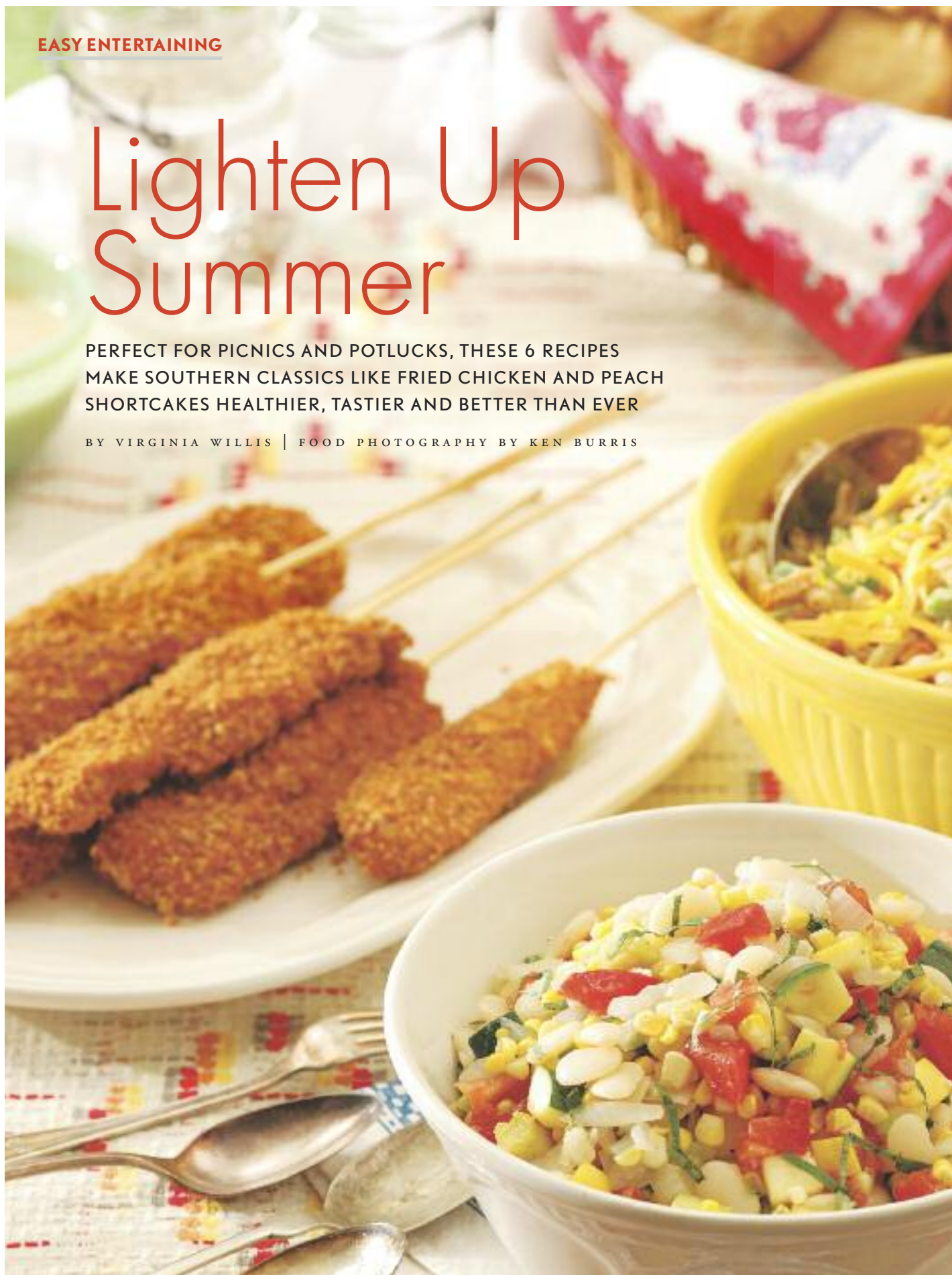


EASY ENTERTAINING

Lighten Up Summer

PERFECT FOR PICNICS AND POTLUCKS, THESE 6 RECIPES
MAKE SOUTHERN CLASSICS LIKE FRIED CHICKEN AND PEACH
SHORTCAKES HEALTHIER, TASTIER AND BETTER THAN EVER

BY VIRGINIA WILLIS | FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY BY KEN BURRIS





PHOTOGRAPHY BY: Bigifile © Bon Appetit/Alamy (top); © Laura Doss/Fancy/Corbis (bottom)

Remembering summers growing up in the South, I think of fishing in the lake, shucking corn on the front porch in the cooler evenings and catching fireflies with my sister after dark. And, more than anything, summer meant picnics. Every Saturday a mixture of friends and family caravanned from Alexandria, Louisiana, where I grew up, to a nearby lake with coolers and wooden picnic baskets laden with food.

A day of swimming and playing in the lake was capped by a grand spread. The most sought-after container was the pale green Tupperware bowl filled with homemade fried chicken. And we always had macaroni “salad.” (Only in the South would we marry pasta with mayonnaise and call it a salad.) Southerners are serious about their mayonnaise. My grandma, Meme, and Mama were loyal to Duke’s mayo; my Aunt Lee used Miracle Whip. Her salad just wasn’t the same.

While my sister piled her plate with macaroni salad, I was partial to the potato salad. Mama followed the Southern formula: adding hard-boiled eggs, onion, celery and sweet pickle to Idaho potatoes for the perfect blend of flavorings. Today I still follow her basic blueprint—though I add a drizzle of vinegar for a little brightness and I go with low-fat mayo instead of regular.

My grandfather, Dede, who was usually seated in the shade sipping cold drinks with the other men at these picnics, grew an amazing vegetable garden. The red clay soil and hot summer sun are a potent combination for growing intensely flavored produce. Our hamper always contained a simple salad of tomato and cucumber that had been picked earlier that day from Dede’s garden. It was lightly drizzled with white vinegar and “salad oil.” (Salad oil is the old-fashioned, catch-all name for any plain-tasting vegetable oil that might be used in a salad dressing.) I adore this simple salad when tomatoes are at their best, but now I opt for slightly-more-subtle rice vinegar and add fresh herbs to make the flavors pop.

I still love family picnics at the lake and the

Grab a blanket, pack a basket and head outside for dining the way it’s meant to be—in the fresh summer air. These Southern-inspired picnic recipes, including lighter oven-fried chicken on a stick and succotash salad (*opposite*), are sure to please your crowd.

food that I grew up with, but these days I'm more careful about what I eat. Despite its reputation, there's no reason Southern food has to be unhealthy. I've found that it's easy to change small things to make a picnic menu lighter and healthier. Now instead of deep-frying chicken, I oven-fry. For this fried chicken recipe I took my inspiration from a classic I came across while visiting Ole Miss in Oxford, Mississippi. At the local Chevron station, believe it or not, chicken on a stick is fried and served as fuel for late-night carousing... or to satisfy the stomachs of said carousers the next morning. As soon as I tried this glorious regional specialty, I knew they were onto something. The stick makes for a handy picnic tool and kids love anything on a skewer.

Though an authentic dipping sauce for the chicken is more likely a corn-syrup-based pre-made barbecue or honey-mustard sauce, I like to make an irresistible homemade one with Vidalia onions, mustard and honey. Each spring, families across the South buy large bags of Vidalias to use for cooking throughout the summer. Mama still uses her special trick for keeping them: she drops an onion down one leg of a pair of pantyhose, ties a knot and repeats. She hangs them in a cool, dry place and they last for months.

I love Vidalias' sweet, pungent taste, so I always seem to find a way to get them into my recipes. For this menu I turned succotash, which is usually a side dish for Sunday suppers, into a salad. My version is chilled and combines butter beans with corn, squash, tomatoes, a zesty apple-cider vinaigrette and (of course) Vidalias.

Finally, though I may have grown up in Louisiana, summer isn't summer without sweet Georgia peaches, so I wrap up the meal with tender peach shortcakes. I make them heart-healthy with canola oil, but one taste and you won't miss the butter.

May your summer be filled with laughter and good food. I, for one, can't wait to go catch fireflies.

Virginia Willis is a cook, teacher, author and culinary television producer. Her new book, Basic to Brilliant, Y'all: 150 Refined Southern Recipes and Ways to Dress Them Up for Company (Ten Speed Press), is due out in September.

Summer Succotash Salad

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MAKES: 10 servings, about ¾ cup each
ACTIVE TIME: 40 minutes | **TOTAL:** 1 hour 40 minutes | **TO MAKE AHEAD:** Prepare through Step 2, cover and refrigerate for up to 1 day. Finish with Steps 3 & 4 just before serving.

Succotash has endless variations, but corn and some sort of beans are typically included. In the South, butter beans are the bean of choice. Butter beans are the same species as lima beans, but they're white instead of green. If you can't find them, use frozen baby limas, shelled edamame or black-eyed peas. (Photograph: page 50.)

- 2 cups shelled fresh butter beans (1 ½ pounds unshelled), frozen (thawed) butter beans or baby lima beans**
- 4 tablespoons canola oil, divided**
- 2 cups corn kernels, fresh (from about 4 large ears; see Tip, page 81) or frozen (thawed)**
- 1 Vidalia or other sweet onion, finely chopped**

- 1 small yellow squash, chopped**
- 1 small zucchini, chopped**
- 1 clove garlic, minced**
- 2 medium tomatoes, seeded and chopped**
- ½ stalk celery, very finely chopped**
- ½ cup very thinly sliced fresh basil**
- 2 tablespoons cider vinegar**
- 1 teaspoon Dijon mustard**
- 1 teaspoon salt**
- Freshly ground pepper to taste**

1. Place beans in a medium saucepan and cover with water. Bring to a boil. Reduce to a simmer and cook until tender, about 30 minutes for fresh beans, about 25 minutes for frozen. Drain well. Transfer to a large bowl.
2. Meanwhile, heat 1 tablespoon oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add corn, onion, squash and zucchini and cook, stirring, until crisp-tender, 4 to 5 minutes. Add garlic and cook, stirring, until fragrant, 45 seconds to 1 minute. Add the cooked vegetables to the bowl of beans. Transfer to the refrigerator to cool for at least 1 hour.
3. When the beans and vegetables are cool, stir in tomatoes, celery and basil.
4. Whisk vinegar and mustard in a bowl. Add

the remaining 3 tablespoons oil in a slow, steady stream, whisking constantly, until the dressing is creamy and well combined. Season with salt and pepper. Drizzle the dressing over the succotash and toss to coat.

PER SERVING: 136 calories; 6 g fat (1 g sat, 4 g mono); 0 mg cholesterol; 17 g carbohydrate; 0 g added sugars; 4 g protein; 3 g fiber; 339 mg sodium; 253 mg potassium. **NUTRITION BONUS:** Vitamin C (25% daily value)

Summer Tomato, Onion & Cucumber Salad


H X W H H

MAKES: 6 servings, about 1 ½ cups each
ACTIVE TIME: 20 minutes | **TOTAL:** 50 minutes (including 30 minutes marinating time)
TO MAKE AHEAD: Prepare through Step 2 up to 1 hour ahead.

This is the most simple salad possible—think of it as the Southern American counterpart to the classic Italian tomato-and-mozzarella salad. My grandmother always used white vinegar in the dressing for this salad. I now prefer to use rice vinegar, which is more subtle. It is best enjoyed at the height of summer, when tomatoes and cucumbers are fresh from the garden.

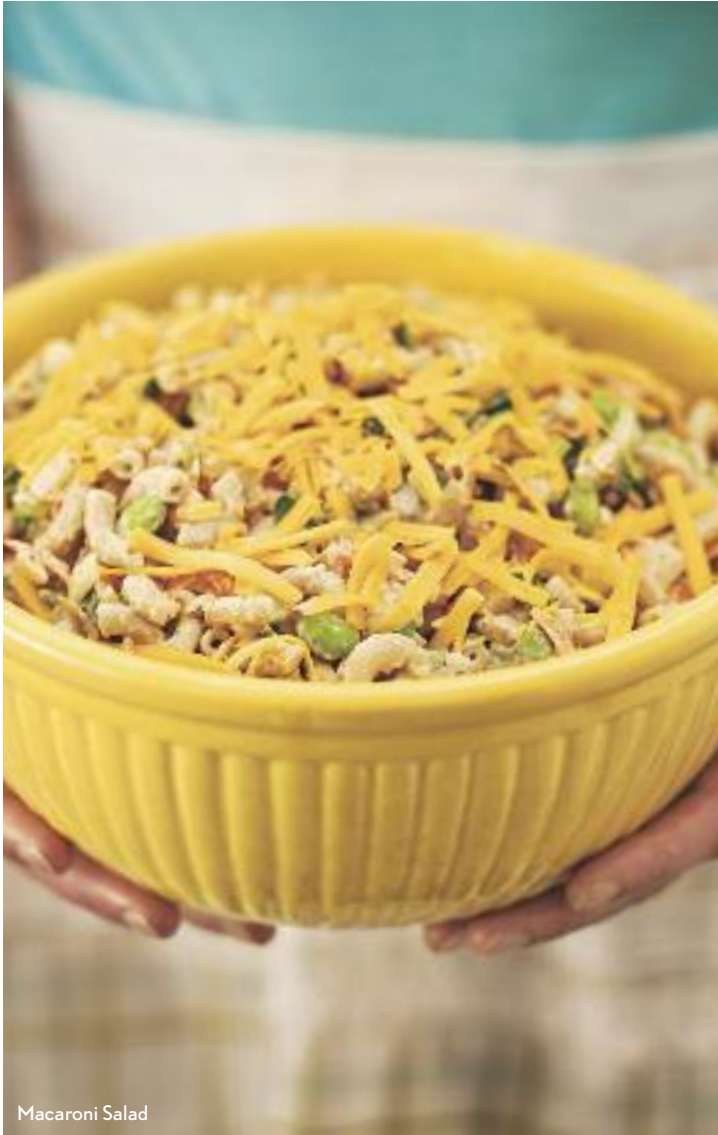
- 3 tablespoons rice vinegar**
- 1 tablespoon canola oil**
- 1 teaspoon honey**
- ½ teaspoon salt**
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground pepper, or more to taste**
- 2 medium cucumbers**
- 4 medium tomatoes, cut into ½-inch wedges**
- 1 Vidalia or other sweet onion, halved and very thinly sliced**
- 2 tablespoons coarsely chopped fresh herbs, such as flat-leaf parsley, chives and/or tarragon**

1. Whisk vinegar, oil, honey, salt and pepper in a large shallow bowl.
 2. Remove alternating stripes of peel from the cucumbers. Slice the cucumbers into thin rounds. Add the cucumber slices, tomatoes and onion to the dressing; gently toss to combine. Let stand at room temperature for at least 30 minutes and up to 1 hour.
 3. Just before serving, add herbs and toss again.
- PER SERVING:** 58 calories; 3 g fat (0 g sat, 2 g mono); 0 mg cholesterol; 8 g carbohydrate; 1 g added sugars; 1 g protein; 2 g fiber; 202 mg sodium; 264 mg potassium. **NUTRITION BONUS:** Vitamin C (20% daily value).



When tomatoes are at their peak, they need little more than a smidge of salt and pepper. This cucumber, Vidalia onion and tomato salad takes just a tiny bit more prep than that. One thing to keep in mind: don't refrigerate it once it's made because you'll compromise the texture of the tomatoes. Instead plan to serve it within about an hour of slicing the tomatoes. You can even make the dressing at home, then bring along a knife and small cutting board, slice the vegetables and toss them with the dressing about 30 minutes before you eat.

Summer Tomato, Onion & Cucumber Salad



Macaroni Salad



This is a modern take on macaroni salad—it's packed with veggies, including celery, carrots, spinach and edamame, but a sprinkling of shredded yellow Cheddar cheese on top keeps it old-school. Using whole-wheat macaroni rather than traditional white pasta doubles the fiber, and with all the goodies in this salad, you won't taste the difference. When you're outside enjoying the warm summer weather, keep in mind that you need to keep cool food, like this salad, cool. So pack your picnic in a cooler with ice packs, if it's going to be more than an hour before you eat it. And remember to bring along a fresh bag of ice for drinks.

Macaroni Salad

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MAKES: 12 servings, about 1 cup each
ACTIVE TIME: 45 minutes | **TOTAL:** 2¾ hours (including chilling time)
TO MAKE AHEAD: Cover and refrigerate for up to 3 days.

Old-fashioned macaroni salad sometimes contains jarred pimientos, diced ham or pickle relish. Mama always left hers simple and deliciously plain with fresh chopped celery, carrot and onion. I've lightened it up with low-fat mayo and sour cream, plus I've added extra nutrients and fiber with whole-wheat elbow noodles, spinach and edamame.

- 3 cups whole-wheat elbow noodles (14- to 16-ounce package)**
- ¾ cup low-fat mayonnaise**
- ¾ cup reduced-fat sour cream**
- 2 teaspoons sugar**
- 1 teaspoon salt**
- ¾ teaspoon celery seed**
- Freshly ground pepper to taste**
- 3 stalks celery, finely chopped**
- 3 carrots, shredded**
- 1 small Vidalia or other sweet onion, finely chopped**
- 1 cup baby spinach, chopped**
- ¾ cup frozen (thawed) edamame**
- ⅓ cup shredded mild Cheddar cheese**

1. Cook noodles in a large pot of boiling

water until tender, 8 to 10 minutes or according to package directions. Drain. Transfer to a large bowl to cool for at least 15 minutes.

2. Combine mayonnaise, sour cream, sugar, salt, celery seed and pepper in a small bowl.

3. When the noodles have cooled, add celery, carrots, onion, spinach, edamame and the mayonnaise mixture; stir well to combine.

4. Cover and refrigerate until cold, at least 2 hours. Taste and adjust seasoning with salt and pepper, if desired. Sprinkle with cheese just before serving.

PER SERVING: 190 calories; 7 g fat (2 g sat, 2 g mono); 13 mg cholesterol; 28 g carbohydrate; 1 g added sugars; 7 g protein; 3 g fiber; 366 mg sodium; 215 mg potassium. **NUTRITION BONUS:** Vitamin A (60% daily value).

Mama's Potato Salad

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MAKES: 12 servings, about $\frac{3}{4}$ cup each
ACTIVE TIME: 1 hour | TOTAL: 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ hours | TO MAKE
AHEAD: Cover and refrigerate for up to 2 days.

This is the potato salad that has been served on paper plates nestled in wicker plate holders for many a summer picnic in my family. The potatoes break down just slightly and the result is a blend of larger pieces of potato with a little bit of creamy mash. (Photograph: page 56.)

- 5 russet potatoes (about 3 pounds)
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons salt, divided
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup white-wine vinegar
- 4 large eggs
- 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ cups low-fat mayonnaise
- 4 stalks celery, finely chopped
- 1 Vidalia or other sweet onion, finely chopped
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sweet or dill pickle relish
- Freshly ground pepper to taste

1. Peel potatoes and cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch cubes. Place in a large pot and add water to cover; season with 1 teaspoon salt. Bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat and simmer until very tender, 15 to 20 minutes. Drain well. While still warm, transfer the potatoes to a baking sheet and drizzle with vinegar. Set aside to cool to room temperature.

2. Meanwhile, place eggs in a medium saucepan and add water to cover by 1 inch. Bring to a simmer over medium-high heat. Reduce heat to low and cook at the barest simmer for 10 minutes. Remove from heat, pour out the hot water and cover the eggs with ice-cold water. Let stand until cool enough to handle before peeling.

3. Once the eggs have cooled, remove the shells by tapping each egg gently on the counter or sink all over to crackle it. Roll an egg between your hands to loosen the shell. Peel, starting at the large end, while holding the egg under cold running water; this facilitates peeling. Grate the eggs through the large holes on a box grater or finely chop them.

4. Combine mayonnaise, celery, onion, pickle relish, the remaining $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt and pepper in a large bowl. Add the cooled potatoes and grated eggs; stir to combine. Serve at room temperature or chilled.

PER SERVING: 199 calories; 7 g fat (1 g sat, 2 g mono); 68 mg cholesterol; 32 g carbohydrate; 1 g added sugars; 4 g protein; 2 g fiber; 574 mg sodium; 446 mg potassium. NUTRITION BONUS: Vitamin C (15% daily value).

Oven-Fried Chicken on a Stick

H X W H H

MAKES: 6 servings
ACTIVE TIME: 40 minutes | TOTAL: 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ hours
TO MAKE AHEAD: Prepare up to 4 hours ahead and hold in the refrigerator; serve cold.
EQUIPMENT: 6 (12-inch) bamboo skewers
COST PER SERVING: under \$2.50

Here's a fun way to serve fried chicken for a picnic—put it on a stick. This recipe was inspired by my visit to Ole Miss, in Mississippi, where chicken on a stick is a beloved late-night food among the college students. It's fabulous served with this homemade Vidalia onion honey-mustard sauce, but it's also great with barbecue sauce or Frank's hot sauce. This is an easy recipe to double if you're serving a crowd. (Photograph: page 50.)

- 1 tablespoon kosher salt
- 2 teaspoons paprika, preferably sweet Hungarian, divided
- 1 teaspoon onion powder, divided
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder, divided
- 1 cup buttermilk
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ pounds boneless, skinless chicken breast, trimmed
- 2 cups coarse dry whole-wheat breadcrumbs or white Japanese-style panko breadcrumbs (see Note, page 81)
- 2 tablespoons canola oil
- 2 large egg whites
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- Freshly ground pepper to taste
- Honey Mustard-Vidalia Dipping Sauce (recipe follows)

1. Combine salt, 1 teaspoon paprika and $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon each onion powder and garlic powder in a large bowl. Add buttermilk and whisk until the salt is completely dissolved and the spices are dispersed in the liquid.

2. Cut chicken lengthwise into about 1-inch-wide strips. Add to the marinade and let stand at room temperature for 30 minutes. (Do not marinate any longer and don't refrigerate, or the chicken will be too salty.)

3. Combine breadcrumbs, the remaining 1 teaspoon paprika and $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon each onion powder and garlic powder in a large shallow dish (a 9-by-13-inch baking dish works well). Add oil and toss well to coat. Whisk egg whites and mustard in a second large shallow dish. Season both mixtures with pepper.

4. Preheat oven to 350°F. Line a rimmed baking sheet with foil, then set a large wire

rack on it. Coat the rack with cooking spray.

5. Remove the chicken from the marinade, shaking off any excess, and thread onto six 12-inch bamboo skewers, dividing evenly. Dip the chicken into the egg mixture, coating both sides. Place in the breadcrumb mixture one at a time, sprinkle with crumbs to cover and press so the coating adheres to both sides. Gently shake off any excess crumbs and place the skewers on the prepared rack.

6. Bake the chicken, turning halfway through, until golden brown and the juices run clear, about 25 minutes. Serve the chicken with the dipping sauce.

PER SERVING: 351 calories; 18 g fat (2 g sat, 10 g mono); 63 mg cholesterol; 20 g carbohydrate; 3 g added sugars; 28 g protein; 2 g fiber; 309 mg sodium; 255 mg potassium.

HONEY MUSTARD-VIDALIA DIPPING SAUCE

MAKES: about 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ cups
ACTIVE TIME: 15 minutes | TOTAL: 15 minutes
TO MAKE AHEAD: Cover and refrigerate for up to 3 days. Serve at room temperature.

The secret to a creamy, emulsified dressing is mustard. Mustard helps thicken liquid sauces by absorbing some of the liquid and allows the suspension of one liquid in another. If Vidalia onions are unavailable, use another sweet onion, such as Walla Walla or Texas Sweet. Half of one gives this sauce big onion flavor; if you like something more subtle, try a quarter of an onion instead.

- $\frac{1}{2}$ Vidalia or other sweet onion, cut into 4 pieces
- 2 tablespoons cider vinegar
- 2 tablespoons honey
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon freshly ground pepper
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup canola oil

Place onion in a food processor fitted with a metal blade and process until smooth, stopping to scrape down the sides as needed. Add vinegar, honey, mustard, salt and pepper; process until smooth. With the motor running, add oil through the feed tube in a slow, steady stream until the mixture is thick and well combined. Taste and adjust seasoning with more honey, salt and/or pepper, if desired. Serve at room temperature.

PER 2-TABLESPOON SERVING: 117 calories; 11 g fat (1 g sat, 7 g mono); 0 mg cholesterol; 5 g carbohydrate; 3 g added sugars; 0 g protein; 0 g fiber; 79 mg sodium; 21 mg potassium.



Mama's Potato Salad

Brown Sugar Peach Shortcakes

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MAKES: 8 servings

ACTIVE TIME: 40 minutes | TOTAL: 40 minutes

TO MAKE AHEAD: Prepare the shortcakes (Steps 2-5), cool completely and store in an airtight container for up to 1 day. Just before serving, warm in a 300°F oven. Prepare peaches (Step 1) up to 2 hours ahead.

EQUIPMENT: 2¾- or 3-inch round cutter

Even though these shortcakes are far healthier than the ones I grew up with, you'll still love them. I use half white whole-wheat flour to add fiber and nutrients. Plus I reduced the saturated fat by swapping in canola oil for some of the butter. Top the shortcakes with fresh, ripe peaches and a lightly sweetened

cream topping that's reminiscent of crème fraîche: the perfect ending to a summer meal.

FRUIT

- 5 cups sliced ripe peaches (4-5 peaches)
- 2 tablespoons packed light brown sugar

SHORTCAKES

- 1¼ cups white whole-wheat flour
- 1¼ cups all-purpose flour
- 1½ cup packed light brown sugar
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into small pieces
- 3 tablespoons canola oil
- 1 cup buttermilk
- ½ teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 tablespoon water

- 1 tablespoon raw cane sugar, such as Demerara or turbinado (optional)

TOPPING

- ⅓ cup whipping cream
- ½ cup reduced-fat sour cream

1. To prepare fruit: Toss peaches with 2 tablespoons brown sugar in a medium bowl and set aside, stirring occasionally to help dissolve the sugar.

2. To prepare shortcakes: Preheat oven to 425°F. Line a baking sheet with a nonstick silicone baking mat or parchment paper or coat with cooking spray.

3. Place white whole-wheat flour, all-purpose flour, ⅓ cup brown sugar, baking powder, baking soda and salt in a food processor; pulse to combine. Add butter and oil and pulse until the mixture resembles coarse sand. Add buttermilk and vanilla. Process until the dough comes together. (*Alternatively, combine flours, brown sugar, baking powder, baking soda and salt in a large bowl. Add butter pieces; with your fingers, quickly rub them into the dry ingredients until the pieces are smaller but still visible. Add oil, buttermilk and vanilla and stir with a fork until the mixture forms a dough.*)

4. Using a rubber spatula, transfer the dough to a floured surface. Knead several times so the dough comes together. Pat the dough into an approximate 6-by-10-inch rectangle, about ½ inch thick. Cut out 6 rounds with a 2¾- or 3-inch biscuit cutter (or cookie cutter) dipped in flour; press it straight down without twisting so the shortcakes will rise evenly when baked. Pat the remaining dough back into a ½-inch-thick disk and cut out 2 more biscuits. (Discard any remaining scraps of dough.) Place the shortcakes on the prepared baking sheet. Brush the tops with water and sprinkle with raw sugar (if using).

5. Bake the shortcakes until the bottoms are golden brown and the tops are beginning to color, 13 to 15 minutes. Transfer to a wire rack to cool slightly.

6. To prepare topping: Beat cream in a medium bowl with an electric mixer or whisk until soft peaks form, 1 to 2 minutes. Fold in sour cream until combined.

7. To serve, split the shortcakes horizontally. Spoon the peaches and juice onto the bottoms, top with the cream mixture and replace the shortcake tops. Serve immediately.

PER SERVING: 303 calories; 12 g fat (5 g sat, 5 g mono); 24 mg cholesterol; 45 g carbohydrate; 10 g added sugars; 6 g protein; 3 g fiber; 258 mg sodium; 301 mg potassium. **NUTRITION BONUS:** Iron (18% daily value). 🍌

A simple potato salad should be in every cook's repertoire—it's timeless and always popular. This one (*opposite*) stays skinny with low-fat mayo, but that will be your secret. Peach shortcake (*this page*) is most luscious made with really ripe peaches. The best way to tell if your peaches are ripe: smell them. They should have a potent, floral, peachy smell. You can also feel the ripeness—they should give just a bit when you hold them. Be careful not to squeeze too hard, as they bruise easily.



Brown Sugar Peach Shortcakes