

## In the Kitchen With Chef Deborah Spriggs-Ross

Growing up in the Windy City with an executive chef for a father provided all the inspiration Chef Deborah Spriggs-Ross needed to launch her cooking career some 15 years ago. Except, her father was not an executive chef. Despite the fact that he did all the work that is expected of an executive chef, and even treated his customers to specialties like homemade beer and gourmet doughnuts, he would only be given the title of short-order cook. That was the top job for Negroes back then, even in a great city like Chicago. "My dad was an extraordinary chef for his day," Spriggs-Ross shares with *Unity*. "He was into organic and natural foods, and this was the '50s and '60s. He started his shifts at three and four in the morning, and his recipes went far beyond grill food or soul food. His Indian succotash was a community favorite," she adds.



Spriggs-Ross

### Parmesan of Sole

(Serves 4)

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1 ½ cups fresh bread crumbs  
 ½ cup fresh Parmesan cheese  
 ¼ cup chopped Italian parsley  
 1 teaspoon Spanish paprika  
 ½ teaspoon fresh oregano  
 ¼ teaspoon of minced garlic  
 1 teaspoon of kosher salt  
 ½ teaspoons of fresh ground pepper  
 Pinch of cayenne  
 Dressed (cleaned) whole fillets of sole  
 ¾ cup half and half cream,  
 Cooking spray (preferably olive oil)

Combine bread crumbs, Parmesan cheese, parsley, paprika, oregano, garlic, salt and peppers. Dip fish in the cream, then in bread crumb mixture. Arrange fish in a baking dish 11 x 9 x 2 inches. Spray fish lightly with olive oil. Bake in a 375-degree oven for 20-25 minutes or until fish flakes easily.

Working alongside her dad instilled in Spriggs-Ross a natural feel for ingredients, measurements and aromas. She was also driven by an entrepreneurial spirit and began a catering business out of her home, but she soon learned starting a food business takes more than a passion for cooking. The city shut her down because there are regulations, permits and other requirements for legally operating a kitchen. Determined to resurrect herself and do it by the book, Spriggs-Ross began networking in associations like Women Chefs and Restaurateurs, reading dozens of books and aggressively searching for mentors.

Eventually, Spriggs-Ross did resurrect herself, relaunching a catering business that continues to grow. She also has diversified into a number of exciting culinary projects. She was recently named executive chef and food writer for *Girlfriend's Health Guide*, a Milwaukee-based, regional publication devoted to health issues for African American and Latino women ([www.girlfriendshealthguide.com](http://www.girlfriendshealthguide.com)). "Unfortunately, women of color are still suffering from certain health issues in numbers disproportionate to their size in the overall population. That's just the way it is," Spriggs-Ross says. "So each quarter

the magazine is published, I focus on foods to help combat one of those issues, whether it be hypertension, diabetes, obesity or breast cancer." Spriggs-Ross has personal knowledge of these issues. Her mother died of kidney failure and her father of Hodgkin's disease; her ex-husband was diabetic; and, she suffers from high blood pressure. "Proper diet isn't the total answer to these problems, but it is certainly part of the answer, because I've experienced the results myself. A good, healthy way of eating on a daily basis has improved the quality of my life immeasurably," Spriggs-Ross states.

Of course, this isn't the whole story of her work in the culinary arts. Spriggs-Ross is also active in her community, providing support, mentorship and, of course, lots of cooking instructions to organizations like the Girl Scouts and the YWCA. "I suppose I am most fond of the work we are doing at the Next Door Foundation," she says. The Next Door Foundation provides support to families living at or below the poverty level in the Milwaukee area. Spriggs-Ross works with those families to teach them how to plan grocery purchases on a tight budget and how to prepare healthy meals throughout the week.



Left to right: Chef Spriggs-Ross, Rochelle Minor of Girlfriends Health Guide, and intern Tammy Winfield.

### Pecan Praline Caramel Cake

Serves 8-10

"My father inspired this recipe. I made it for more than 300 chefs at the annual Women Chefs and Restaurateurs Conference in 2001."

2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour  
 2 cups sugar  
 3 teaspoons baking powder  
 1 teaspoon kosher salt  
 1/8 teaspoon ground cassia cinnamon  
 1 1/2 cups plus 1/3 cup whole milk  
 2 teaspoons plus 1/4 teaspoon pure Mexican vanilla extract  
 2/3 cups vegetable shortening  
 2 large eggs  
 1/3 cup butter  
 1 cup brown sugar  
 2 cups powdered sugar  
 1/4 cup pecans, chopped

#### For the Cake

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Grease and flour 2 9x2-inch round cake pans.

Beat all ingredients in the list up to, and including, the eggs (use 1 1/2 cups milk and 2 teaspoons vanilla). Beat on low until ingredients have all become moist. Then, beat on high speed, scraping down all ingredients so everything is included. Beating time is about 7-8 minutes.

Pour into prepared pans. Bake until toothpick inserted in center comes out clean, between 30-35 minutes. Cool for about 10-15 minutes and remove cake from pans.

#### For the Caramel Frosting

Prepare while cake is cooling. Using a 2-quart saucepan, melt the butter on medium-low heat, and stir in brown sugar. Heat until it boils, stirring continuously with a wooden spoon. Then add the remaining milk and vanilla, and stir until it boils. Remove from heat, and add the pecans. Cool.

When caramel mixture is still slightly warm, add the powdered sugar. Beat in sugar until caramel is very smooth. Be prepared to frost your cake right away. This particular frosting tends to harden fast. If it becomes too hard, add a few teaspoons of milk.

#### Helpful Hint

"Serve this dessert with the berries of your choice. I prefer raspberries because they reduce the sweetness of the caramel."