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## Food & Restaurants

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### Made to order

**SUSAN SCHRENK; For The News Tribune**

It's dinnertime and you've got a hankering for the Chicken Marsala you recently had at Olive Garden, with its perfect infusion of spices and texture. Only problem is the restaurant is too far away and you've settled in for the evening after a long day at work.



DREW PERRINE | THE NEWS TRIBUNE

No need to travel beyond your own front door to create your favorite restaurant meal at home. If you have Internet access, you'll find thousands of copycat recipes for homemade versions of restaurant dishes, as well as famous fast food, candy, sauces and seasonings.

Copycat Web sites have become popular places for recipe cloners and cooks to publish or find copies of such nationally known products as Big Macs, Hostess Twinkies, Bit-O-Honey, Bisquick, See's fudge and Big Boy seasoning salt.

"Restaurant recipes and copycat recipes have always been popular requests on our message boards - even before we had a forum dedicated to copycat recipes," says Betsy Couch of RecipeLink.com, based in Rochester, N.Y.

Most copycat Web sites gather their recipes from the public in the form of newsgroups, message boards or chat rooms, but many restaurants themselves supply the creations you'll find on these sites. While this ensures the truest version of your favorite recipe, says Valerie Whitmore of CDKitchen.com, contributing recipes to copycat Web sites is also an easy way for restaurants to obtain free advertising on the Web.

"Think about it," she says. "You just stumbled across a great looking recipe for Applebee's chimichangas. Your spouse/significant other suggests going out for dinner that night. What's the first restaurant that comes to mind?"

Not all copycat recipe sites depend on submissions from the Internet community. Todd Wilbur of TopSecretRecipes.com is an copycat recipe pioneer and the author of a slew of copycat recipe books. Wilbur, of Las Vegas, Nev., personally creates every recipe in his books and on his site.

"The time-consuming trial-and-error process of reverse engineering food is at times tedious," he says, "but extremely rewarding when successful. I love to cook ... so I guess you could say this is my dream job."

Wilbur's site has garnered a number of fans because it offers an eclectic choice of copycat recipes alongside traditional favorites.



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"(TopSecretRecipes.com) has a lot of nostalgic value for me," says Robert Elsenpeter of Minnesota, "because there are sections that cover some of the older products I used to love, but can't find anymore (like Marathon candy bars)."

Why create copycat recipes at home? For some it's more convenient and cost-effective.

"We live 40 miles from town and 90 miles from a large metro area," says Micha Buller, who lives in Arizona, "so you can't just run to your favorite restaurant or the grocery for a brand-name item whenever you want. Cost is also an attraction. I can make copycat recipes much cheaper than purchasing them pre-made."

For others it's a way to make healthier or more proportionate versions of their favorite recipes.

"I especially like copycat recipes for spice and herb blends," says Jeanne Swanson of Florida. "I can make them in smaller amounts ... and control the MSG and excessive salt many of the commercial mixes have. I definitely think it is more convenient to cook at home than go to a restaurant, as well as healthier and generally the food is better."

Some just want a little more adventure in the kitchen and don't care about difficulty.

"It is decidedly less convenient and more expensive (honestly, who keeps anchovy paste or a can of cane syrup on hand?) to do a copycat recipe," says Elsenpeter. "It's much easier to simply go to the restaurant. On the other hand, it's a ton of fun to try and make these recipes on your own - and you can even make triple or quadruple stuffed Oreos."

Because of the sheer volume of submissions they receive, not all Web site operators have the time to test recipes before they post them. As with most culinary experiments, results can vary.

"I believe the recipes from restaurants shared by chefs are usually most accurate," says Couch. "Copycat recipes are sometimes reported as very close to their original counterpart, but those and experimental clone recipes are usually 'works in progress.' Sometimes they're right on the money and other times have a long way to go."

Whitmore agrees: "Many of the recipes just won't taste exactly like the restaurant's version because the average home cook doesn't have the commercial equipment or ingredients available to them," she says. "Some recipes (apparently) come right from the source so they are very close. Others are someone's best guess at copying them and while they might be very tasty, they may not be exact."

Exact or not, Couch recommends approaching copycat recipes with a spirit of adventure and a sense of humor. Sometimes outrageous ingredients - such as powdered saltine crackers in a salad dressing or baby food in hamburgers - may be just what it takes to create the perfect taste or texture for your clone.

"Ultimately," she says, "when the results turn into the taste you crave, it makes all the trial and error worthwhile."

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Here are some look-alikes to start with:

### **Hostess Twinkies**

a bottle about the size of a Twinkie

12 12-inch-by-14-inch pieces of aluminum foil

pastry bag

toothpick

*For the cake:*

4 egg whites

1 16-ounce box golden pound cake mix

2/3 cup water

Nonstick spray

*For the filling:*

2 tablespoon butter

1/3 cup vegetable shortening

1 cup powdered sugar

1/4 cup granulated sugar

1/3 cup evaporated milk

1 tsp vanilla extract

2 drops lemon extract

Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Fold each piece of foil in half twice. Wrap the folded foil around the bottle to create a mold. Leave the top open for pouring the batter in. Make 12 of these molds and arrange on a cookie sheet. Spray the inside of each with nonstick spray.

Beat the egg whites until stiff. Combine with cake mix and water, and beat about 2 minutes until thoroughly blended. Pour batter into molds, filling each about 3/4 inch deep. Bake about 30 minutes, or until the cake is golden brown and a toothpick comes out clean from the center.

For the filling, cream the butter and shortening. Slowly add the sugars while beating. Add the evaporated milk, vanilla and lemon extracts. Mix on medium speed until completely smooth and fluffy. When the cakes are done and cooled, use a toothpick to make three small holes in the bottom of each one. Move the toothpick around the inside of each cake to make room for filling. Using the pastry bag, inject each cake with filling through all three holes. Makes 12.

Source: courtesy of recipelink.com

### **Olive Garden Chicken Marsala**

4 chicken half-breasts, cut 1/4-inch thick, skinned and deboned

1/4 cup Wondra flour

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/2 teaspoon oregano

4 tablespoons oil

4 tablespoons butter/margarine

1 cup fresh mushrooms - sliced

1/2 cup Marsala wine

Combine flour, salt, pepper and oregano and blend well. Heat the oil and butter in a skillet until bubbling lightly. Dredge the chicken in the flour and shake off the excess. Cook the chicken on medium heat for about two minutes on the first side, until lightly brown. As you turn the breasts to the second side to cook, add the mushrooms around the chicken pieces. Cook about two more minutes, until lightly browned on the second side.

Stir the mushrooms. When the second side is lightly browned, add the wine around the pieces, cover the pan and simmer for about

10 minutes. Serve immediately.

Source: CDKitchen.com

### **Boston Market Corn Bread**

1 box Jiffy Mix Corn Bread Mix

1 box Jiffy Mix Yellow Cake Mix

or

2 boxes Jiffy Mix Corn Bread Mix

1 box regular yellow cake mix

Mix both boxes according to directions, and combine the batter. Use a large mix bowl, and add both boxes together, and add the other ingredients all at once. If you're only using boxes of

Jiffy mix, use an 8-inch-by-8 inch baking pan. If you are going to use a box of regular cake mix, use a 9-by-13 inch pan. Bake at 350 degrees until done (usually about 30 minutes).

Source: CDkitchen.com

### **Top Secret Recipes version of Wendy's Chili**

2 pounds ground beef

One 29-ounce can tomato sauce

One 29-ounce can kidney beans (with liquid)

One 29-ounce can pinto beans (with liquid)

1 cup diced onion (1 medium onion)

1/2 cup diced green chili (2 chilies)

1/4 cup diced celery (1 stalk)

3 medium tomatoes, chopped

2 teaspoons cumin powder

3 tablespoons chili powder

1 1/2 teaspoons black pepper

2 teaspoons salt

2 cups water

Brown the ground beef in a skillet over medium heat; drain off the fat. Using a fork, crumble the cooked beef into pea-size pieces. In a large pot, combine the beef plus all the remaining ingredients, and bring to a simmer over low heat. Cook, stirring every 15 minutes, for two to three hours.

Makes about 12 servings.

### **Bit-O-Honey**

1 cup honey

1 cup chunky peanut butter

2 cups dry powdered milk

Melt honey and peanut butter together in microwave. Add dry powdered milk and knead well. Roll out on wax paper. Cut in strips and roll into pillows. Wrap in wax paper to store.

Source: CDkitchen.com

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