

MONADNOCK LIVING



Sentinel photos by STEVE HOOPER

WORTHY OF A RIBBON — Polly Bannister of Greenfield prepares her award-winning recipe, Glorious Grape Leaves. Bannister recently won \$10,000 and first prize in the Oldways / Sun-Maid Raisin & Rice Recipe Contest. Bannister says using fresh grape leaves is best, but difficult to do since they're not commercially available. So she suggests using grape leaves from a jar, packed in water, not oil.

An award-winning experience

LAST SUMMER, POLLY Bannister decided to make stuffed grape leaves. At the time, it seemed the right thing to do. A year later, she's certain it was. As a result of her recipe, she won \$10,000.

The recipe was that good. It was judged in a national recipe contest and she thought so. "It was exciting," Bannister says. Her recipe for Glorious Grape Leaves won first place in the Oldways-aid Raisins & Rice Recipe Contest.

It was very lively, with a light touch of cayenne," says Dun Gifford, resident of Oldways Preservation & Exchange Trust in Cambridge, Mass., and one of the judges. "It just tasted terrific. It was fresh with a sparkling texture. Even more important, it was prepared in the traditional way."

Stuffed grape leaves were a tradition with Bannister. She had never made them last summer. Nor had she entered a recipe contest before.

The idea to make stuffed grape leaves first came to Bannister late one day while taking a walk at the office — at Yankee Magazine in New York, where she's managing editor. She was going with her boss, Mel Allen, editorial director of Yankee's Sports Illustrated group, who she's known for years.

She has often spoken with fondness about his mother's cooking. "It was a traditional ethnic food," Bannister says.

On this particular day, Allen was so fondly of stuffed grape leaves. It was a few weeks before Mel's birthday (July 16), and Bannister asked him what his late father would have made him to celebrate the occasion. "I didn't ask anymore," Bannister says. "I knew then that I would be making stuffed grape leaves for his birthday."

Just before Bannister did that, she had to learn how. While Bannister is a graduate of the Chef's Training Program at the Natural Resources Institute's Natural Resources Cookery School in New York, stuffed grape leaves is not something she knew how to make. She consulted about a dozen cookbooks, gleaned ideas from five, and revised her own recipe.

The result was served at Allen's birthday party.

"This is something I ate and I thank you very much," Allen



says. "Little did I know it was a historic lunch."

While most stuffed grape leaves recipes include lamb, Bannister's does not.

"Mel is not a big meat eater," Bannister says. "So I made vegetarian grape leaves because I was trying to please the person whose birthday it was."

For that same reason, Bannister also decided to throw in some cayenne pepper, which wasn't included in any recipes she saw.

"It gives a stronger flavor," Bannister says. "Mel likes things a little spicy."

The Glorious Grape Leaves were a hit. In fact, they were so memorable that several months later, in March of 1998, when a notice of the Oldways-Sun-Maid Raisins & Rice Contest came into Yankee's offices, Carol Connare, a colleague of Bannister's, remembered Bannister's stuffed grape leaves from the previous summer, and convinced her to submit the recipe in the contest.

"Carol was instrumental in this," Bannister says. "I was thinking of submitting a different recipe and she said 'no, no, no.'"

So Bannister submitted the grape leaves recipe, and felt good about its chances.

"I understand food and recipes," Bannister says. "I understand cooking and what has broad appeal."

And Bannister understood that her grape leaves recipe met the most important criteria for the recipe contest. They're made with rice

and raisins, the two ingredients required of the contest's recipes; and they're also a traditional ethnic food.

Oldways Preservation & Exchange Trust is a nonprofit educational organization that promotes healthy eating, sustainable agriculture and traditional regional cuisines around the world. Its primary education program is Chefs Collaborative 2000, which brings chefs and farmers together to work together for the common good of food, and people.

"I knew Oldways was traditional," Bannister says. "So I knew they would want a traditional recipe."

Bannister also knew a bit about winning cooking contests, although she had never actually entered one. Bannister is editor of the recently published "Blue Ribbon Recipes: Award-Winning Recipes from America's Country Fairs" (published by the Old Farmer's Almanac Home Library, Time-Life Books, 1997).

"I talked to hundreds of judges at fairs and asked what they looked for," Bannister says.

What Bannister learned about cooking contests was "to stay within the parameters, but do something that stands out. Grape leaves are traditional, but few people make them."

"Judges look for a dish that has an addictive taste and pleasing texture, photographs well, and can be prepared in 30 minutes or less, using three or four seasonings

added to 10 or fewer main ingredients."

The judging criteria for the contest Bannister entered were: 1) appearance, 2) taste, 3) nutrition value, 4) ease of preparation, 5) traditional preparation and 6) use of accessible ingredients that promote sustainable agriculture.

"We judged strictly on the merits of the recipes," says Francie King, media and publications director for Oldways. "It was completely blind judging. That was really important because it could have been quite political with the well-known chefs that participated."

More than 500 people participated in the contest, which had an April 17 deadline. The entrance fee was a one-year membership (\$35) in Chefs Collaborative 2000. Contestants could only submit one recipe and had to enter it in one of four categories: main course, side dish, salad or dessert.

A panel of chefs winnowed down 500 recipes to 40 recipes by re-reading them.

"After awhile, you can tell which recipe will be difficult to make, taste good and be healthy just by reading it," Gifford says.

The 40 recipes were then given greater consideration, and narrowed down to 11 recipes, which were made by chefs at the Savoy restaurant in New York, and evaluated by five judges: Gifford, Mimi Sheraton, former restaurant critic at The New York Times; Tina Ujlak, a cookbook author, Tina Ujlak, food editor of Food & Wine magazine, Cara DeSilva, a newspaper food columnist and cookbook author, and Marge Perry, senior editor of Cooking Light magazine.

Five winners were chosen: 1) grand prize winner (Cynthia Adams of Houston, Texas) received \$50,000 for her Mediterranean Spinach and Rice recipe, the first place winner (Polly Bannister) received \$10,000 and three second place winners received \$5,000.

To make Glorious Grape Leaves, Bannister recommends using fresh grape leaves, unless they're out of season. In that case, Bannister says, use jarred leaves packed in water, not oil. Similarly, Bannister recommends using fresh parsley, mint and basil.

"It makes all the difference in the world," Bannister says.

"I use whole ingredients with very little processing. It's very simple and something that resonates with people. People know what the food has not strayed too far from its origins."

Award-winner urged by co-workers to enter recipe contest

(Continued from page 4)

Bannister describes her Glorious Grape Leaves as "sweet, subtle and rich in flavor," and when presented, they look like "little bundles, like little presents."

GLORIOUS GRAPE LEAVES

- 24 large grape leaves, plus 6 for lining pan for cooking
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 tablespoon butter or margarine
- 1 medium onion, finely chopped
- 1/2 cup golden raisins
- 1/4 cup minced parsley
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh mint
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh basil
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/2 teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 1 1/2 cups cooked rice
- 1/2 cup pine nuts, toasted
- 1/4 cup freshly squeezed lemon juice

If using fresh grape leaves, trim stems at the base of leaves, rinsing leaves under cool water. Bring a pan of lightly salted water to a boil and blanch leaves for 1 to 2 minutes or until they are limp but retain texture. If using canned leaves, rinse in three changes of warm water (to remove brine). Whether using canned or fresh leaves, pat dry with a clean towel. Heat olive oil and butter in a large skillet and saute onions until translucent. Add raisins, parsley, mint, basil, salt, cinnamon, nutmeg, cayenne pepper and rice. Cook for two minutes.

Place pine nuts on cookie sheet or toaster-oven tray in 350-degree oven for 5 minutes or until lightly toasted (do not overcook). Stir toasted pine nuts into rice mix-

ture. Stuff leaves by laying a leaf underside up on work surface and place about 1 tablespoon of filling at stem end. Fold sides over and roll from the stem up to form a snug bundle. Repeat until 24 leaves are filled and wrapped.

Line a large skillet (an electric skillet works well here) with the remaining leaves. Sprinkle with three tablespoons lemon juice and place wrapped bundles in skillet. Add water to cover, about an inch, and simmer gently for 30 minutes. Transfer stuffed grape leaves to a platter and serve hot or chilled with remaining lemon juice sprinkled on top.

Here is the \$50,000 grand prize-winning recipe from Cynthia Aldape of Houston, Texas.

This side dish can serve as a starch, a vegetable, or both. The unique blend of flavors adds an interesting twist to any meat or fish dish. The proportions of any of the ingredients can be changed to accommodate the need for a starch, side dish or a vegetable side. Whichever you choose, there never seems to be enough.

MEDITERRANEAN SPINACH AND RICE

- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 4 cloves garlic, chopped (or to taste)
- 1/2 cup golden raisins
- 2 pounds fresh spinach leaves (washed & dried)
- 3 cups cooked white rice
- 1 cup feta cheese, crumbled
- 1 sweet red pepper, juiced (optional)
- 1 salt and pepper to taste

In a large wok, saute garlic over

medium heat in oil until barely golden. Add salt, pepper and raisins and saute for one minute. Add spinach and toss until just-wilted. Add the rice and the feta cheese. Toss all ingredients until heated through. Red pepper can be added prior to the rice, if desired. The pepper adds color and another texture to the dish.

One \$5,000 second prize winner was Sally Sampson of Whitertown, Mass. Her stew, which has roots in Moroccan cooking, is a combination of great taste sensations.

Sweet, tart, salty and spicy, it is simple to prepare, low in fat, gorgeous to behold and extremely versatile.

All the vegetables can be varied. If you don't like parsnips, simply add more carrots. If you don't like butternut squash, you substitute acorn squash or sweet potatoes.

And for spice fanatics or detractors, the spiciness can be adjusted by increasing or reducing the spices. The stew keeps well, refrigerated for up to 4 days and freezes beautifully for up to one month. If you prefer your raisins uncooked, omit them from the cooking portions and add them as part of the garnish.

MOROCCAN VEGETABLE STEW

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 small Spanish onion or 2 leeks, chopped
- 2 teaspoons finely chopped fresh ginger root
- 2 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
- 2 small turnips, peeled if desired, and diced
- 1 parsnip, peeled if desired, and diced
- 3 carrots, peeled if desired, and diced
- 1/2 large butternut squash, peeled and diced (about 4-5 cups)
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1/4 teaspoon ground coriander
- 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/8 -1/4 teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 3/4 teaspoon curry powder
- 1 large or 2 small zucchini, diced
- 1 1/2 cups fresh or canned diced tomatoes, including the juice
- 1 1/2 -2 cups cooked chick peas
- 1/8 cup dark or golden raisins
- 4 -5 cups chicken or vegetable broth
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh basil leaves

- 1/4 cup chopped fresh cilantro leaves
- 1/4 zest of 1-2 lemons
- 1/4 cup goat cheese
- 1/4 cup chopped black olives

Place a low stock pot over medium heat and when it is hot, add the oil. Add the onion, ginger, garlic, and cook until softened, about 10 minutes. Add the turnips, parsnips, carrots, squash, cumin, coriander, cinnamon, cayenne and curry and cook for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add the zucchini, tomatoes, chick peas, raisins and chick broth and bring to a boil.

Lower the heat to low, partially cover and cook until all the vegetables are tender, but do not fall apart, about 45 minutes to an hour. Serve over steamed basmati rice, garnish with the basil, cilantro, lemon zest, goat cheese and olives.

Jennifer Wehler of St. Louis, Mo., submitted this \$5000 second prize winner.

ARUGULA AND GOAT CHEESE SALAD WITH RAISIN BALSAMIC DRESSING

- 1/4 cup white rice
- 2 ounces mild soft goat cheese (at room temper-

- 3 (ature) tablespoons snipped chives
- 1/2 cup raisins
- 1 tablespoon red wine vinegar
- 2 tablespoons Balsamic vinegar
- 1/2 cup olive oil
- 1/4 pound arugula, rinsed well and spun dry

In a small sauce pot with tight-fitting lid, bring 1 cup water to boil and stir in rice. Lower heat, cover and cook 20 minutes, until rice is soft. Drain and set aside in a bowl to cool. Add goat cheese and chives and toss until cheese is melted and mixture can be formed. Form mixture into 4 round medallions and transfer to a plate, cover and refrigerate until ready to use.

In a jar with tight-fitting lid, combine raisins and vinegar and let sit 15 minutes until raisins have plumped up. Add olive oil, cover and shake vigorously until dressing is blended. (Dressing may be made several hours ahead and kept refrigerated.) Divide arugula leaves among four salad plates and arrange the leaves in a circle. Arrange one rice medallion in center of each plate and drizzle raisin vinaigrette over. Serve immediately.

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