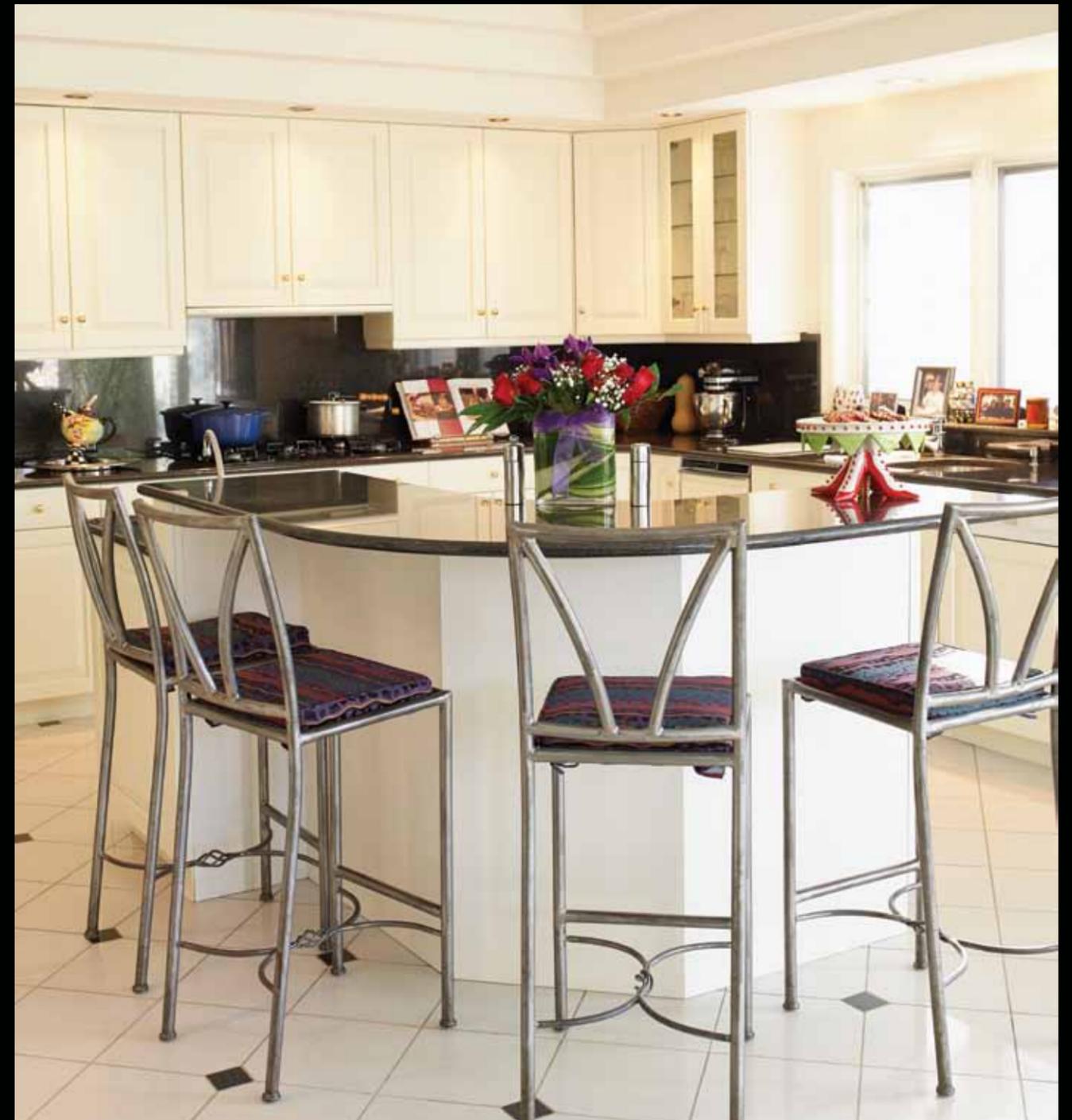


Vicki Bensinger

Born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri, Vicki Bensinger grew up in an extended family where she quickly developed a passion for cooking, a credit she gives to her maternal grandmother. Vicki's cooking evolved from using chicken fat as a child, to now using heart-healthy fats. A culinary instructor since 1992, she instills stress-free cooking while teaching privately in her clients' homes, online, and in venues throughout the area. You can find Vicki sharing recipes, videos, and culinary tips through her blog, VickiBensinger.com.



I've been cooking for what seems like my entire life. Growing up in an extended family, there was never a lack of food. In fact, food was the center of our universe. We'd always congregate in the kitchen, cooking, entertaining, sitting around the table eating, and laughing — always laughing, because let's face it, food makes us happy. I've never seen anyone eat an ice cream and cry unless it fell on the ground. While I'm sure it was challenging for my parents with both grandmothers and a disabled aunt living with

us, I reaped the benefits. My maternal grandmother was the best cook. Most days we'd sit together at the kitchen table, prepping and cooking the evening meal or snacks, which were laden with chicken fat. The smiles on the faces of our family as they devoured our dishes gave me immense satisfaction. A favorite snack was made by slowly cooking chicken skin and rendering the fat, leaving fried skin — our version of potato chips. Who knew then it was a heart attack waiting to happen? ▶



My mom was/is a good cook, but like many moms in the '50s and '60s, she kept plenty of convenience foods on hand. Swanson TV dinners, boxed, canned, and frozen foods, Hostess Cupcakes, Twinkies, Snowballs, frozen Snickers, Milky Ways, and Butterfingers were staples. No wonder I've been a chocoholic all my life! My diet was awful as a child, and as a result, I looked like Olive Oyl (Popeye's girlfriend), skinny and sick all the time.

While attending college to earn a teaching degree, my passion for cooking never waned. I prepared dishes for my roommates and friends — thrilled to make them home-cooked meals. After graduation, I taught school for two years. I changed careers to become a certified financial consultant and for the next 10 years taught others how to manage their assets. In 1984 I married my husband and close friend of 11 years. Two years later we had a son. When our daughter was born in 1989, I left the workforce to raise our children. After growing up eating a high-fat diet and lots of sweets, I vowed to feed my children well-balanced meals. Of course, eliminating sugar completely didn't seem necessary. "Everything in moderation," was my motto.

Stay-at-home moms aren't rewarded like they are in the workplace, but I was content with my role. I was graciously repaid most nights with satisfied smiles from the meals I served my family. Trivial as that might seem, it was the encouragement I needed to delve into cooking, creating culinary masterpieces for my family and friends. Soon friends were asking me to cook for them, share my recipes, or give them culinary advice. By 1992, I went from being a room mom cooking with my children and their classmates, to teaching classes at a local culinary school. I joined the IACP (International Association for Culinary Professionals) and expanded my classes to include adults at venues throughout the area. Little did I know this would be the beginning of a lifelong career. ▶



"Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass. It's about learning to dance in the rain."

— Vivian Greene



GRILLED SEA BASS

over Zucchini Pasta with Roasted Tomatoes

Serves 4

- 4 (6–8 oz.) Chilean sea bass
- Extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 (10½ oz.) cherubs tomatoes
- 2 zucchini squash
- Spiralizer

1. Rub sea bass with olive oil, leaving skin on, and place fish meat side down onto preheated grill over medium heat. Grill for approximately 10 minutes; carefully flip over for an additional 10 minutes. Fish will be done when the tip of a knife inserted separates layers easily. Remove skin at this point if desired by sliding a thin metal spatula between the skin and fish.
2. Cut tomatoes in half and place on a foil-lined baking sheet. Drizzle lightly with olive oil and toss to coat. Place in preheated 425-degree oven for approximately 15 minutes or until slightly charred and wilted.
3. Rinse zucchini, place on spiralizer, and spin until completed. Just before plating, microwave for 20 seconds to make zucchini more pliable.
4. Divide zucchini pasta among 4 plates. Top with sea bass, and place roasted tomatoes on top of each. Serve.



In 2004 I established “At Home with Vicki Bensinger, In-Home Culinary Classes,” to accommodate those wishing to have private or small classes in the comfort of their homes — an idea that came to me as a result of venues cancelling classes due to low enrollment, hence, disappointed clients. While initially I was hesitant about this venture, my son looked at me and said, “You always told me to follow my passion. If you never try, you will never achieve it.” It seemed ironic that my son was preaching to me the exact thing I taught him. I knew if I didn’t follow through it would be hypocritical.

By 2009 I created my blog, VickiBensinger.com, as a means to stay in front of my clients when I wasn’t teaching in their homes. I had no idea the world would soon be following my blog.

My cooking has come a long way from the days when we cooked with chicken fat. Since its inception, my blog has gradually transformed to sharing mostly heart-healthy, whole-food recipes using sustainable foods, including

nuts, whole grains, fresh fish, chicken, vegetables, and fruits, with occasional recipes for beef, bread, and sugary treats. I’ve found that by maintaining a healthy lifestyle with regular exercise, plus cutting out the latter three items above, I feel healthier, more energetic, and my figure is streamlined. A lesson I teach in my classes and blog — while still offering those drool worthy recipes for those craving them.

I’ve been told by my clients they feel comfortable learning from me because I’m approachable and non-threatening. I attribute this to my teaching background and patience. To schedule a private class, clients contact me to discuss a menu or skill they’d like to master. I put together a menu, do the grocery shopping, and come to their home ready to teach in their kitchen. After several hours, they master the skill they set out to learn. While enjoying the fruits of their labor, I answer questions to ensure they feel confident re-creating the dishes on their own. I then clean up and go home, leaving them with a packet of recipes, newfound knowledge, and confidence. ▶



Roasted Vegetable & Quinoa TARTLETS

Serves 4

- 3 TB. extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- ½ large shallot, diced
- 1 cup quinoa
- 2 cups water
- 2 TB. pesto (homemade/store-bought)
- 1 TB. Parmesan cheese
- Salt & pepper, to taste
- 1 container grape tomatoes
- 1 bunch baby carrots
- 12 asparagus spears
- 4 handfuls mache rosettes/arugula
- 1 TB. fresh lemon juice
- 1 tsp. honey
- 1 tsp. Dijon mustard

1. Place 1 tablespoon olive oil in a nonstick skillet with diced shallots and sauté for 1–2 minutes. Add quinoa. Stir to combine. Continue cooking on medium heat until quinoa becomes fragrant, about 2 minutes. Add water and bring to a simmer. Cook for approximately 15 minutes or until liquid is absorbed. Remove from heat. Add pesto, Parmesan, salt, and pepper. Stir to combine. Set aside and allow to cool.
2. Meanwhile, prepare 4 (4¾-inch) tartlet pans with removable bottoms. Spray with non-stick spray. Add ½ cup of quinoa mixture to each tartlet pan. Using your fingertips, gently press quinoa mixture into bottom and up sides of tartlet pan. Be sure to create at least a ¼-inch border of quinoa around edges for stabilization. Place quinoa filled tartlet pans into a 350-degree oven for 20 minutes or until golden brown.
3. Remove tartlets from oven and allow to cool briefly before removing them from their container, onto a plate.
4. Wash tomatoes, carrots, and asparagus. Place tomatoes and carrots on a sheet tray lined with heavy-duty foil. Drizzle lightly with olive oil and salt. Place in a 425-degree oven for 12 minutes. Lightly drizzle asparagus with extra-virgin olive oil and salt, and add alongside tomatoes and carrots for an additional 6–8 minutes until bright green in color. Remove pan with all vegetables from oven.
5. To make lemon vinaigrette, combine lemon juice, 2 tablespoons olive oil, honey, Dijon, and salt and pepper to taste, and whisk.
6. Top tartlets with greens, veggies, and drizzle with a touch of lemon vinaigrette.

It's been an incredible journey. Over the years I've had the opportunity to appear on numerous local TV programs preparing fun and creative dishes, to have articles written about me in local publications, and to be a regular contributor writing a culinary column for a local magazine, in addition to freelance work nationwide. Sharing my passion for food and instilling the confidence and comfort of stress-free cooking with others gives me the greatest pleasure. While I continue to teach at both public and nonprofit venues, I have diversified by teaching private online cooking classes as well. I'm currently orchestrating an online cooking series and culinary tours throughout the world. While my goals are lofty, it's far better to have tried and failed than to have not tried at all. *

Where Women Cook would like to thank Vicki Bensinger for her involvement in our summer issue. To learn more, visit vickibensinger.com, or follow Vicki on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram, and YouTube.

TIP

If you prepare a dish and it doesn't turn out the way you expected, call it something else. For example, if you make a cake and it falls after coming out of the oven, don't fret. Serve it and call it a torte — no one will ever know, except you!

