

# Cowles' cooking chops are right on thyme

When co-organizers Rachel Murray and Jeff Seckar-Martinez announced that the Friday morning professional development day on Jan. 4 would consist of faculty members teaching their passions to their peers, there were some expected sessions: Natalie Uehara taught tap dance, Carey West taught pottery-wheel throwing, Scott Pass taught juggling, Audrea Moyers taught circuit building, and Seckar-Martinez taught oil painting.

“

Cooking is all about experience and experimentation.”

– culinary guru Richard Cowles

But some of the sessions had nothing to do with the primary discipline that the presenter taught at Mac. One such class was entitled, “My Favorite One Pot Meals,” taught by Richard Cowles. Cowles is known around campus for his math prowess and his excellent work mentoring the PALS program. But what many in the Mac community probably do not know is that Cowles is a former employee at Chili's and, more importantly, that he loves to cook.

Science teacher Elaine Bohls-Graham put into words what many observers discovered during the course of Cowles' 45-minute class.

“We have a lot of hidden talent in our midst,” she said, “and it is great that there is this opportunity to showcase those talents and passions.”

Before teaching his students, an intrepid group of wannabe Gordon Ramseys comprised of 12 teachers and one administrator, the proper way to dice an onion and a garlic clove (see

related [video](#)), he offered some sage (not the spice) advice about the culinary arts.

“Cooking is all about experience and experimentation,” said Cowles, adding that his time in the Chili’s kitchen was not nearly as valuable as his time trying out and tinkering with recipes to suit his palate.

“There’s no such thing as too much cilantro,” he told his pupils after he had dispatched them to the stovetops in Room 160 to make one of the five can’t-miss one-pot recipes he brought for them to make.

The outcome of his pupils’ culinary adventures are posted below along with the recipes Cowles gave them to guide their cooking.

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– aspiring chef Chastity Colbert-Davis

One of his star pupils, math teacher Chastity Colbert-Davis said she took the class because she loves food and likes to cook and would like to be better at it.

“I thought I could learn a few things,” she said. “At first, I didn’t really think we were going to cook. I thought it would be more demonstrations by Mr. Cowles and sharing of our recipes that we cook. I was surprised that we all got to cook and we cooked different dishes. The class was so well run and organized by Mr. Cowles.”

Colbert-Davis made skillet tamale pie, along with her culinary cohorts, Elizabeth Sanders and Richard Whisennand. Beverly Evans and Jennifer St. Lawrence made skillet lasagna. Joshua Amy and Brandon Grant made Mediterranean style orzo. Katie

Carrasco, Shelly Pringle and Georgeann Shockley made Peruvian quinoa and corn chowder. Elaine Bohls-Graham and Larry Featherstone made skillet strata with cheddar and thyme.

The cooking experience was great, but Colbert-Davis said the camaraderie of the class was even better.

“I really liked working with my colleagues and getting to know them better, and eating all the yummy recipes.”

The class decided to eat their lessons before they departed for the second session of the assigned professional development course. After sampling each of the five skillet dishes, class members also tried a candied Meyer lemon peel, which Cowles made beforehand with lemons from a tree in his backyard.

Colbert-Davis said that her dish, skillet tamale pie was her favorite, followed by the Mediterranean orzo and the skilled lasagna. Bohls-Graham had a similiar ballot but was also a fan of the chowder.

“I really liked the Mediterranean Orzo and the Peruvian Corn Chowder,” Bohls-Graham said. “I can see ways that I can tweek these two recipes in a couple of different ways to accommodate different occasions and ingredients. Both make a great base dish with which to start.”

Colbert-Davis added that all the dishes were delicious and that her takeaway was that she and her husband might be able to go for takeout less often in the future.

“It takes me FOREVER to cook at home during the week. My husband and I usually just go out because we don’t feel like spending all that time cooking, and I’m too tired from the day. My takeaway from this class was that you can cook really delicious and flavorful meals in less than an hour and it doesn’t require a ton of ingredients, dishes, pots, and pans.”



## Mediterranean Style Orzo

$\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon salt

1 pound lean ground lamb, beef, turkey

1 large onion, finely chopped

2 cloves garlic, minced or pressed

1 or 2 cans (14.5 oz) tomatoes

$1\frac{1}{2}$  to 2 cups hot water or chicken stock

$\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon dry oregano leaves

$\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon pepper

1 cup (about 8 oz) dry rice-shaped pasta

1 or 2 packages (10 oz.) frozen chopped spinach, thawed

$\frac{1}{2}$  cup grated Parmesan cheese (or more)

Sprinkle salt into a wide frying pan over medium-high heat. Crumble meat into pan and cook, stirring often, until meat begins to brown (3 to 5 minutes).

Reduce heat to medium, stir in onion, and continue to cook, stirring, until onion is soft but not brown (about 5 minutes). Spoon off and discard excess fat.

Add garlic, tomatoes (break up with wooden spoon) and their liquid, bouillon cube, water or broth, oregano, and pepper. Bring mixture to a boil, then stir in pasta. Reduce heat, cover, and boil gently, stirring once or twice, until pasta is just tender to bite (10 to 12 minutes; or time according to package directions).

Meanwhile, squeeze as much liquid as possible from spinach. Stir spinach into pasta mixture just until heated through. Serve with cheese to add to taste.



## Skillet Tamale Pie

2 tablespoons vegetable oil  
1 onion, minced  
2 tablespoons chili powder  
Salt and ground black pepper  
2 garlic cloves, minced  
1 pound lean ground beef or turkey  
1 or 2 cans black beans, rinsed  
1 (14.5 oz) diced tomatoes, drained  
1 (6.5 to 8.5 ounce) package cornbread mix and needed

## ingredients

1 cup shredded cheddar cheese

2 tablespoons minced fresh cilantro

Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 450 degrees.

Heat oil in 12-inch skillet over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion, chili powder, and  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon salt and cook until onion is softened, about 5 minutes. Stir in garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds.

Stir in ground beef, beans, and tomatoes, and bring to simmer, breaking up meat with wooden spoon, about 5 minutes.

Meanwhile, mix cornbread batter according to package instructions.

Stir cheddar and cilantro into filling and season with salt and pepper to taste. Dollop cornbread batter evenly over filling and spread into even layer.

Bake until cornbread is cooked through in center, 10 to 15 minutes.

*from America's Test Kitchen, The Best 30 minute Recipes*



## Skillet Lasagna

1 pound ground beef, pork, turkey

2 garlic cloves, minced

$\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon red pepper flakes

Salt and ground black pepper

6 ounces curly-edged lasagna noodles (8 noodles), broken into 2-inch pieces

1 (26 ounce) jar tomato sauce, such as marinara

1 to 2 cups water

$\frac{1}{2}$  cup mozzarella cheese, shredded

$\frac{1}{4}$  cup grated Parmesan cheese

$\frac{3}{4}$  cup whole-milk ricotta cheese

$\frac{1}{4}$  cup minced fresh basil

Cook meat in 12-inch nonstick skillet over high heat, breaking it into pieces with wooden spoon for 5 minutes. Drain meat and returning to skillet. Stir in garlic, pepper flakes, and  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon salt and cook over medium-high heat until fragrant, about 30 seconds.

Pour tomato sauce and water in skillet and bring to boil.

Sprinkle noodles into skillet. Cover and cook, stirring often and adjusting heat as needed to maintain a vigorous simmer, until noodles are tender, 15 to 20 minutes.

Off heat, stir in half of mozzarella and half of Parmesan. Season with salt and pepper. Dot heaping tablespoons of ricotta over noodles, then sprinkle with remaining mozzarella and Parmesan. Cover and let stand off heat until cheeses melt, 3 to 5 minutes. Sprinkle with basil before serving.

*from America's Test Kitchen, The Best 30 minute Recipes*



## **Peruvian Quinoa and Corn Chowder**

1 tablespoon olive oil

1 medium red onion, finely chopped

$\frac{1}{4}$  cup aji amarillo paste

3 tablespoons fresh, or 1 tablespoon dried, oregano

Salt and ground black pepper

8 ounces sweet potato, peeled and cut in  $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces (1 $\frac{1}{2}$  cups)

1 $\frac{1}{2}$  to 2 cups corn kernels

$\frac{3}{4}$  cups quinoa, rinsed and drained  
5 cups chicken broth  
 $\frac{1}{3}$  cup heavy cream  
 $\frac{1}{3}$  lightly packed fresh mint, chopped  
Lime wedges, to serve

In a large Dutch oven over medium, heat the oil until shimmering. Add the onion and cook, stirring, until light golden brown, about 4 minutes. Add the aji amarillo paste, oregano, and salt and pepper to taste. Cook, stirring constantly, until fragrant, about 30 seconds.

Stir in the sweet potato, corn, quinoa and broth. Bring to a boil, then cover and reduce to medium-low. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the potatoes and quinoa are tender, 16 to 19 minutes. Taste and season with salt and pepper. Off heat, stir in the cream. Ladle into bowls, sprinkle with mint and serve with lime wedges.

From *Milk Street, Tuesday Morning*



## Skillet Strata with Cheddar and Thyme

- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 onion, minced
- Salt and ground black pepper
- 6 large eggs
- 1½ cups whole milk
- 1 teaspoon minced fresh thyme
- 1 cup shredded cheddar cheese
- 5 slices high-quality sandwich bread, cut into 1-inch squares

Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 425 degrees. Melt butter in 10-inch oven-safe nonstick skillet over medium-high heat, swirling to coat skillet, until foaming subsides. Add onion and ½ teaspoon salt and cook until onion is softened and lightly browned, about 6 minutes.

Meanwhile, in large bowl, whisk eggs, milk, thyme, and ¼ teaspoon pepper together, then stir in cheese; set aside.

Add bread to skillet and, using rubber spatula, carefully fold

bread into onion mixture until evenly coated. Cook bread, folding occasionally, until lightly toasted, about 3 minutes.

Off heat, fold in egg mixture until slightly thickened and well combined with bread. Gently press on top of strata to help it soak up egg mixture.

Bake until edges and center are puffed and edges have pulled away slightly from sides of pan, about 12 minutes.

*from America's Test Kitchen, The Best 30 minute Recipes*



## Candied Meyer Lemon Peels

- 3 organic Meyer lemons, rinsed and dried (you can use regular lemons too)
  - 2 1/2 cups sugar, divided
  - Semi-sweet chocolate (optional)
1. Cut lemons in half and juice. Using a sharp paring knife, remove flesh from skin and discard (leave white pith attached to peel). Slice peel into strips.
  2. Place strips into a saucepan and fill with water. Bring to a boil and simmer for a few minutes. Drain water and repeat two more times.
  3. After draining the last batch of water, place peels aside. Combine 2 cups of water and 2 cups of sugar in saucepan and bring to a boil. Stir until sugar has dissolved and reduce heat to medium-low. Add peel strips and cook, stirring occasionally, until soft and transparent, about 15-20 minutes. Drain (reserve liquid for other use – this lemon simple syrup can be used to sweeten drinks or desserts).

4. Pour remaining sugar in a bowl and toss strips until coated with sugar. Place coated strips onto a sheet of wax paper and let dry overnight (if you're impatient, you can dry it in a 200°F oven for an hour, checking frequently).
5. If you want to cover in chocolate: once peels feel dry to touch, dip in melted chocolate and let dry on wax paper.
6. Store in airtight container at room temperature.

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