

Jennifer Chandler's cookbook shows that great-tasting meals can be simple

By C. Richard Cotton / Special to The Commercial Appeal

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Her books might make it sound simple, but Jennifer Chandler's life is anything but right now.

In addition to the release on Monday of her second cookbook, "Simply Suppers: Easy Comfort Food Your Whole Family Will Love" (Thomas Nelson, \$24.99), Chandler has also just signed as the national spokeswoman for French's Mustard and French's French Fried Onions.

She's a busy woman, doing radio interviews from her East Memphis home and soon to be on the road for her book tour. She just returned from a week in New York promoting the book and taping spots for French's. She's developing recipes and going on TV and radio talk shows for the company, not making commercials, because, she points out:

"I'm a real-life mom and cook, not an actor."

With two girls under 10 and a husband who also has a busy career, "simple" might be optimistic, but striving for it is crucial to keeping her family well fed.

"It's all about preparation and having a few strategies," Chandler said. "I always have a well-stocked kitchen, and if I'm making a home-cooked meal that freezes well, I make a double batch."

"Simply Suppers" follows Chandler's successful "Simply Salads" (Thomas Nelson, \$24.99), which first published in 2007 and has undergone subsequent printings. Both take the sensible approach that putting good food on the table is something anyone can do.

"Good food isn't about being gourmet ... it's about being delicious," Chandler writes in the

introduction of her latest book. "In fact, some of our favorite foods are the simplest dishes."

Then she spends the next 240-plus pages proving it.

"It's all about comfort food. I wanted to show

people you can easily put together good home-cooked food," she said.

Calling the recipes "a good mixture of both healthy and fattening comfort foods,"

Chandler is not the least bit apologetic about the latter: "There is butter in this book," she declared.

For the health-minded, try the White Bean Chicken Chili, which is among Chandler's favorites and was a popular dish at her now-closed restaurant, Cheffie's Market & More. The chicken chili is one of several including soups she keeps frozen and ready to serve her husband, Paul, and daughters Hannah, 10, and Sarah, 8. The other two always on hand are the Vegetable Beef and the Lentil and Sausage soups featured in the book.

After working together on magazine articles, Chandler collaborated with New Orleans-based food photographer Natalie Root for "Simply Suppers." She and Root spent many days at the Chandler residence, cooking the dishes, arranging settings and shooting photos of them on the dining room table.

Chandler began writing recipes last November and turned in the completed manuscript in early March: "I basically lived and breathed this book for those months. My family ate very well, and so did the neighbors and even delivery people I gave food to."

Chandler, 39, also collaborated with 20 recipe testers -- friends, relatives and cooking colleagues -- across the country. She e-mailed them recipes that they cooked, suggesting changes, additions and subtractions. Chandler drew on a mix of experienced and novice cooks to test the recipes in order to ensure anyone can cook them.

"It was fun. I would do it again," said tester and friend Patricia Wilson, who just moved from Memphis to North Carolina. Wilson was sent 15 recipes; she suggested "some minor adjustments on a few of them."

While most of the recipes are fairly simple, Chandler has included some that are slightly more complex. For some of her dishes, she draws on her 18 months of study in Paris at Le Cordon Bleu, where she graduated at the top of her class in pastries.

"I'm very proud of my dessert section," said Chandler.

"Every single one of them is worth every calorie," she said.

Each recipe comes with a bit of history as to where Chandler acquired it. She has also included color-coded tips for each, as well as suggested substitutions for some ingredients that might be difficult to find.

"I tried to think of everything I ever wanted in a cookbook," said Chandler. "I want people's 'Simply Suppers' books to be grease-stained and have tomato sauce on them. I want them to be used."

Yellow Squash Casserole

5 tbsp. unsalted butter, plus extra to grease the baking dish and for the topping

2 lbs. yellow summer squash (about 8 squash)

Kosher salt

- 3/4 cup finely diced yellow onion (1 medium onion)
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1 small jalapeño pepper, seeded and finely diced
- 1 1/2 cups panko bread crumbs
- 4 large eggs, lightly beaten
- 1 container (15-oz.) whole milk or part-skim ricotta cheese
- 1 small log (4-oz.) fresh goat cheese
- 1/2 cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 1/4 tsp. paprika
- Freshly ground black pepper

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees. Lightly grease a 2 1/2 -quart baking dish with butter and set aside.

Cut the squash into 1/2 -inch thick slices. Over high heat, bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add the squash and cook until fork tender, about 10 minutes. Drain well. Transfer to the bowl of a food processor and coarsely puree.

In a large saucepot over medium heat, melt the butter. Add the onion, garlic and jalapeño pepper and cook until soft but not browned, about 4 minutes. Add the squash puree, 1 cup of the bread crumbs, eggs, ricotta cheese, goat cheese, 1/4 cup of the Parmesan cheese and paprika. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Stir until well combined. Pour the puree into the prepared baking dish and top with the remaining 1/2 cup of the breadcrumbs, 1/4 cup of the Parmesan, and thinly sliced pats of butter. Bake until golden brown, about 40 minutes. Serves 6 to 8.

Slow Cooker Beef Stew

- 4 lbs. beef chuck roast, trimmed and cut into 2-inch cubes
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 2 tbsp. olive oil
- 1/2 cup good red wine (such as a merlot or syrah)
- 1 can (28-oz.) whole tomatoes with juice
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 1/2 cups baby carrots
- 2 bay leaves

Pat the meat dry with a paper towel and generously season with salt and pepper.

In a large cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat, warm the oil until a few droplets of water sizzle when carefully sprinkled in the skillet. In two batches as to not overcrowd the skillet, cook the meat until nicely browned on all sides, about 8 minutes per batch. Transfer the meat to the slow cooker (at least 3 1/2 -quart size).

Pour the red wine into the skillet, stirring with a wooden spoon to scrape the brown bits on the bottom, to deglaze the pan. Pour the wine mixture into the slow cooker.

Add the tomatoes to the slow cooker, breaking them up with a spoon or fork. Add the garlic, carrots and bay leaves. Cover and cook on high until fork tender, about 5 to 6 hours. Adjust seasonings as needed. Discard the bay leaves. Serve warm. Serves 6 to 8.

Cooking tip: If you do not have a slow cooker, you can still make this dish. Place the ingredients in a Dutch oven or heavy stock pot with a lid and bake in a 250 degree oven for 3 hours.

Blackened Catfish

For the remoulade dipping sauce:

3/4 cup mayonnaise

4 tbsp. ketchup

3 tbsp. freshly squeezed lemon juice

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

1 tbsp. finely sliced scallions

For the blackened catfish:

4 catfish fillets (6 oz. each)

4 tbsp. blackened seasoning

2 tbsp. olive oil

To make the remoulade dipping sauce: In a medium mixing bowl whisk together the mayonnaise, ketchup and lemon juice. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Stir in the scallions. Cover and refrigerate until ready to serve.

To make the blackened catfish: Season both sides of the fish with the blackened seasoning. In a large skillet over medium-high heat, warm the oil until a few droplets of water sizzle when carefully sprinkled in the pan. Sear the fish on one side until the meat is well browned and releases easily from the pan, about 4 to 5 minutes. Turn over the fillets and cook until desired doneness, about 5 more minutes. Serve warm with a spoonful of the remoulade dipping sauce. Serves 4.

Potato Chip Chicken Tenders

1/2 cup all-purpose flour

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

2 large eggs, lightly beaten

1 bag (11-oz.) Lay's potato chips, crushed

4 boneless, skinless chicken breasts (about 1 1/2 lbs.)

Vegetable oil, for frying

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.

Place the flour in a shallow bowl and season generously with salt and pepper. Place the beaten egg in another shallow bowl. Leave the crushed potato chips in the bag. (This way you don't dirty another dish.)

Rinse the chicken and pat dry with paper towels. Slice each chicken breast lengthwise into 4 or 5 strips. Generously season the chicken with salt and pepper. Working in small batches, lightly dredge both sides of the chicken in the seasoned flour, shaking off the excess. Next dip the chicken in the egg wash to coat completely, letting the excess drip off. Then dredge the chicken through the crushed potato chips, evenly coating on all sides. Place the prepared chicken on a baking sheet or cutting board.

In a large stockpot or Dutch oven, pour enough oil so that there is an approximately a 1-inch layer of oil. Over medium-high heat, warm the oil until a few droplets of water sizzle when carefully sprinkled in the pot. In batches so as not to over crowd the pot, cook the chicken until golden brown, about 3 minutes per side. Transfer the chicken to a baking sheet lined with parchment paper. Transfer to the oven and bake until the chicken is cooked through, about 15 to 20 minutes. Serve warm. Serves 4 to 6.

Note: I like to serve this with my homemade honey mustard sauce. Just whisk together equal amounts prepared yellow mustard, whole-grain Dijon mustard and mayonnaise. Add honey to taste.

Freezes well: The prepared but uncooked chicken fingers freeze well. To prevent sticking, freeze the chicken fingers in a single layer on a baking sheet before placing them in a container or freezer bag. When you are ready to cook the chicken fingers, no need to thaw. You can fry them frozen.

Source, all recipes: "Simply Suppers: Easy Comfort Food Your Whole Family Will Love," Jennifer Chandler

Book signings

Chandler will hold the following local book signings:

Babcock Gifts, 4626 Poplar, Sept. 25; 1-3 p.m.

Davis-Kidd Booksellers, 387 Perkins Ext., Sept. 28; 7 p.m.

Collierville Burch Public Library, 440 W. Powell, "Meet the Author Series" Oct. 12; 11 a.m.-noon

Keep up with her at cookwithjennifer.com.



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