

CHICAGO

Food



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The fix is in
Cheesecake falling flat? Biscuits like hockey pucks? Two Chicago guys aim to ease your kitchen troubles with their new Web site, www.FixMyRecipe.com.

CHEF'S TABLE | PAGE 3A

A chocolate classic
After all these years, flourless chocolate cake still hasn't lost its allure for chef Ina Pinkney. Made richer with coffee, it's a fitting end to a romantic evening.

More V-Day treats inside

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 11, 2009 | EDITOR: JANET RAUSA FULLER | S

Let's get into it.®

FOOD DETECTIVE



"I can attest it works," Taste of Peru co-owner Julie Izquierdo says of the restaurant's *Sopa de Viagra*. | CHRIS SWEDA-SUN-TIMES

Anchors aweigh! Fish soup unchains passion

BY LISA DONOVAN
ldonovan@suntimes.com

As Valentine's Day approaches, love is in the air. But at a tiny Peruvian restaurant in Rogers Park, lust is in the fare. We're talking about the *Sopa de Viagra* at Taste of Peru, 6545 N. Clark. The creamy soup is studded with more than a dozen types of seafood, a natural elixir to jump-start the love life, the restaurant's owner says.

"The reason we call it *Viagra* is it has 14, 15 types of fish and crustaceans in it and so much iron, so much phosphorus, once you drink it, it makes you very tired. But once you wake up, it makes you very alive," says Cesar Izquierdo, owner of Taste of Peru. "You're full of life — put it that way."

While the little blue pill is meant for men, *Sopa de Viagra* gives the ladies a special boost, too, says Izquierdo's wife and co-owner, Julie Izquierdo. "I can attest it works," she says. "The saying goes that you usually take a nap and chase your wife around."

No wonder foodies have declared 2009 the big year for Peruvian cuisine.

The Izquierdos' *Sopa de Viagra* has been on the menu for nearly a decade, a variation of the famous yet simple Peruvian *parihuela* — essentially seafood soup in a seafood broth.

The soup combines traditional ingredients — shrimp, oysters, clams, snow crab, blue crab, king crab, calamari, conch meat, bay scallops, corvina, grouper and other seafood — with non-traditional evaporated milk, which adds silkiness.

After he and his chef developed the dish, Izquierdo still wasn't convinced it was something that would take off. He kept it off the menu, eating it only during his dinner breaks.

One day, nine years ago, two couples of Colombian descent noticed the dish being carried over to Izquierdo and perked up. One of the men declared, "That's the *Viagra*! That's the *Viagra*!"

And that's when the dish got its name and a place on the menu.

The soup, which sells for \$25 a bowl, easily serves two for dinner or at least four as a starter.

The restaurant doesn't celebrate love only one day a year — *Sopa de Viagra* is on the menu year-round. And, the Izquierdos say, plenty of couples come in regularly for a helping.

Curious about an unusual edible or kitchen tool? Want to share some mysteries in your own cabinets? E-mail the Food Detective at ldonovan@suntimes.com.

COOK'S FAVORITE | Prized for their longevity and versatility, cast-iron pans never fail to deliver

BY MICHAEL NAGRANT

The cookware huckster at the department store was wrong: My heavy clad nonstick cookware set hasn't outlasted me or my marriage.

Eight years later, I can still see the clerk from the kitchenware department of a particularly famous Chicago department store shaking her head disapprovingly as I fingered the dull finish of a new cast-iron skillet.

She harrumphed and whipped off her glossy red reading glasses and beelined for my wife and me while we built our wedding registry. I almost expected her to smack my wrist off the pan, but instead she pitched a tirade about how cast-iron pans are too much work, how they rust and how what we really wanted was a heavy clad nonstick collection.

She said she'd throw in a free wok if we registered for the set. If only we'd held out for a set of Ginzu knives.

Maybe it wasn't the clerk's fault. Wedding registries tend to encourage witless excess. After all, who really needs five Waterford lead crystal pieces, NASCAR china or a Baccarat dolphin sculpture?

And at that time, I thought that cooking was something my grandmother did, Outback Steakhouse was luxury food and the chrome lids on the recommended set were pretty sweet.

So for a year or so after we were married, our shiny set was a pride-inducing museum display of unused gleaming glory on our kitchen shelves.

Then I learned to cook. Two years later, I finally got that cast-iron skillet. I coddled it, fed it precious bacon fat when it was thirsty and it returned my love as the workhorse of my kitchen.

While the nonstick coating on those wedding gifts is long gone, after six years, the non-stickiness of my fat-laden cast-iron skillet keeps on going.

By cast iron, mind you, I'm not talking about those bank account-draining, oven range-gulping yachts slathered in pretty, vibrant colored enamels. I'm talking about the \$20 pans so heavy that they can double as a handy bludgeon for would-be intruders. For value, there may be no better pan, especially in these troubled economic times.

My Lodge skillet is the only pan I use to make breakfast. It does double duty at dinner, ensuring a uniform, crispy-brown crust on steak or any protein, for those of us without 1,500-degree infrared restaurant broilers.

Even those with restaurant equipment tend to love cast iron. A few years ago at Avenues

restaurant in the Peninsula Chicago hotel, I watched as chef Graham Elliot Bowles' staff, surrounded by gleaming copper sauce pans and Dutch ovens, seared meat exclusively in a cast-iron pan.

Says Rob Levitt, chef-owner of Bucktown's Mado, who uses his to pan-fry soft-shell crabs, braise lamb belly and render pork fat: "Aluminum saute pans just don't cut it. There's nothing greater to sear protein."

Cast-iron pans are prized not only for their function, but their durability. Even a fully rusted one dug up at a thrift store can usually be revived with a healthy coating of lard and an hour or two in a 375-degree oven.

While I've always said it would be the first thing I'd grab on way out of the door during a fire, my cast-iron pan would likely endure that, too.

In fact, Rogers Park purse-maker Cinnamon Cooper told me that when she was in fourth grade, a classmate's kitchen chimney caught on fire and the cast-iron pans were among the only things that survived.

Because of this, and also because her own mother cooked with cast iron so often during her childhood, when Cooper worked as a clerk for Williams-Sonoma, she'd often try to convince would-be purchasers of expensive cooking sets to consider cast iron instead.

LETTERS | Readers offer warm, fuzzy thoughts on rough, tumble item

Readers, we had a hunch you treasure your cast-iron pans as much as we do. We were right. Here, in your own words (slightly edited for space), are your stories.

Do I have a cast-iron pan! I was told my parents bought this Wagner Ware Dutch oven shortly after their marriage in January 1934.

I've been using it for a good number of years to feed my family of three girls and two boys, seven grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

One of my daughters is waiting in the wings for her turn at ownership of this family treasure. It'll be a while yet.

Pat Harding, Willow Springs

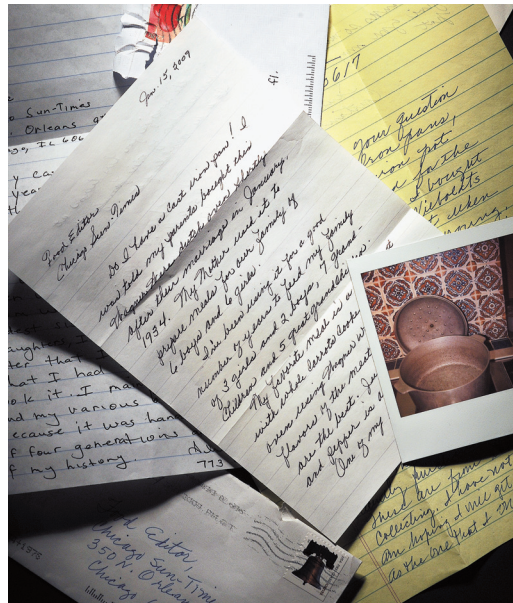
The cast-iron pan that I have was my grandfather's. He was born March 13, 1886, and died Oct. 3, 1990.

When my two brothers and I were children, he used to cook up everything in one pan. Bacon and eggs and toast. Chili, chicken, everything.

Now I cook everything in it (especially fried chicken). ... It brings back the good old days.

Barbara Ross, Chicago

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