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The Comfort Zone

WHO COULD DENY IT? We're in uncharted waters. We humans are social creatures; we mix, we meet, we congregate. Even those who work alone from home end the day with a bite, a drink, a run... something with a friend. Or so I've been told. I admire those who can shut the door on the outside world and accomplish their jobs from the sanctity of their home offices. It's a trick I hadn't really tried. Until now.

Day 10 of the self-imposed distancing. Or maybe it was day 8 or 9. As in the film, "Groundhog Day", time had lost its meaning. I got up and had coffee, of course. And then I did nothing. Really. Nothing. I didn't take a walk because it was windy and rainy. I didn't take a nap or tackle one of the million chores I had been putting off. I didn't pick up the enormous branch that fell from my tree, binge watch TV, or read the book I found so enjoyable, "The Dutch House" by Ann Patchett.

My very smart phone told me I walked less than the previous day. Hardly news to me. The thing is, I didn't feel rested. Just lethargic. The day wasn't a total waste, however, because I learned something about myself. Normally I tear around from one job to another. Not efficient, but somehow

effective. Before planning a menu for my classes, I have cookbooks scattered on every flat surface with scraps of paper marking interesting recipes. I hit the library, because Barrington has a fantastic selection of culinary books and magazines. I make lists, lose them, make more, and somehow pull together ingredients from at least two, maybe three locations. I'm tired, but euphoric. Grant you, this isn't how most people get their jollies. My friends knit, needlepoint, swing golf clubs, or hit their home gyms with a vengeance. Fantastic. I'm your cheerleader. Keep it up.


But at the end of the day, we're all the same in one regard—we all eat. In this time of chaos, sitting down to a meal, whether alone or with your family, should be a time of comfort. For a while I was grazing, rather than eating. I'd grab something from the fridge, something from the cupboard. It was hardly satisfying and very fattening. Grabbing and going usually involved carbs...lots of them. Comfortable, not comforting by any means.

Like everyone else, I had to change my ways. Being of "a certain age", I was now advised to shop the hour when the store first opened. Get in/get out was the message. Okay. I no longer wandered the aisles, picking up and reading labels on all

sorts of disparate items. I had to plan on making something simple with ingredients that were available. Something satisfying and nourishing. Something I would eat sitting down...preferably with utensils.

There are so many recipes I've read over the years in sections titled "Comfort Food". Usually these involve stews or large chunks of meat of some sort that require long, slow cooking. Comfort food articles seem to be published in winter, when the editors think we need cosseting with time spent indoors away from the harsh winds of winter.

But this is spring, and my daffodils are coming up. I might have to walk in shouting rather than talking distance, as I want to be outside. The comfort food of spring is different from that of winter months. It may still be soft and unctuous, but it's lighter and brighter. In my mind it's nourishing and healthy, but not so time consuming. It's got to be easy to put together with ingredients that are readily available, and oh yeah, it's got to be gorgeous. This menu can be put together with very little hands-on time. I know some of you are going to tell me you don't like salmon. (Why won't you try again? Those wild species work so hard to get to us. They swim upstream, jump boulders, and avoid bears. What a journey.)

So, if gorgeous orange isn't your passion, buy a fillet of snowy white. Whatever is beckoning to you from its icy bed at the market will be stunning against these smoky, dark lentils. Add some bright green asparagus spears or a stalk or two of broccoli. The composition would be fantastic. 

Smoky Baked Lentils

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 cup dry Beluga or French Lentilles du Puy
- 1 bottle dry white wine (or 32 oz. chicken stock, for kids)
- 1-2 tablespoons olive oil
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Place the lentils in a baking dish with a lid. Add the white wine or chicken broth and olive oil. Stir to combine. Bake, covered, in the center of the oven for 1 hour. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Mustard Crusted Salmon



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INGREDIENTS:

- 4 salmon fillets, about 6 oz each
- Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper
- ¼ cup Dijon mustard
- 1/3 cup dry breadcrumbs, such as Panko
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- Finishing quality olive oil and lemon wedges, for garnish

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Season the salmon fillets with salt and pepper. Divide Dijon mustard evenly on the flesh sides of the salmon and sprinkle the breadcrumbs over the tops. Using your fingers, press the crumbs into the mustard.
2. Heat a large skillet, preferably cast iron, over medium-high heat for a minute or two. Add the oil, and when it is hot, add the salmon fillets, mustard side down. Sear for 2-3 minutes, without moving the fillets, until a crust is formed. Turn and sear the second side for 2 minutes. Transfer the skillet to the oven and bake for 8 minutes for medium-rare salmon, or 10 minutes for medium.
3. Place some lentils on each of 4 plates and nestle a salmon fillet alongside. Drizzle some extra virgin olive oil over all and serve with a wedge of lemon.



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