugar, ½ tablespoon cinnamon and the lemon juice. Bring to a boil and cook for 3 minutes. Remove syrup from heat and reserve.

Remove the apple cores, but do not cut all the way through the bottoms.

In a medium bowl, combine the remaining 1½ cups brown sugar, remaining 1 tablespoon cinnamon, raisins, pecans and lemon zest. Fill each apple with brown sugar mixture, to within ¼ inch of the top. Pour 1 teaspoon Calvados over the filling in each apple and top with ½ tablespoon butter.

Transfer the apples to prepared baking dish. Stir the remaining 1 tablespoon Calvados into the reserved syrup and pour syrup over apples. Bake apples until tender, about 1 hour, basting them occasionally with the syrup in the pan.

Remove from oven and, using a slotted spoon, transfer baked apples to a serving dish. Pour the syrup from the pan into a small saucepan over medium-high heat. Bring to a boil and cook until slightly reduced, about 5 minutes. Cool slightly, then pour 1 tablespoon of syrup over each apple, and serve remaining syrup at the table.

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Gardening: Cure for winter staleness

Having had enough talk about viruses and politics, I went out to finally plant the bulbs and roots I had bought. The red and also the white peony roots looked pretty sad, but the pink peony and tiger lilies all looked especially fine.

The soil was quite easy to dig and it was feeling very spring-like outdoors. Almost tempting to open all the doors of the house to air things out. Winter staleness is easy to cure.

The tiger lilies need to have 6 to 8 inches of soil above the bulb’s base. The hole would have to be a hole deeper than it was wide for each bulb. If you want, you can sparingly



BETWEEN THE ROWS

WENDY SCHMIDT

add some of the long-lasting (9 months) slow-release fertilizer mixed with soil in the bottom of the hole.

The peonies are planted eyes up, with the eyes 1 to 1/2 inches below the soil surface. Peonies do not bloom as well if planted too deep. In very old gardens, being too deep is generally the reason if peonies are no longer blooming.

Garden chores

- Shrubs and trees best planted or transplanted in spring rather than fall include butterfly bush, dogwoods, rose of Sharon, black gum (Nyssa), vortex, redbud, magnolia, tulip popular, birch, bingo, hawthorn and

most oaks.

- When crabapples are in bloom, hardy annuals may be transplanted outdoors.
- Fertilize established roses once new growth is 2 inches long. Use a balanced formulation. Begin spraying to control black spot disease.
- When forsythia is in bloom, winter mulches may be removed.
- Do not prune boxwoods before April 15.
- Easter lilies past blooming can be planted outdoors. Set the bulbs 2 to 3 inches deeper than they grew in the pot. Mulch well if frost occurs.
- Aphids begin to hatch on fruit trees as the buds begin to open.

If you have garden questions or comments, please write to greengardencolumn@yahoo.com. Thanks for reading!