

Good Luck and Bubblewrap.com

By LISA NAPOLI DEC. 30, 2004

A Recipe for Good Luck

The only thing that stands between Rick McDaniel and a giant pot of black-eyed peas is the date. Like many Southerners, actual and adoptive, he plans to cook up some Hoppin' John on New Year's Day. The dish is a simple blend of black-eyed peas with rice, spiced with a bit of pig, either in the form of bacon or ham hock.

"You find it eaten in the poorest homes and most expensive mansions," said Mr. McDaniel, who lives in Asheville, N.C., and maintains a Web site dedicated to his love of Southern cooking, www.chefrick.com. "I would no more have New Year's Day without Hoppin' John than I would go on a diet on New Year's Day."

A blend of tradition and superstition keeps it alive. The dish symbolizes good luck and good fortune for the coming year. For extra luck, Mr. McDaniel said, "I always put a dime in mine, and my wife always has a conniption fit every year because she's sure someone's going to choke on it. But we've never had to call 911."

Mr. McDaniel said he began lurking in the kitchen during childhood, which inspired his love of making and not just consuming Southern delights. A friend eager to experiment with the Web helped him post recipes and food columns starting in 1996, and Mr. McDaniel loves the way it helps keep tradition alive. Many of the recipes he shares are from his Aunt Ruth.

"She would just be tickled to death," he said. "A man from the Sultanate of Brunei wrote to tell me how much he loved her sweet potato pie. And her pound cake was made by someone from the U.N. peacekeeping force in Kosovo."

That pie "is probably the best thing I've ever put in my mouth," Mr. McDaniel said. "It's so good, it's beyond belief."

Matzo to Dinosaurs

Keeping family traditions alive is what inspired Eric D. Alterman to start knowitallvideo.com. He had wanted to capture his 98-year-old grandmother on tape, talking about her matzo ball soup, but she died before he could train the camera on her.

He launched the site in the fall anyway, and immediately began receiving videos from people like Jason Klamm, an aspiring filmmaker who lives in -- where else? -- Los Angeles.

Mr. Klamm's video, "Dinosaurs: They Certainly Were Big," quickly became one of the most popular videos at the site, which gives viewers the chance to rate them.

He does not represent himself as a paleontologist. "It was just for a science class," said Mr. Klamm, 24, who moved west after graduating from Columbia College in Chicago. "The only thing I can do is make movies. I wrote it in, like, a night, and we shot it the next day. We lived on Michigan Avenue, right across the street from the Museum of Natural History."

He wound up working for a search engine, and his attention was piqued by a request to be listed from a company known as KnowItAllVideo. He submitted his video, now two years old, to the company. A few weeks ago, Mr. Alterman called to tell him that his was one of five videos chosen to be shown on Frontier Airlines beginning in January.

"It's insane exposure," Mr. Klamm said. "The reality of it is I'm not going to make money right away in film, so I had to set my goals just on getting people to like my stuff."

Nor does Mr. Alterman, an entrepreneur based in New York and Jupiter, Fla., expect to make money with his new Web venture right away. But he thinks the potential for amateur video online and on cellphones is enormous in an age of high-speed connections.

"In the Internet world, everyone can be a contributor," he said. "It's not just for Hollywood anymore."

Pop Goes the Woofer

This penultimate day of the year is a good one for quiet reflection, and there's no better way to rack up some quality idle time than by doing something mindless like,

say, popping bubble packaging. If you have never had the pleasure, thanks to Katherine Fernie, you can -- even if you don't have any of the stuff hanging around.

At www.virtual-bubblewrap.com, a pristine cybersheet of the wrapping is there for your amusement. (A supersophomoric version makes distasteful sounds.) Ms. Fernie is a Web designer who lives in Centreville, Va. And she harbors no delusions about her site.

"It started back in the day when the funniest things on the Internet were sites like 'the big red button that doesn't do anything' and other absurdist 'useless' sites," she said in an e-mail interview. "My friend and I were wanting to put up a site that topped them all in uselessness, so we brainstormed to think of what would translate least well to an online medium. Bubble Wrap was our natural choice. It is an almost completely tactile experience, so how could that possibly translate to a computer screen?"

Ms. Fernie and her friend created several other versions before the Flash animation that is currently available was posted. She has many fans, among them the Sealed Air Corporation, the maker of Bubble Wrap, which has given her permission to use the name of its product.

Fans write in her guest book, including one who typed: "i dont know who it was where it was when it was who invented this game but you are totally awesome dude and you have my vote for the totally addictive game dude."

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