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The Internet is stuffed with goodies for cooks

Barbara Haugen / Star Tribune

For cooks who surf the Internet, the question is not whether you'll be able to find a recipe for awesome apricot bars. Or whether you'll become engrossed in a serial novel about one woman's struggles with life, love and salmon cakes in lobster sauce.

Or whether you'll stumble onto a complete description of the old Kwakiutl Indian way to prepare and serve a whale found dead on the beach.

It's just a question of when.

The Internet is as stuffed with goodies for cooks as a gourmet's pantry, with recipe archives you can search by name or ingredient, tips from celebrity chefs and knowledgeable amateurs, and Web sites and news groups devoted to any cooking-related topic.

If your eyes glaze when people start talking computers, your love of cooking might be a good reason for an attitude upgrade. And while some aspects of Net use are more arcane than others, news groups and the Web are no more difficult to learn to use than a new food processor.

"It's got a lot of resources," said Barb Schaller of Burnsville. "And it's just way too much fun."

Schaller, who describes herself as a "middle-

aged computer geek wannabe," uses the Internet often for cooking information. When her sister needed a recipe for a certain kind of peanut pie, Schaller rounded up two on the Cookbooks On/ Line Web site. She found another site promoting a book of recipes from the Carpathian Mountain region where her family originated.

And when the M.A. Gedney Co. chose Schaller's peach-raspberry jelly last year to adapt for its Minnesota State Fair line of preserves, the news stirred the jam world in the rec.food.preserving news group, which covers canning, pickling and smoking foods.

"I have the most fun in the news groups," she said.

"As someone put it, they're just like a coffee klatsch, only you don't have to put on your makeup."

Valerie Whitmore

Newsgroups are ongoing written discussions of a specific topic that you can choose to keep up with online. Web sites are usually much jazzier-looking, garnished with graphics, animations, photos and a seemingly endless trail of links that let you leap from one site to another with a click.

Valerie Whitmore

"I was just amazed by what you can find out there," said Valerie Whitmore of Minneapolis. "You can keep going on and on and on."

Types of sites

Cooking-related Web sites generally fall into a few categories:

Commercial sites set up by companies, such as Pillsbury or the Eatwell Organic Farm of Winters, Calif., to promote their products.

Celebrity sites, with interviews and recipes from famous chefs and cooking show hosts.

Ad-sponsored enterprise sites including magazines -- those with newsstand versions and those published only on the Web.

Those put up by individuals who just love to cook and share recipes.

Whitmore has her own Web site, which includes a section called "The ChiliDog's Cookbook" (named after her Dalmatian). The site took a day to set up last year. Now she spends an hour or so a day adding recipes and links -- time wedged among her full-time job at the University of Minnesota, her pursuit of a degree in criminology and her chores as a moderator of the rec.food.recipes news group.

It's volunteer work, but Whitmore said the feedback she gets from the site makes it worthwhile. She gets e-mails from people who have tried one of her recipes or who write to say they like her site.

"A lot of it is just being able to share and knowing people are actually enjoying these recipes," she said.

All the technical mumbo-jumbo surrounding the Internet -- which is enough to scare off some people -- makes it seem completely disconnected from the scent of homemade soup or the cathartic joy of kneading bread dough. In some ways, it is.

"There is no substitute for getting into the

kitchen, getting your hands messy, and cooking real food -- and sharing and enjoying what you've created," said Eric Hansen of Kampsville, Ill., via e-mail. His Web site offers his collection of original recipes, along with tales about his work as an archaeologist.

Still, there's enough out there to tempt even -- or especially -- the most dedicated from-scratch cook to start surfing. How else could you learn, quite by accident in the privacy of your Midwestern home, that it's best not to use the tail meat when preparing alligator sauce?

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