

## LOCAL FLAVOR

### Expand how you enjoy chicken

Chicken is the most common type of poultry in the world and is a popular choice in nutritional cuisines across the globe. Choosing chicken for your meals is a healthy option



**BERNIE MASON**

because it is high in nutrients, including protein, B vitamins, iron and selenium, and is comparatively low in calories to other meats. Chicken can be prepared in

multiple ways, including stewing, roasting, in salads, in stir-fries, in soups, and in casseroles, just to name a few. Try the following recipes to expand your usual ways to enjoy chicken, which include a newer method plus an old classic. Just remember to follow proper food safety practices when handling raw chicken to avoid bacterial cross contamination.

If you have not made a spatchcocked chicken yet, it is time to try it. This is a method of splitting a whole chicken down the back using a kitchen shears or knife, and opening it up. Flattening the chicken exposes more of the meat to the oven's heat, so it cooks evenly and gets extra crispy. The meat is moist and you will have the best roast chicken ever. This recipe flavors the chicken with Tuscan dressing, but this method of preparation can also be done by rubbing the chicken with different kinds of herbs or other kinds of seasonings. A spatchcocked chicken can also be cooked on the grill.

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## LAST BEST PLATES



STELLA FONG

Co-owner Rhonda Harman serves up cheer and nostalgia at RaRa's Pizzeria and Sandwiches. Two bacon chicken sandwiches with waffle fries are readied for diners.

# RaRa's serves up a nostalgic atmosphere

Heading 10 miles outside of Billings is just far enough to build an appetite. My friend Susan Carlson and I drove east on Highway 312 on this cloudy day to come upon a red roofed building by the road, edging wintering fields of corn.

Once inside RaRa's Pizzeria and Sandwiches, owner Rhonda Harman welcomes us with a shining smile while directing us to a table by the window. We walk around the large counter anchoring the room, pass seating by a fireplace and several

booths with diners.

As I slide into the red upholstered bench seat, I steady myself on the edge of the black dining table as I study the Betty Boop collectibles on the corner wall. Across the room, above the entryway, I spy the shelves of the neatly arranged collection of model cars. My eyes train on the American Graf-



**STELLA FONG**

fiti poster over the fireplace as Harman eases over with menus.

The black and white checkered edge of the laminated menu with drawings of 1950s convertibles offer pizzas on one side and appetizers, sandwiches and salads on the other. While Susan orders the grilled chicken salad, I decide on the twelve inch Canadian and kraut pizza.

Rhonda and her husband Monte opened RaRa's Pizzeria and Sandwiches on Nov. 28, 2013. Harman admits, "I love the food industry." With

hours and experience clocked in from working since she was 17 years old at establishments such as Steiner's Kit Kat diner in Worden, Town and Country Lounge, Lanes and Cafe, and The Flying J Truck Stop where she did the ordering and inventory, opening a restaurant with her husband was her destiny.

With the previous coffee shop business shutting down, she says, "The business fell into our hands." In securing a SBA loan,

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## FLASH IN THE PAN!

# Plant peas to keep a finger on pulse of a garden

Gardening is a conversation with the earth. The gardener does something, and the earth responds via the outcome. If you plant a tomato seedling upside down, for example, the earth will happily swallow it, thereby ending the discussion.

A new dialog starts every time the gardener sows a seed or does anything to disrupt the status quo, even something as mundane as digging up last year's beds. Like any language, a garden dialectic grows to reflect the landscape, complete with regional variations. When I lived in the New Mexico hills, a seasoned farmer told me to begin planting when the lilacs leafed out. That advice

saved me a lengthy conversation with the earth. Farmers, unlike most gardeners, do this stuff all day and are fluent in these things.

Up here in Montana, some farmer friends of mine begin the annual conversation with a handful of peas. It goes like this: As soon as the soil thaws, you plant some peas. You don't have to soak the peas overnight first, like I usually do when I plant for real in order to jumpstart the germination process. Just plant the peas and see how the earth responds. They may sit there for a week or two, but when they finally sprout is when you plant your peas for real.

Planting that first handful of peas in a bare, brown field can be a lonely experience. It's the



SEYLON CHEN, WITH PERMISSION VIA FLICKR

Please see LEVAUX, Page C2 Pea greens grow fast and are high in protein and vitamins A and C.

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## Mason From C1

### Zesty Roasted Chicken and Potatoes

For another version of a simple way to prepare a roast chicken, you might want to try this method which uses a combination of mayonnaise, mustard, and garlic to coat the chicken and lend flavor to it as it bakes. Potatoes bake along with the chicken in the same pan.

(Servings: 6)

#### Ingredients

- 6 boneless, skinless chicken breasts (about 1 ½ lb.)
- 1 pound small red potatoes, cut into fourths
- ½ cup mayonnaise or salad dressing
- 3 tablespoons Dijon mustard
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- 2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- Chopped chives, if desired

#### Directions

Heat oven to 350 degrees. Spray a 15 x 10 x 1-inch pan with cooking spray. Place chicken and potatoes in pan. In small bowl combine mayonnaise, mustard, black pepper and garlic; brush over chicken and potatoes. Bake uncovered 30 to 35 minutes or until potatoes are done and chicken has reached a temperature of 165 degrees internally. Sprinkle with chives. \*If you wish to reduce calories, low-fat mayonnaise may be used.

— Source: “Betty Crocker — So Simple”.

### Chicken Cacciatore

Years ago I began preparing this recipe for chicken, which is a popular Italian classic. It can be served as a company dish for entertaining or for a family dinner. Serve it with a tossed salad and garlic bread and your guests or family will enjoy this Italian-inspired dinner. If you wish you can prepare it using all thighs or breasts of the chicken.

(Servings: 4)

#### Ingredients

- 1 (2 ½–3-pound) broiler-fryer chicken, cut up
- ¼ cup vegetable or canola oil
- 1 large onion, cut in ¼-inch slices
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 medium green pepper, diced
- 1 (1-pound) can tomatoes
- 1 (8-oz.) can tomato sauce
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano or basil, crushed
- ½ teaspoon celery seed
- 1 or 2 bay leaves
- ¼ cup white wine

#### Directions

In a large skillet, over medium-high heat, cook the chicken, a few pieces at time, until browned on all sides; set aside. In drippings in skillet over medium heat, cook onion, green pepper and garlic, stirring occasionally, until vegetables are almost tender, about 5 minutes. Return chicken to skillet. Combine tomatoes, tomato sauce, salt, pepper, oregano or basil, celery seed and bay leaves. Pour mixture over chicken. Cover and simmer 30 minutes. Uncover and stir in wine. Continue to cook chicken uncovered for 15 minutes longer, or until chicken is tender; turn occasionally. Remove bay leaves; skim off any excess fat. Serve chicken over hot noodles or spaghetti and sprinkle with shredded Parmesan cheese.

— Source: “Better Homes and Gardens, Favorite Ways with Chicken, Turkey, Duck and Game Birds”, Better Homes and Gardens Books.

Bernie Mason writes the Local Flavor column for Lee Montana Newspapers.

She was a Yellowstone County extension agent for 24 years. Mason grew up in Sidney in a family of German and Danish ancestry.



BERNIE MASON

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### Spatchcocked Roast Chicken with Dressing

(Servings: 8)

#### Ingredients

- 1 sweet potato (½ lb.), peeled, cut into ½-inch pieces
- 2 stalks celery, cut into ½-inch thick slices
- ½ cup Kraft Tuscan House Italian Dressing, divided
- 1 whole chicken (4 lb.)
- 4 cups ciabatta bread cubes (½-inch)
- ½ cup coarsely chopped pecans (if desired)
- ½ cup dried cranberries (if desired)

#### Directions

Heat oven to 425 degrees. Place sweet potato and celery in a bowl; toss vegetables with 2 tablespoons dressing; set aside. Use kitchen shears or sharp knife to spatchcock the chicken. To do this, place the chicken breast-side down on a cutting board. Cut along one side of the backbone and then cut along the other side of the backbone to remove it. Discard the backbone or add it later to stock. Turn the chicken breast-side up and press down firmly with both hands to flatten it. If necessary, make a small cut along the sternum of the breast from the backside to make it easier to flatten. Open the chicken butterfly-style; place skin side up (breast side) on work surface. Brush half of the remaining dressing evenly onto chicken, then brush the remaining dressing under the chicken skin. Cover large baking sheet with foil; spray foil with cooking spray. Place bread cubes in single layer on center of the baking sheet. Place chicken, breast side down, on bread. (The bread cubes will be flavored with the juices of the chicken.) Spoon vegetables around chicken. Roast 30 minutes. Carefully turn chicken over. Stir vegetables. Roast an additional 30 minutes or until chicken is done (165 degrees). Remove from oven. Let stand for 10 minutes. Transfer chicken to cutting board; cut into pieces. Spoon bread mixture onto platter; if desired, stir in nuts and cranberries. Top with chicken.

— Source: “My Food and Family”, by Kraft Heinz, Festive 2020.

## Plates From C1

From C1

Rhonda wrote a business plan and researched the best location. With her husband and two boys, they surveyed the community as to what was wanted and needed. As for the name of the restaurant, Rhonda used her CB handler name, “RaRa” from her 8 1/2 years working at the Flying J Truck Stop.

Attending high school in Huntley and Shepherd, she and her husband Monte had known each other since childhood, but didn’t start dating until both were in their 20s. “In 1992, I had to have my wisdom teeth pulled out,” she shares, “He brought me a Betty Boop watch.” Ever since, Rhonda has been enamored with this characterization of a 1920s flapper.

“My husband has always been into cars,” Rhonda says. Since 2015, except during the COVID pandemic, on Wednesday nights at 5 p.m. from May 26 to Aug. 29, RaRa’s Pizzeria and Sandwiches gathers classic cars from all around. “For those in the know, you have to get here between 4 to 4:30 p.m. if you want to eat.”

My Canadian and kraut pizza arrives on an aluminum pan with a of couple potholders underneath. This is the ultimate gooey-oey pizza with Monte’s house-made crust recipe. The sauerkraut melds with the savory pizza sauce and Canadian bacon. Upon first bite, the sauce oozes out as the mozzarella cheese stretches into numerous strands.

Susan’s grilled chicken salad comes mounded with chopped greens, shredded cheese, diced onions, tomatoes, cucumbers and egg. She brought her own dressing and opted out of the croutons, but she shares, “There is a generous serving of grilled chicken in this salad and the greens are fresh.”

Brandy Newman who just moved to the area from Melstone was having lunch with her daughter Chelsea Vohs. They ordered the most popular item



STELLA FONG PHOTOS

The loaded meat pizza and crispy chicken salad on a bed of lettuce topped with breaded chicken strips, onions, tomatoes, bacon and egg are hearty menu offerings at RaRa’s Pizzeria and Sandwiches.



**LEFT:** Family and friends bring nostalgia and neighborhood to RaRa’s Pizzeria and Sandwiches. From left to right, Rhonda Harman, Nolan Harman, Nick Harman, Kim Duggan and Alex Duggan, who once waited tables when he was 16. **RIGHT:** The bacon chicken sandwich, with a breaded chicken patty served on a hamburger bun with bacon and choice of cheese, is one of the popular items on the menu at RaRa’s Pizzeria and Sandwiches.

on the menu, the bacon chicken sandwich, with a breaded chicken patty. Newman says, “The sandwich is delicious. It’s fresh and hot.”

While sons Nolan and Nick work in the kitchen, husband

Monte helps out early in the mornings before he heads to his job at Pryor Creek Golf Course. Kim Duggan, married to Monte’s childhood friend, has been working at RaRa’s for the last three years. Rhonda says,

“What I love is when people know someone in the restaurant.”

“When you crave pizza and want a taste of nostalgia, head up the road to RaRa’s Pizzeria and Sandwiches.

## LeVaux

From C1

feeling of being slightly early to the party, a feeling top gardeners know well. But you and your plants don’t want to be too early, or they might get nipped by a late frost. Or too late, on the other hand, because then you will spend the rest of the season playing catch-up. Late planted peas in particular won’t reach pod-bearing age before they wilt in the heat of summer. By planting a test handful of peas, you dial in the timing for the whole garden. When that first handful sprouts, it’s game on. Soak the rest of your peas, and start building a trellis. Maybe plant some spinach too, which grows happily at the foot of pea stalks.

The pea pods themselves are not the only reason to grow peas. Many of the vendors at my local market sell pea shoots by the bunch throughout the season. They add crunch to salads, complexity to instant ramen, and cute curls when wilted atop anything hot. In a stir-fry, which is my favorite way to eat them, those pea shoots are delicate and savory. And unlike the peas grown for their pods which can only be planted during that tight spring window in time, it’s never too late to plant pea shoots.

Altogether, you could do worse than to go all-in on peas, right about now. Grow them for peas, grow them for greens, and grow them to keep your finger on the pulse of the garden.

### How to grow pea greens

Pea greens grow fast and are high in protein and vitamins A and C. It’s definitely worth planting more peas than you think you’ll need, just to have a little crop of these delicious sprouts. Rather than paying a lot of money for a little envelope of dried peas, if I can I’ll instead pick up some dried cooking peas in the bulk bins of my local grocery store. They sprout just fine — just remember to eat them for the greens, and not to expect any sweet peas. When I do order pea seeds, I buy the largest envelope I can find.

Begin by soaking the pea seeds for about 24 hours. They should swell and turn a little green, and start to look a little bit alive.

Work your pea spot, or arrange a container that drains, filled with potting soil. Make sure the soil is perfectly moist.

Sow peas in a dense layer, so thick that they almost touch but none atop another. Cover the peas in another layer of soil, compost or potting mix. Water again. For the next few weeks, keep the soil moist but not swampy.

When they are about 4 inches tall — about three weeks — your pea greens are ready for harvest. They will be tender to about eight inches tall.

### Qing Chao Pea Sprouts (spinach)

This recipe comes from Budai, my favorite Taiwanese and Chinese restaurant in Albuquerque, from my time in those New Mexican hills.

(2 servings)

#### Ingredients

- 1 tablespoon peanut oil
- 1 teaspoon toasted sesame oil
- 1 teaspoon Sichuan peppercorns (or substitute one clove minced garlic)
- 1 pound chopped pea shoots, including leaves, stems and curly-cues
- ½ cup broth (chicken or clam)
- ½ cup rice wine
- ½ teaspoon white pepper
- Salt to taste

#### Directions

Heat the oil on high in a wok or heavy pan. Add the Sichuan peppercorns and stir-fry for 30 seconds. Add the pea greens, broth and wine, in that order. Stir it around quickly, cooking everything evenly. Add the white pepper. Stir fry 1 minute at high heat, so the sauce starts to thicken but doesn’t completely evaporate. Season with salt and serve.

Ari LeVaux writes Flash in the Pan, a syndicated weekly food column carried in more than 60 newspapers nationwide. Though his audience is national, he says he “always writes about Montana. Usually.”