



FOOD



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Karen Paly pours an egg mixture over her spiced meat as she preps it for the oven while giving tutorial on making Bobotie, a South African curried meatloaf, with her pre-blended spice packets at Juli Dave's North Asheville home.

LESSONS FROM KAREN'S SPICE KITCHEN

*Asheville family's
homegrown
business supports
flavorful cooking*

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East Asheville resident Karen Paly has always enjoyed cooking the curries of her native South Africa, where many varieties enjoy wide popularity. "When I was 5," she recalled, "my father took me out for my first curry. 'This is heaven,' I said."

As a teenager, she learned to make authentic curries with intricate spicing from her stepmother in Durban, which has the highest concentration of Indians outside India. A great repertoire of South African curries evolved there over 250 years, as Indian cooks tweaked their traditions with Dutch, English, Malay and native African takes on the dish.

For Paly, authenticity meant sourcing, blending and sometimes grinding her own spices. No generic curry powder or sauces out of a bottle for her.

When she and husband Scott moved to Asheville from Dallas 21 years ago to start a small farm, her first daughter was 18 months old and she was pregnant with her second. Despite a busy life raising beef cattle, chickens, lambs and vegetables and volunteering at Thoms Rehabilitation Hospital and at the girls' school, Paly never took shortcuts with her curries.

That changed when her daughters were at Asheville High. Their tennis, field hockey and lacrosse practices seriously cut into cooking time.

See **SPICE**, Page 4D



PHOTOS BY ANGELI WRIGHT/AWRIGHT@CITIZEN-TIMES.COM
Karen Paly and her husband, Scott, pour the contents of a pot into a pan to be prepped for the oven as they give a tutorial.

GET A TASTE

Karen Paly will hold a tasting of her curries from 3-5 p.m. Sept. 30 at the Chop Shop, 100 Charlotte St., Asheville. She'll be at the Sunburst Market, 142 N. Main St., Waynesville, from 2-5 p.m. Oct. 1, and at the French Broad Food Co-op, 90 Biltmore Ave., Asheville, from 3-6 p.m. Oct. 29. Watch her make Chicken and Chickpea Curry at www.youtube.com/watch?v=DxQos6Gp4gg and learn more at karenspacekitchen.com.

Spice

Continued from Page 4D

By then, Paly's father and stepmother had moved to Australia, where curry is also ubiquitous because of India's proximity and the British-Indian connection. On a visit, she found packaged spice blends that met her standards. One company offered 60 different versions. She ordered a dozen every month.

She and her husband, who calls himself a "serial entrepreneur" and likes to start new businesses, approached one company about becoming their American distributor. When they declined, the lightbulb went on. With her daughters now at Appalachian State, she said, "I can do it myself, I can have my own company."

Last August, coming back from a wedding in Australia, she said, "We talked a lot about it during the 18 hours on the plane from Sidney to Atlanta."

Starting in September, Paly played with combinations and proportions of classic Asian spices: cardamom, cinnamon, coriander, cumin, curry leaves, ginger, mustard seed, nutmeg, paprika and turmeric. She experimented with seafood, poultry, beef, lamb and vegetables. "We ate curry five times a week for four months," Scott Paly said.

She sent sample packets of each experiment to friends across the country with a survey. More of this? Less of that? Would you like to chop your own fresh onions and garlic or would you prefer dried in the packet? How much would you pay?

By January, she had settled on 12 selections, with familiar favorites like butter chicken and lamb korma, and a South African specialty called bobotie, a kind of meatloaf. And she had a name for her business: Karen's Spice Kitchen.

Trained as a graphic designer, Paly created her packaging and began a one-person manufacturing operation. "It is literally two teaspoons of this, a teaspoon of that, hand measured into plastic bags," she said, "plastic bags into paper bags, bags sealed, labels applied." She has a packing facility on Tunnel Road, approved by the N.C. Dept. of Agriculture, and she can turn out 150 packets in a few



Bobotie is one of several dishes that can be made with pre-blended spices from Karen's Spice Kitchen.

SOUTH AFRICAN BOBOTIE

A distinctly South African dish, bobotie is a hybrid of meatloaf and meat pie studded with raisins and toasted almonds, sweetened with apricot jam and grated apple and, in Paly's version, fragrant with ginger, coriander, cardamom, cumin and cloves.

Preparation time: 20 minutes. Cooking time: 75 minutes.

Serves 4-6

One package of Karen's Spice Kitchen Bobotie Spice Blend, which contains a packet of spices, a smaller packet of extra chili powder and a small packet of whole bay leaves.

- 1 large onion, chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed
- 2 tablespoons cooking oil
- 2 pounds ground beef or lamb or a combination of the two
- 1 Granny Smith apple, peeled, cored and grated
- 1 cup whole milk (non-dairy milk can be substituted)
- 1/2 cup slivered almonds, toasted
- 1/4 cup golden raisins
- 2 slices white bread, crusts removed
- 2 tablespoons apricot jam/preserves (chutney or other jam can be substituted)
- 3 large eggs
- Grated rind and juice of 1/2 lemon

Pre-heat oven to 325 degrees. Soak bread in 1/2 cup milk. In a 4-5 quart pot, cook onions in the oil until translucent; add garlic and cook for about 1 minute more. Turn down heat, add contents of large spice packet and cook for a few seconds, stirring constantly.

Add grated apple and mix together. Add ground meat, breaking up large pieces, and stir until coated with onion/garlic/spice mixture. Continue cooking and stirring on medium heat until meat has browned. Stir in raisins and almonds.

Break up soaked bread and add. Cook another two minutes. Add jam, lemon rind and lemon juice. Simmer on low heat for a few more minutes. Add extra chili powder if desired for heat.

Transfer mixture to a baking dish. Bake 45 minutes to one hour.

Whisk eggs and remaining 1/2 cup milk in a bowl and pour over meat. Press bay leaves into the mixture in a decorative pattern. Raise oven temperature to 400 degrees.

Continue baking 15 minutes or until the custard topping has set and browned.

Serve with rice. Paly suggests a green salad or a green vegetable as an accompaniment.

hours.

Her mother, Fanny Marcus, who lives on the Paly farm, sometimes helps. "She is a sweetheart," Paly said. "I am fortunate to have her close by."

Paly never wrote a business plan, but she had one in her head. Create a Facebook page and a web page. Find local vendors. She placed her first display at the Chop Shop, the Charlotte Street whole-animal butchery.

"I have a product that would help you sell more meat," she told Matt Helms, the manager. "I'm interested," he said.

Since taking her webpage live in February, Paly has sold 5,000 packets. Karen's Spice Kitchen sells in retail outlets in Asheville, Black Mountain, Fairview,

Brevard, Hendersonville, Hickory, Morganton and Waynesville. She holds in-store tastings, had a table at last month's Asheville Food & Wine Festival and appeared at two of this month's Taste of Biltmore showcases.

The next steps will be fancy food expos in Atlanta and maybe New York. From days of hand packing her spice packets and making deliveries to "a lot of late nights, sitting at the computer, figuring this stuff out," Paly said, "I don't sleep much. Five to six hours is normal." She is learning what it means to be the mom of a mom-and-pop food start-up.

"Now I know why they call it Labor Day," she said. She worked the entire weekend.