

## Time-Saving Tactics For Speed-Scratch Cooking

TOWSON, Md. — Home cooking is alive and well, and family dinners are the norm in millions of households, said Delia Hammock, associate director of the Good Housekeeping Institute and director/editor of "Nutrition and Fitness."

In fact, almost 80 percent of *Good Housekeeping* readers polled in a 1994 survey said they are still home-on-the-range five to seven evenings a week. But while the symbolic meaning of dinner may not have changed much, the preparation of it certainly has.

Convenience is now a prerequisite for both the novice cook and the experienced culinary whiz, and no one is apologizing for it, Hammock said. Women see choosing foods that are easier to prepare, to serve, to eat and to clean up as "smart," because it allows them to work outside the home and still get the evening meal on the table.

But while convenience is king (or queen) in the kitchen, this doesn't necessarily mean that consumers want more packaged convenience foods to zap in the microwave, Hammock said. In fact, there has been a definite retreat from such heat-and-eat fare.

"In the past three years, we've

seen sales of many well-known microwaveable brands shrink, and the number of new entries in the microwaveable category decline," she said.

Instead, women are rethinking meal preparation with an eye toward shortcuts that don't require a major sacrifice in quality or taste. The result is a new style of cooking which has been dubbed "speed scratch" by trend watchers. Speed-scratch bears little resemblance to the traditional "cooking from scratch" which often meant spending hours in the kitchen, or to the old straight-from-the-can cooking which never fooled anyone.

The '95 version of home cooking is characterized by a combined use of ready-to-use and readily available fresh and processed convenience products. These include pre-packaged and ready-to-cook fresh vegetables, pre-washed lettuce mixes, meat pre-cut for stir-fry or kebabs, pre-seasoned beef cuts, marinated chicken cutlets, rotisserie chicken, jarred sauces, spice blends, frozen vegetable medleys (or stir-fry vegetable and sauce combinations), and high quality canned foods. It's a culinary compromise that blends fast and simple with wholesome and

delicious.

Cheese is a perfect speed-scratch ingredient — a ready to use refrigerator staple in most households. Its versatility can take the hasty home cook from hors d'oeuvre to dessert with flair, and it adds nutrition as well as a fresh homemade flavor to any dish — all without a lot of extra work.

Today, cheese can be found in the dairy case sliced, shredded, grated, even cubed. Many varieties now come in resealable bags that further enhance the convenience factor. Flavored cheeses also make it easy to give a meal an ethnic flair without buying special ingredients.

A taco-flavored combination of shredded Cheddar and Monterey Jack is perfect for giving a dish a Tex-Mex twist, or building a gourmet pizza in minutes by teaming up a ready-made pizza shell and tomato sauce with one of the shredded pizza cheese blends on the market.

Cheese also appeals to the increasing number of "part-time" vegetarians who are interested in consuming more meatless meals but still want taste, convenience and nutrition.

Speed-scratch cooking doesn't necessarily start with a traditional

step-by-step recipe. Instead, it may originate with a meal kit which includes the exact amount of each necessary ingredient. Or it may be as simple as pairing a prepared product with a fresh product and adding a creative garnish.

Speed-scratch recipes are streamlined — ingredient lists are short, steps are few, and preparation utensils are held to a minimum. This short-cut cooking allows the cook to customize the dish to meet the family's needs and taste preferences, Hammock said, and it also offers the emotional involvement and payoff of "homemade" with a minimum of effort. The bottom line? More control, less guilt.

### Shopping Tips

During your next shopping trip, look at the shelves with an eye toward streamlining your time in the kitchen. There's a palate-pleasing assortment of convenience foods including:

#### On the Grocery Shelves...

- The wide variety of pasta sauces from the standard marinara to Italian regional varieties; from creamy to extra-chunky, seasoned with pesto, sun-dried tomatoes, peppers, garlic, etc.
- Stewed tomatoes, seasoned in

a variety of ways, the start of quick soups and casseroles — as sauces for meat and poultry.

- Canned soups and beans in countless varieties — the basis of quick meals.

- Flavored vinegars, croutons, packaged salad fixings — all for speedy salad making.

- Condiments like mustards, chutneys and relishes to quickly add flavor to super-fast meal preparation.

- The large assortment of salsas, barbecue sauces and marinades.

- The seemingly unlimited assortment of seasoned rice, pasta and potato mixes, ready to be turned into a main dish with chunks of cheese, meat or poultry.

#### In the Dairy Case...

- The broad array of cheeses, sliced, cubed and shredded; others spiced for tacos and pizzas as well as blends of two or more shredded cheeses, packed in easily resealable bags.

- Seasoned soft cheeses shaped in logs or balls for instant party food or snacks.

- The many new flavors and packages of cottage cheese and yogurt.

(Turn to Page B36)



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