

“... But What’s in It?”

By: Betsy Bearden

Deck the halls with boughs of holly! What does that mean, exactly? I haven’t a clue, but it is a very big part of the Holiday Season. Just as shopping, cooking, visiting, decorating, singing, eating, shopping, eating, shopping—and eating. The Holiday Season also signifies a time for looking back on the year that has passed and in reminiscing. Since September, my son’s 14-year old cat, Zena, passed away; so did our beloved Lhasa Apso, Yogi. He, too, was 14.

However, for each loss, there is always gain: some big, some small. For us, it was little Birdie. She has returned to the nest. She is back and nesting in the same nail pouch in our garage where she hatched her five eggs over this past spring. I know it’s her, because I recognize her face! Who could ever forget that sweet little face? I watched her for hours as she showed the baby chicks the way out of the garage, and into the big wide world of adventure. When we noticed she stayed close to our house for months after her chicks had hatched, Steven vowed to leave a way back in for her should she ever return home, and she has! I don’t believe she is “on the nest” but she is roosting there comfortably for now.

It is always a happy time when family comes home, especially during the holidays. What a wonderful, festive, happy, chaotic, surprising, interesting, nerve wracking and frustrating time we always have. Nerve wracking? The year someone forgot to bring the ham and we had to eat a totally veggie Christmas dinner: what a disaster, right? Chaotic? Forgetting to put sugar in the eight pumpkin pies I made one time and trying to correct the mistake by poking them with a wooden spoon and drizzling the only sweetener left in the house on Christmas Eve (molasses) all over the top of them. That didn’t exactly work out as I had planned.

Frustrating? Have you ever brought tofu to Thanksgiving or Christmas Dinner? I rest my case. I am forever cursed when it comes to bringing any dish to a holiday gathering. “Oh...that looks delicious—but what’s in it?” I have been practicing for responses for this question with lines like “Oh, just a little eye of newt; toe of frog; high fructose corn syrup; Monosodium glutamate; nitrates; hair of the dog that bit me.” You know, things they would probably go for as long as it’s anything other than T-O-F-U!

Now that I think of it, it’s been a while since I have “experimented” with the family during the holidays. I think I am overdue, what do you think? I don’t have to tell the *family* that, do I? Muwahahaha. I am not banned from making macaroni and cheese, as long as it does not contain hidden chunks of tofu, or is made with the little red, green, and yellow Santa Claus-shaped noodles I happened to make it with one year. I was almost banned from the making of Mac and Cheese over that one. The noodles looked so cute in the box, but something happened to them during the cooking process. They sort of “grew” and became, well, big soft globs of red, yellow, and green in a sea of cheddar cheese. It actually looked more like something you would serve at Halloween instead of Christmas. That did not work out as planned, either.

I am leaning toward Nutritional Yeast Flakes in place of cheese for the Mac and Cheese this year. Yep—that may be the ticket. A *healthy* version of my famous Mac and Cheese. I could place it on the table and tell them I have revamped it this year because we all need to eat a healthier diet. Maybe I could decorate it with a mini wedge of cheddar cheese on a toothpick or something to that effect and explain to them how great it tastes, and that it's loaded with ALL the essential amino acids and B-vitamins, not to mention an excellent source of vegetarian protein!

I can hear it now—"But what's in it?" Nah, I guess I will just stick to the gooey Mac and Cheese I usually make with a whole stick of butter, half gallon of whole milk, 5 cups of cheddar cheese, 1 container of sour cream, and white elbow noodles. You know the *real* stuff. But that's fine with me, because I love to make it, and I love to see the happy face of my nephew Kenny who always asks if I am bringing it. Oh well, the thought of mixing it up a bit was fun anyway.

If you have not tried nutritional yeast flakes, I highly recommend you do. Life Grocery in Marietta has them in the bulk section next to their organic produce section. Today Steven made us a batch of *Golden Gravy from nutritional yeast flakes and served it on fresh buttermilk biscuits, with veggie sausage patties. This is so warm and filling on a cold morning. To me, the gravy is reminiscent of Sunday dinner gravy, served up in a gravy boat and ladled over fresh roast beef slices like those that Mama served when I was a little girl. The flavor of the Golden Gravy is wonderful, and I have included the recipe below.

So as I began, I will end. It is time to *Deck the Halls, Jingle the Bells, Go Rockin' around the Christmas Tree*, and to sing *The Chipmunk Song*: Oh-KAY! It's also time to remember lost loved ones, and to get ready to greet new loved ones. To visit, reminisce, laugh, cry, eat, eat, eat, and shop. And as with Birdie, the most important thing of all is to just make sure that those coming back home during this joyous time of year will always have a way back in.

I wish you all Peace on Earth, Happy Thanksgiving, a Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukkah, Happy Kwanzaa, and perhaps even a "Happy Festivus for the Rest of Us!"

Golden Gravy

1/2 cup nutritional yeast flakes

1/4 cup flour

1/3 cup vegetable oil

1 1/2 cups water

2-3 Tbs. soy sauce or Braggs Liquid Aminos

****Salt and lots of fresh cracked black pepper to taste. (I like to use Braggs Liquid Aminos because it is not as salty as Soy Sauce and it has added nutrients to boot!)**

- Toast the yeast and flour in skillet until it become aromatic and you can smell it.
- Add the oil, and stir while it bubbles, turning golden brown. (It will become thick at this point.)
- Add water and begin whisking until it changes to a gravy consistency.
- Add Braggs Liquid Aminos (or Soy Sauce) and pepper.
- ****Taste first for saltiness before adding salt.**

**Source: The Farm Vegetarian Cookbook*

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