

Barbara Quinn
On Nutrition



LOWERING RISK OF BREAST CANCER

I drove to a conference with three of my friends last week. And it took all four of us to decide where to eat breakfast the next morning. Amanda thought we should turn right. Michael saw an interesting place straight ahead. I thought we should make a U-turn and go back where we came from. And Chris just smiled patiently.

We women are different from men. We make decisions . . . in unison. And our health concerns are often different. For example, although heart disease is the main cause of death in men and women in this country, breast cancer kills more women in the United States than any other

type of cancer.

How many women does it take to lower our risk for developing breast cancer? All of us. Here are some choices we can make based on current research:

► Eat more fruits and vegetables.

The American Cancer Society recommends we eat at least five servings (3 or more cups) of fruits and vegetables every day. Plant foods contain substances that actively protect cells from damage that can lead to the growth of cancer cells.

Cruciferous vegetables — those with crosslike stems such as broccoli, cauliflower, brussels sprouts and cabbage — contain particularly potent cancer fighters.

I gently reminded our foursome of this fact when we ordered our dinner one evening. "She's a dietitian," my friend explained to the waitress, who smiled sympathetically.

► Choose to eat less fat. Watch those breakfast scones, ladies. Although studies have not been clear on the effect of fat intake and breast cancer incidence, diets high in fat are usually high in calories that can lead to weight gain. And putting on too many pounds — especially after menopause — is strongly associated with an increased risk for breast cancer.

► Find ways to be more active. Evidence is growing, says the American Cancer Society, that physical exercise reduces breast cancer risk. We complied with this as we searched for parking at the conference. Amanda insisted the lot across the street was way too expensive. Michael patiently drove around and around as we discussed the matter. Chris jumped out of the car periodically to assess potential parking spots. And I finally acknowledged as we jaunted several blocks to our destination that, yes, it felt good to walk.

► Drink less alcohol or don't drink at all. According to the American Cancer Society, "use of alcohol is clearly linked to an increased risk of developing breast cancer. Compared with nondrinkers, women who consume one alcoholic drink a day have a very small increase in risk." And the risk goes up from there. (Remember, one "drink" is 5 ounces of wine, 12 ounces of beer or 1 ounce of liquor.)

► What about soy? Like four women trying to decide the best route to drive home, no definitive conclusions have been drawn about the relationship between soy intake and breast cancer risk. There seems to be more of a benefit in women who have consumed soy foods from a young age — such as women in Asian countries — rather than those who begin to eat more soy products after menopause.

► Enjoy your coffee. Thank heaven, caffeine does not appear to increase the risk for breast cancer.

Together we can do this. Thanks for the good time, dear friends.

Barbara Quinn is a registered dietitian at the Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula. E-mail her at bquinn@chomp.org.

Monterey County
Taste

www.montereyherald.com



With rum and beer as trade, a fresh catch of fish helps feed the scientific team.



A small pig roasts for hours on a spit, traditional style, over a charcoal fire.



Flamingos walk the Caribbean shore; mother crocodiles are nearby, waiting to come ashore at night to tend their nests.

By **MARIE PERUCCA-RAMIREZ** and **JULIO RAMIREZ**
Herald Correspondents

One way to experience rural life in Cuba is to volunteer to work on a crocodile research project in an isolated area of mangrove swamps.

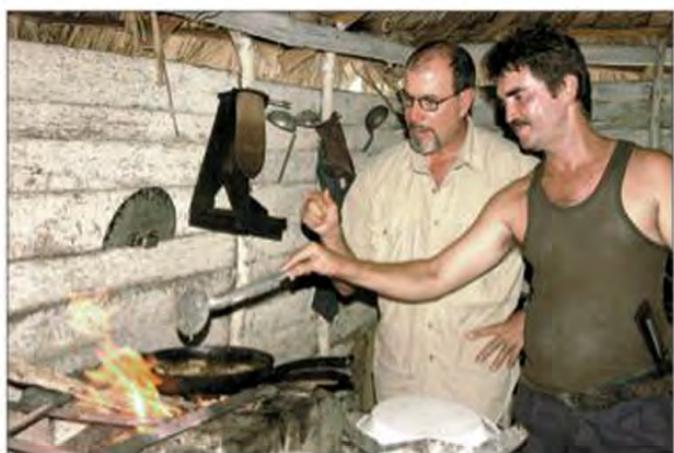
Away from Old Havana, the country cuisine of Cuba is rich with starches, vegetables, fish and the occasional delicacy of roasted whole pig

A bit extreme, granted, but it allows access to a part of this isolated country not widely written about.

Traveling from Havana with our team, three Cuban scientists and four fellow volunteers, the 12-hour journey to the research station takes us through the Cuban countryside, past fields of sugarcane and rice, groves of bananas and small herds of goats and cebu cattle.

When the road becomes impassable for our vehicle, we are collected by a tractor pulling an empty sugar cane cart. Tossing our duffle bags into the cart, we clamber aboard and, gripping the sides for balance, we jostle and bump down the muddy, potholed road for more than an hour until we

reach the edge of a swamp. Boarding the small motorboats that have come for us, we continue our journey to the coast. The brackish green water mirrors the overhanging mangrove trees as we gently motor through the curving waterway; started birds,



Julio Ramirez, left, observes camp cook Manresa frying fish over a wood fire at the research station.

humming and pulsing insects and connected only by sporadic radio communication to the outside world. The research team is anchored by six campesinos from a nearby village who work at this camp. In charge of cooking, repairing equipment and assisting the scientists with the boats, trip cameras, night expeditions and crocodile captures, these men offer a window into life in rural Cuba.

The heat at the station is intense — sweat even drips from our eyebrows and fingertips. Hosts of mosquitoes greet us at dawn and tuck us into our mosquito nets at night. Mornings we are awakened by the sound of diving pelicans splashing as they hit the water in the estuary. Everyone savors the freshness of the new day along with their strong sweet café Cubano — just a brief respite before the relentless escalation of heat and humidity begins — then we take the small boats out to the crocodiles' nesting beaches.

Thumping on the nests buried in the sand, we listen for any tiny "yippling" responses from the baby crocs signaling that they are ready to hatch. If we hear cries, we dig out the nest and help the crocs emerge from their shells. Then we weigh, measure and sex the hatchlings, notch one of their tail scales, attach a toe tag and record the data.

The mother crocodiles are hovering right offshore and, though we've read about crocodile behavior, we are awed to see photos of them taken at night by the trip cameras, faithfully coming ashore to check on their nests: listening for their babies'



A newly hatched crocodile, the focus of the research project.

feeding by the shore, rise up as we pass egrets, herons, roseate spoonbills and flamingoes.

The research station sits on a spit of beach where the Rio Jobabo enters the Caribbean: a site cocooned by balmy sea air, shimmering in blinding sunlight, surrounded by squadrons of

Please see **Cubana** page D5

Coming in Go!

Monterey Music Summit
The first-year event is billed as a gathering of music, minds and merriment



Good to know

What's cooking?



Quick fix

Kerala Jewish fish with green herbs and spices
(Serves 2)

- 1 large lemon
- 1-inch piece ginger root
- 2 sprigs mint
- 1 T. cilantro leaves, plus 4 or 5 cilantro root ends, crushed (optional)
- 1 to 3 small green chili peppers, stemmed and seeded
- 2 to 4 cardamom pods
- 1 to 2 tsp. coriander seeds
- 1 to 2 tsp. cumin seeds
- 1 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- 3 to 4 pearl onions
- 1 tsp. cubeb peppercorns (optional)
- One ½-lb. or two ¼-lb. firm fish, such as trout or mullet, cleaned, boned, rinsed and patted dry
- Salt
- Canola oil, for drizzling

Steps: Wash the lemon; finely grate 1 tsp. of zest and squeeze at least 3 T. of juice; add to the bowl of a mortar and pestle or to the bowl of a mini food processor. Grate 1 tsp. of ginger and add. Finely chop 1 tsp. of mint leaves, 1 T. of cilantro leaves and 4 or 5 cilantro roots, if using; add to the bowl. Finely chop the chili peppers and add to the bowl, to taste. Add the cardamom, coriander, cumin, black pepper, pearl onions and cubeb peppercorns, if using; crush to achieve a coarse consistency. Cut the fish open so it lies flat. Rub the fish with the spice mixture, season with salt to taste and drizzle lightly with oil. Position the top oven rack 4 to 5 inches from the heating element and preheat the broiler. Have ready a roasting pan with a flat rack inside. Place the fish skin side down on the pan rack and broil for 6 to 8 minutes or until just cooked through; the herb mixture may be slightly charred. Transfer to plates and serve immediately.

— Adapted from Andreas Vestad's "Where Flavor Was Born: Recipes and Culinary Travels Along the Indian Ocean Spice Route" (Chronicle, 2007).

On the shelf

Thirsty for more
Ready to kick the soda habit? We like these two zero- to low-calorie beverages that contain no artificial sweeteners.



IZZEesque, sparkling water blended with fruit juice, has 60 calories per 8-ounce bottle in Mandarin orange, black raspberry and lemon-lime. A four-pack is \$5.40-\$7 at Whole Foods Markets. O Water's regular and infused flavors have 0 to 60 calories, respectively, per 16-ounce bottle. The infused waters also are fortified with some vitamins and minerals. They're about \$1.40 each in several flavors at various grocers and markets.

Tips

You can make it
Greek-style (that is, strained) yogurt is rich and thick, and the perfect substitute for sour cream in dips and sauces. If you can't find it in your store, strain whole-milk yogurt in a coffee filter or cheesecloth over a bowl overnight; discard the watery liquid in the bowl — the yogurt that remains is fantastic in marinades too, or simply eaten straight drizzled with honey.

All about wine

Our online wine expert George Edwards of WineMarket in Pacific Grove writes about pairing wines with shrimp dishes. Read Edwards' columns or ask him a wine-related question of your own. Go to www.montereyherald.com, click on columnists and find "All About Wine."



TASTE

With no refrigeration, the cooks use cured chorizo and canned sardines and meats and rely heavily on the Cuban staples of rice and beans, yuca, malanga, potatoes and sweet potatoes.

Cubana

From page D1

calls, helping them dig out, and then gently carrying the hatchlings in their mouths to the safety of the swamp.

The swamp has its dangers. We quickly learn to avoid the spines from the cactus growing on the beaches, to dodge the thorny bushes that can take out an eye, to avoid certain insects and snakes, and to use care in handling the baby crocodiles (yes, they bite!).

One morning, working alone in shallow water offshore, Julio finds that he can't pick up his feet and he can't extract his feet from his shoes: he's firmly stuck in quicksand — and sinking. Struggling to move his feet, he loses balance and winds up in a sitting position in the muddy water. His hips firmly caught, he's being sucked down. This is not like in the movies: it's not "quick" sand — the process is slow, but it's continuous. Using machetes, the team members cut tree branches and venture out as close to Julio as they can. Extending the branches until Julio can grab a hold, the men are able to pull him out.

Our meals are prepared over an open fire in a thatched-roofed patio. With no refrigeration, the cooks use cured chorizo and canned sardines and meats and rely heavily on the Cuban staples of rice and beans, yuca, malanga, potatoes and sweet potatoes. These starches are supplemented by cucumbers, carrots, onions, avocados, pineapples and mangoes. Visits from local fishermen — in boats reminiscent of the "African Queen" — are especially welcome; they come to the station to trade their fresh fish for our stash of rum and beer. Thanks to these fishermen, we enjoy whole deep-fried *liseta* and *mojara*.

One night, talk turns to traditional Cuban food and the scientists share their favorite family recipes with us. The camp cooks, Coco and Manresa, understanding our interest, bring Julio and me out back where a small pig is being fattened up in a thatched-roof pen. They tell us this is the perfect occasion to enjoy the pig: We will cook it in the traditional style and have a feast.

This is an all-day project, as it is in villages in many parts of the world. Directed by Coco, the pig is killed, shaved, bled (the blood saved for sausages) and gutted. A spit is constructed of long branches, a fire pit dug, wood chopped and a fire started to reduce the logs to glowing coals. A small shelter of sacks and sticks is erected to ward off the sun as everyone takes turns cranking the spit. We turn that spit for four hours while the pig goes from white to a golden, roasted brown, its skin crackling and juices running down. It's so good we eat it with our hands, served with *mojo de yuca*, rice and beans.

When they see how much everyone appreciates the pig, the cooks decide to get a goat. In Cuba, meat is a scarce commodity; we are humbled by the generosity of these villagers who want to share this



MARIE PERUCCA-RAMIREZ/Special to The Herald

A fisherman on the dock cleans his catch; the fish will be deep-fried and served with a mojo of sautéed garlic, chile and a splash of vinegar.

wealth with us — and who take delight in our delight. The next week we are treated to a succulent, flavorful stew made from machete-chopped goat simmered with onions, garlic, mildly hot Cuban red peppers, tomatoes and beer.

Leaving the project for Havana as torrential rains begin, we carry with us the memory of that pig turning on the spit, a symbol of the warmth and generosity of the Cubans who shared their knowledge, traditions — and food — with us.

Ajiaco (Cuban Criollo Stew)

(Serves 12)

This hearty one-pot meal makes a great fall or winter buffet dish, perfect for a Sunday football get-together. Make it ahead — it tastes better every time it's reheated. Ajiaco reflects the varied heritage of Cuba. The native root vegetables and corn, the plantains from Africa, and the meats, olive oil and bay leaf from Spain all combine to make a dish enjoyed all over Cuba.

2½-lb. chicken, cut into pieces (cut each leg in two; thigh in two, and each breast into three pieces)

¼ lbs. pork chops cut into bite-sized pieces, leave the bone on
¼ lbs. skirt steak cut into bite-sized pieces
½ lb. bacon, cut into bite-sized pieces
2 qts. water
1 onion, diced (about 1¼ cups)
3 T. minced garlic
1 green bell pepper, diced
1 red bell pepper, diced
3 serrano chiles, minced
1 can diced tomatoes (14-oz. size), with juice

2 bay leaves
1 T. mild paprika
1 tsp. cumin

Cooking hint: Start the pot and prep the vegetables below while the meat is simmering; hold the potato, roots and plantain in cold water to prevent discoloration

½ lb. potato, peeled and cut into bite size pieces

¾ lb. sweet potato (boniato),* peeled and cut into bite size pieces
¾ lb. yams, peeled and cut into bite size pieces

¾ lb. malanga or taro root (optional),* peeled and cut into bite size pieces

¾ lb. yuca (cassava),* peeled and cut into bite size pieces

1 green plantain (cooking banana), sliced into ¼-inch rounds

¾ lb. pumpkin or squash, peeled and cut into bite size pieces

2 ears of corn: cut into 2-inch wheels.

2½ qts. chicken stock (homemade or use "boxed" broth)

3 T. salt
1 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
6 T. olive oil

4 T. freshly squeezed lime juice
2 avocados, sliced, for garnish
2 cups *salsa fresca*, for garnish (see recipe below)

Steps: In a large 16-qt. pot, put the chicken, pork, beef, bacon and water; add the onion, garlic, bell peppers, chiles, tomatoes, bay leaves, paprika and cumin. Bring to a boil over medium heat; reduce heat to medium low and cook for 1 hour.

Add the potatoes, yams, malanga, yuca, plantain, squash, corn, chicken stock, salt and pepper, raise heat to medium; when pot comes to boil, reduce heat to medium low and cook until the vegetables are tender, about 1 hour. Remove from heat. Degrease the soup; add the olive oil and lime juice; stir.

Serve Ajiaco in individual bowls, garnished with two avocado slices and 2 T. of *salsa fresca*; accompany with hot tortillas or a loaf of warm French bread.

Note: *Yuca, malanga, plantains and yams can be found at many supermarkets and in Latin and Asian markets such as Mi Tierra in Seaside and Mi Pueblo in Salinas.

Salsa fresca

(Makes 3 cups)

Fresh salsa adds a great flavor complement to steaks, egg dishes, soups, beans, tacos and pastas.

2 cups diced tomatoes
½ cup diced onions
¼ bunch cilantro, chopped
2 serrano chiles, minced

2 T. freshly squeezed lime juice
1 tsp. salt
½ tsp. black pepper
½ cup diced jicama (optional)

Steps: Mix ingredients well. Refrigerate, covered, in a noncorrosive container, for up to one week.

Cuban-style coconut rice pudding

(Serves 6)

Rice pudding is a versatile dessert: a casual "comfort food" — or dress it up and serve it topped with a dollop of whipped cream, a curl of lemon zest and a sprinkle of cinnamon.

1 cup Arborio rice
5 cups water
1 tsp. salt
1 14-oz. can sweetened condensed milk
1 12-oz. can evaporated milk
1 13.5-oz. can coconut milk
1 vanilla bean, split
1 stick cinnamon, crushed (about ½ T.)

2 tsp. lemon zest (yellow "skin" of about one lemon)

Optional to garnish:

Whipped cream
Cinnamon

Steps: Bring water and salt to boil in a medium saucepan. Add the rice. Simmer until tender and the grains are split, 20 to 25 minutes. Drain.

Transfer the drained rice to a medium saucepan; add the remaining ingredients. Cook over low heat, stirring frequently, until the rice mixture is thick, 25 to 30 minutes. Remove the mixture from the heat. Pick out the larger pieces of cinnamon; discard. Remove the vanilla bean; scrape out the inside of the bean; return interior to the pudding; discard the skin; mix well.

Divide the mixture among eight individual serving dishes; serve warm or refrigerate until chilled. Serve topped with whipped cream, and/or a sprinkling of cinnamon (if desired).

Pollo a la piña

(Cuban pineapple chicken)

(Serves 4)

This delicious chicken has a bit of a kick from the chiles, but it's balanced by the sweet and savory pineapple purée.

1 fresh ripe pineapple, peeled
2 tsp. chopped garlic
2 serrano chiles, chopped
½ tsp. salt
5 T. sugar
3 T. rice vinegar
¾-lb. chicken, washed, dried, skin removed, and cut into eight pieces

1 T. olive oil

Steps: Take five thin slices off the bottom of the peeled pineapple; set aside. Core and discard the center of the pineapple; chop the fruit. Put the fruit, garlic, chiles, salt, sugar and vinegar into a blender and purée for 2 minutes. This will yield about 2½ cups of liquid. Put the chicken in a plastic bag and cover with ½ cup of the pineapple purée; marinate for 45 minutes to an hour. Note: pineapple is a tenderizer; it will change the texture of the chicken a bit.

Put the remaining two cups of pineapple purée in a small sauce pan; cook it over medium heat for 15 to 25 minutes until it is reduced to about half and is the consistency of a thick syrup. Put the oil in a large Pyrex baking pan, coating the bottom of the pan; arrange the pineapple slices on the bottom of the pan; place the marinated chicken pieces over the pineapple slices, pour the pineapple reduction over the chicken and bake in a 325-degree, preheated oven for 1 hour. Broil for 5 minutes more to give the chicken a rich color. Remove from oven, baste with pan juices, and let rest for 5 minutes.

Place chicken in serving platter; degrease the pan juices; serve hot accompanied by rice.

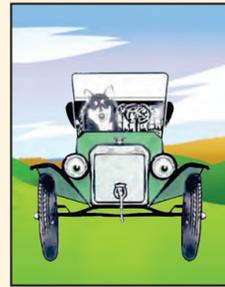
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