Guide to Cafeteria Cooking Makes Lobdell Fun

Column by Bill Jackson

We're a few weeks into the term, and ARA food is getting to be a bit bland. Luckily, there is relief on the way.

MIT employee Lynn Harris has co-authored a new book called Tray Gourmet: Be Your Own Chef In The College Cafeteria. Harris, who works in the former Undergraduate Education Office, co-wrote the book with two of her friends from Yale, Larry Berger and illustrator Chris Kalb.

Harris told me that her fascination with cafeteria cooking began during her sophomore year at Yale. At first, she says, "I was just fooling around, experimenting, but some people were asking, 'Hey Lynn, could you make me that banana thing?' " Soon Harris was getting notice for her special cafeteria food, from Fettucine Alfredo to Cheese Fondue.

The resulting cookbook is designed to help college students use the food in their cafeteria to make a variety of interesting dishes. Many of the dishes sound great, and the book is presented with a sense of humor. For example, "Cliff's Oates," a parody on the famous cereal while maintaining the "Cliffs" style. "Chinese Peanut Pasta." "God save me!"

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As I combined the ingredients, I checked the progress on the other team members. Mr. Hersch had Mr. Rizzo cornered, demanding "Two soupspoons." "It says 'Two soupspoons.' " Mr. Rizzo, nodding in semi-disbelief: "Sure." He poured some basil leaves into a cup.

"Now," I asked, "I need just a pinch of garlic powder." I hope somebody at ARA gives this guy a bonus.

So I assembled a crack squad of Tech staffers to attack Lobdell with recipes. The team consisted of myself, fellow opinion editor Matthew H. Hersch '94, contributing editors Lois E. Eaton '92 and Deborah A. Levinson '91, and production staffer Chris Kalb.

"Chinese Peanut Pasta." "God save me!" exclaimed Margaret White, who was working the deli when Ms. Levinson approached looking for ingredients. Ms. White gave out a scoop of peanut butter. When Mr. Council showed her that the recipe he was working on, "Pa amb Tomaquet" (Bread with Tomato, a Catalan dish) required "6-inch length French Bread," Ms. White went to great pains to make sure the bread was exactly 6 inches long. Ms. Eaton seemed to be having little trouble with her team, the "Greek Week Burger," since the feta cheese and peppers required were on the salad bar.

Meanwhile, I came to the banana realization that although my pesto sauce was looking (and smelling) pretty good, Lobdell doesn't have english muffins after breakfast. I was forced to settle for different types of breads on which to spread the sauce. Meanwhile, Mr. Rizzo returned from the downstairs kitchen with a summer squash for Mr. Hersch — not quite a zucchini, but in the same family — and the satisfied columnist called off the tactical air strike he had been planning.

We went to the register. I gulped as I watched each of the five meals rang up, not to mention a couple of sodas and extras. The total bill for all of the above items? $11.75. Not bad. I think the unusual combinations confused the Lobdell pricing system.

And the results? Excellent. After sampling all of the dishes, the consensus was that Mr. Levinson's peanut pasta was the best, although the pesto sauce had its share of fans and the bread with tomato was excellent as well. The only limitation was that many of these dishes (including the bread with tomato) require a microwave. Because there isn't one in Lobdell, we used the maker in the Tech office to complete these recipes which needed heating. Perhaps these would work better in house dining halls where students could ask to use a microwave (or take them back to dorm kitchens with microwaves.)

Tray Gourmet is on sale now, although it may be hard to find due to high demand. The Coop is expecting to receive it any day now, and it should be available at the Harvard Book Store and other local bookstores. A portion of the authors' proceeds go to the Children's Defense Fund.

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Antinuthat to that son.