



## The Cooking Diva

Of fritters, ceviche and a woman's right to cook

By Karina L. Arrue

**F**OOD BLOGGING IS A THRIVING ENTERPRISE THESE days; with over 48,000 blogs in the U.S. dedicated solely to culinary pursuits, these palatable web diaries are changing the way we relate to food. From popular blogs like *Chocolate and Zucchini* to *Gluten-free Girl* and *Smitten Kitchen*, there is bound to be a self-proclaimed foodie on the net, armed with the recipe needed to satisfy your precise hankering—say for an artichoke and goat cheese *mille-feuille*—at any given moment.

→ Their growing number leads me to believe that a small culinary miracle occurred when I stumbled upon the Cooking Diva a couple of months ago. I was looking for a recipe for *carimañolas*, a yuca fritter made in my father's homeland, when I first came across Chef Melissa De Leon's charming blog, and I

have been a regular visitor since. The 30-something Panama native drew me in with her knowledge of Latin American cuisine, which is a rarity on the Internet—especially in English—despite the food blog boom. While her perspective on cooking is exceedingly cosmopolitan, no doubt a product of

many years of living and traveling abroad, her voice is refreshingly warm and lacking the pretension often found in elevated culinary circles.

→ Aside from being an avid blogger, Chef Melissa wears many other hats. On any given day, she may be cooking up a storm in her experimental kitchen, where she tests new recipes for her latest project, be it hosting a nationally-syndicated cooking show (*Life Made Simple in Panama*) or writing a weekly column for the weekend section of a national newspaper. When not in her own kitchen, Chef Melissa might be leading visitors on food tours or teaching classes. She also cultivates produce on her own organic farm. → The downside of entering Chef Melissa's universe is an inability to focus. Her delicacies interrupted me every few keystrokes as I tried to write: *That mandioca chocolate cake with coconut milk looks divine. How much would the half a pound of yucca needed to make it cost at the international supermarket?* She inspired many a foray into my own kitchen to make amateurish (nay, foolish) attempts to concoct one of her recipes with whatever ingredients I had. Hopefully the Diva's love of food (and her recipes!) will inspire new cooking exploits in your kitchen, too.

*The Green Magazine:* Tell me a little bit about your culinary background.

**Chef Melissa De Leon:** I went to hotel management school in Mexico and worked as a manager for international chains, where I worked side by side with many chefs. That's when I started thinking about the culinary world. After living in Cancun for eight years, I moved to California. I took a lot of short term programs at several cooking academies in the Napa Valley Area.

→ But my first interest [developed] when I was a child. While all the other kids were playing outside, I was in the kitchen watching what my grandmother, aunts and mother were cooking. If my cousins wanted me to play they had to eat my cooking. So what opened the door was working in the hotel management world, but the interest was always there. I opened a personal chef service in Sacramento, which I ran for four years. Then I came to Panama in December of 2002 to be a pastry chef. I was doing excellent [in California] but I always came back on brief stints to do cooking shows and classes, so I was interested in trying something [new] here.

**TGM:** How did you get involved in the blogging world?

**MDL:** CookingDiva was born in Spanish when I started blogging in January 2004. My idea was to create a blog with my recipes and share my stories. Then I started receiving these emails from Latin American women, mostly living in Europe, requesting that the recipes be translated to English. That was how I started writing in English. I recall I was getting

10 visits per day during the first months, so when I got the emails, I was so excited!

**TGM:** How many hits do you average nowadays?

**MDL:** Now I get 2,000 to 5,000 hits per day. I know that there are other fantastic blogs in Spanish, but CookingDiva is one of the only blogs about Latin American food in both Spanish and English.

**TGM:** How would you characterize Panamanian cuisine?

**MDL:** In Latin American cuisine there is a tendency to use the same ingredients, the same kind of herbs, and the same cooking procedures for fish or meat. Many of the same ingredients exist throughout Latin America, [but what's different] is the addition of locally grown spices and vegetables. Panamanians have a particular way of cooking *ceviche* (a citrus-marinated seafood salad), for example. In Panama you prepare it one day in advance, and the fish is cooked in the juices of the onion and lime. It's different in Peru, Colombia and Belize. Some recipes call for carrot or some other ingredient we don't use in our traditional recipe.

**TGM:** Have you noticed the recent growth of Latin American cooking shows on American TV?

**MDL:** I don't watch much TV (except to catch up with "Law & Order" and "CSI" on Sundays), but I do a lot of work on the Internet, so that's how I know about them. I think it's fantastic. Latin America is hot right now! You're going to see more and more of that.

**TGM:** And why do you think that is?

**MDL:** First of all, we have to understand that this generation is the first [in Latin America] to take cooking seriously. Probably because they think it's glamorous, but it's not. You have to be born with a love for cooking to be able to withstand the heat. For women, it's very difficult because of the machismo; traditionally this has been a career mostly for men, but now we are changing things. We are showing the world that we know how to cook, and not only for our families. If a male chef has a restaurant, guess who is the one who prepares dinner for him? His wife. We can cook [for a living] and also feed our families.

**TGM:** Have you ever experienced this type of discrimination?

**MDL:** There was an incident a couple of years ago: I was the official chef for a big convention and one of my clients was footing the bill and they insisted on having me in control of the cooking operation. I agreed on the hotel's promise of the kitchen staff

helping me prepare the meals for this large group. The hotel also agreed on providing all of the necessary ingredients we requested; but at the last minute, the hotel cooks were upset because they didn't want a woman in their kitchen. If they didn't want to help, what was I going to do? I had to run the show by myself with the help of only two assistants who had recently graduated from the culinary academy and the only two of the twenty-member hotel crew who were willing to help. I lost about 10 pounds in a week! Everything was fine, but it could have been better. I had to improvise a lot because 60% of the requested ingredients were missing—sabotage. On two occasions I just went out to the beach, looked up and cried, "Please God help me, but I am not going to give up."

**TGM:** Tell me a bit about your travels.

**MDL:** I love traveling, but in my profession, if I travel, I want to go to places where I can learn about the traditions, cooking and ingredients. Once I went to Thailand and Cambodia to attend an intensive cooking program at a hotel cooking school. I've also gone to Portugal, Spain and France to learn about cheese and wine. I especially loved my trip to the monasteries in Portugal and Spain to learn about recipes kept secret for centuries.

→ I also spent three years in high school in Argentina. I loved it. Now as a chef, I have been back many times; I took a trip through Uruguay and Argentina's wine country, tasting South American wines. I don't understand how I didn't get sick after drinking so much wine! You have to combine work and pleasure, so if I learn about one or two ingredients that I didn't know about, that's enough. My clients like my sense of adventure. 🍷



### Chicken Stuffed with Tropical Fruit in Chocolate Sauce *Pollo Relleno de Frutos Tropicales en Salsa de Chocolate*

[SERVES 4]

#### INGREDIENTS

4 boneless skinless chicken breast cutlets  
1 teaspoon olive oil  
4 tablespoons onion, chopped  
1-2 garlic cloves, chopped  
4 tablespoons fresh orange juice  
1/4 cup dried mango, chopped  
1/4 cup pineapple, chopped  
1/4 cup golden raisins or dried cranberry  
1/4 cup chopped unsalted cashew nuts, chopped  
3 tablespoons all-purpose flour  
1-2 eggs, beaten  
1 cup unsweetened dried coconut flakes (or breadcrumbs)  
1/4 cup vegetable oil

#### DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 350°F. To prepare the stuffing, sauté onion and garlic in 1 teaspoon of olive oil until soft. In a bowl mix in with the orange juice, dried fruit and chopped cashews. Remove any skin from the chicken breasts and place between 2 sheets of plastic wrap. Pound lightly with a meat mallet or rolling pin to flatten evenly. Remove plastic wrap and spread stuffing over the chicken. Roll up like jellyroll and secure with wooden toothpicks. Dust with flour and dip first in egg wash and then into the coconut flakes. Pour oil into sauté pan and heat; sear chicken until golden brown. Stand pieces in a ovenproof dish and bake for approximately 15-20 minutes (internal temperature should reach 160°F). Remove from oven and cool. Slice crosswise into 1/2-inch pinwheels.

### Chocolate Sauce *Salsa de Chocolate* (to be served with rice)

#### INGREDIENTS

1 tablespoon butter or olive oil  
1/2 cup onion, diced  
2 ounces red wine  
1/4 cup milk warm + 1 tablespoon cocoa powder, blended  
1 tablespoon chili powder  
1/4 cup tomato sauce  
2 tablespoons fresh cilantro leaves, chopped

#### DIRECTIONS

Sauté the onions over medium high heat until translucent. Add the red wine and chocolate milk and stir. Add the chili powder and the tomato sauce; stir and cook for 5 minutes. Remove from heat and adjust seasoning to taste. Stir in cilantro leaves and serve warm with chicken.