



SALLY JOHNSTON

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BIG-BATCH COOKING

THREE MOMS SOLVE THE DINNER DILEMMA WITH THEIR NEW COOKBOOK



SUPPLIED PHOTOS

Lorelei Thomas, left, Deanna Siemens and Joanne Smith have published *The Big Cook* cookbook for time-crunched families.

Simply super suppers

The dinner dilemma. Six o'clock stress. Evening meal madness.

Different terms, same problem: how to get a hot family supper on the table every day when you're a busy working parent with kids in after-school activities.

Now three resourceful moms with 11 school-aged children between them have come up with a solution, *The Big Cook* cookbook.

It describes the communal meal-making technique and 73 recipes that the women have tried and tested over a decade of juggling jobs and hockey practices.

Meals for months

"We get together for a day to prepare enough meals to keep us going for three or four months," said Lorelei

Thomas, who teaches high school math. Her cooking partners are Joanne Smith, a registered dietitian, and Deanna Siemens, a former nurse. All live in Medicine Hat, southern Alberta.

The friends assemble multiple amounts of about 25 recipes. The result is up to 200 ready-to-cook meals in a bag. Each feed four to six.

"It only takes a little longer to make eight meals of one recipe than it does to make one," explained Thomas.

The prepared meals, mostly popular standbys such as beef stew and sweet and sour pork, are sealed in plastic bags. The women divide the packages and take them home to be frozen. To serve, the meals are thawed and cooked in a slow cooker, oven, barbecued or stir fried.

"Because the ingredients

are not pre-cooked, we're getting a freshly-made meal every time," said Thomas.

The cost averages around \$10 per meal. Each recipe in the book has instructions to make one, four, six or eight meals.

Cooking with friends

The women suggest getting together with friends a week before doing a Big Cook to decide on recipes and to write a shopping list. The day before, grocery shopping and some preparations, such as chopping vegetables, should be done.

The recipes use only pantry staples and the women make no apologies for employing short-cuts such as onion soup mix in sauces.

"One of our pet peeves with recipe books was having in-

gredients that we had never heard of. We wanted to make *The Big Cook* a practical book for the typical mom," said Thomas.

She will never return to the old ordeal of preparing a meal every night.

"This morning before I left for work I popped one of our meals, a lazy man's lasagna, into my slow cooker. When I came home the house was filled with wonderful aromas," said Thomas.

The 116-page book has colour photographs of every recipe, wipeable pages and is coil-bound so that it lies flat when opened.

The book costs \$32.95 and is available at select bookstores across Canada and online at www.thebigcook.com.

sjohnston@edmsun.com



BARBECUE BEEF

(for 4 meals)

- 8 lbs (4 kg) beef stew meat, cut in bite-sized pieces
- 4 cups (1 litre) ketchup
- 1 cup (250 mL) water
- 4 pkgs onion soup mix
- 1 cup (250 mL) brown sugar
- 2 Tbsp. (30 mL) mustard
- 1 cup (250 mL) vinegar
- 8 cups (2 litres) celery
- 4 large zipper bags

Label bags. Place 2 lbs (1 kg) of stew meat into each zipper bag.

Combine remaining ingredients and stir until thoroughly mixed. Distribute evenly among all bags. Remove air, seal bags and freeze.

Method:
Slow cooker - 4 to 5 hours on high or 6 to 8 hours on low.
Oven - 1 1/2 hours covered at 350 F (180 C).

RICE IN A TRICE: Yes it's too salty, contains MSG and several ingredients we've never heard of (disodium inosinate anyone?), but we loved Zatarain's new rice pilaf mix. Just add a knob of butter and water and it's ready in minutes. The blend of rice and orzo, tiny pasta grains, lend a good nutty texture. It's a perfect side-dish for dinner in a hurry. Price about \$1.90 at major grocery stores. Zatarain's makes several other New Orleans-style rice mixes.



QUICK, QUICK SLOW: McCormick's new line of Club House slow cooker seasoning mixes are worth a spot on the pantry shelf. We tried the beef stew blend. We simply mixed it with water, added to the meat and veggies in the slow cooker, switched the pot on and walked away for eight hours. Verdict: tasty with an appealing pepperiness. Look also for the pot roast and BBQ pork seasoning mixes. Price about \$1.50.



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