

A Taste of Trinidad: Recipes and Interview with Charlene Charles

Charlene works as a Grants Coordinator in Chemistry on the Tufts Medford campus.

How did you learn to cook?

Growing up, I was a very picky eater. There were only a few things that I liked – mostly spaghetti with ground beef, and mac and cheese. My father got so frustrated he told me I had to learn to cook the things I liked. So he taught me how to cook. My father was a flambé chef at a hotel, and my uncle was the head chef.

My grandmother was a huge baker, but I did not inherit that gene! She baked without a recipe – how did she do it? Baking is chemistry – a little too much and it turns out too heavy, or something.

Do you use a recipe for your dishes?

No. No one in my family uses recipes. You just know what ingredients you like and what tastes good, and they should taste good together! And if you're not sure, just add garlic, because garlic makes everything taste good.

(Charlene does give general instructions for her chicken dish and Cauliflower Puree -- see below.)

Any other secret ingredient besides garlic?

Yes – ketchup! I put ketchup in almost all my sauces.

Your dishes all have a Caribbean flavor, right?

I grew up in Trinidad, and in Trinidad everybody cooks a lot. Plus people eat a lot of fruit. Growing up, we had mango trees in our yard, so I ate lots and lots of mangoes. Now I bring them in to share with my co-workers.

What's your favorite lunch on or near the Medford campus?

Oh, that's a tough question!

I really like Hotung's mozzarella, tomato and basil panini, or their Ruccolo flatbread pizza.

One of my favorite restaurants for a weeknight out is Raso's Grille and Pizzeria (on Mystic Avenue in Medford). For an appetizer, I like their Buffalo chicken tenders – they're not breaded or fried, and they're very moist. For an entrée, I usually get their baked ziti with chicken and steamed spinach. Their baked haddock is also great. Plus, they have great bartenders. Brendan is very innovative, always trying out new martini concoctions. My favorite is his mango martini!

Charlene's Jasmine Rice with Chicken Breast and Snap Peas

- Cook the jasmine rice per bag instructions. While this is cooking start to prep.
- Wash the chicken in lime juice (and then throw away the juice). Slice the chicken breasts really thin, to make pieces about 2" by 1/2". Mix with a spoonful of green seasoning (see below), Adobo seasoning (in the Goya section of your supermarket), and some black pepper.
- Wash pea pods and chop garlic.
- Cook chopped garlic in olive oil in a skillet. Add the chicken and cook about 5 minutes. The chicken should be about $\frac{3}{4}$ cooked because the pieces are so small. Add $\frac{1}{4}$ cup ketchup and cook for about 5 minutes more. (Add a little water if it seems dry.)
- Turn stove off. Add about $\frac{1}{3}$ cup of milk to the chicken.
- While the chicken is cooking, sauté the pea pods in olive oil and garlic for a few minutes, but don't let them get over-cooked.

I've been in the habit of plating my food, gourmet style. It helps with portion control and it looks pretty.

Green Seasoning

In Caribbean style cooking, all meats are "seasoned." It's like marinating the meat, but you don't have to leave it overnight. I make a big jar of green seasoning and keep it in the refrigerator for

whenever I need it. You can mix the green seasoning with your meat and let it sit while you prep your vegetables for that meal, or you can mix it with all your meat for the week ahead, like on a Sunday. If you do it weekly, you can freeze the meat after coating it with the green seasoning. The longer it marinates, the more flavor it adds.

Green seasoning is a paste made from scallions, thyme, garlic and cilantro. Combine the ingredients in a food processor, then bottle or jar them.

Pan-seared Scallops, Cauliflower Puree, and Watercress, Mango and Cucumber Salad, with Asparagus

- Steam one head of cauliflower. *(The cauliflower puree: I made it like mashed potatoes, and it turned out really well!)*
- Add about 1 tablespoon of garlic butter. *(I always keep some minced garlic mixed up with butter in the refrigerator – I use it a lot. Fresh garlic, not garlic powder.)*
- Mash with a potato masher. *(I wanted it creamier, so then I put it in the food processor.)*
- Mix in a splash of milk, salt and pepper.
- *The scallops I pan-seared in olive oil, with salt and pepper. I sliced up the mango and cucumber really thin, and chopped up the water cress. (Water cress is very healthy – filled with lots of vitamins.) The asparagus I sauteed in -- you guessed it -- butter and garlic.*