

# easy meals for the whole family

**A**fter a long, busy day of camp, swimming lessons and all of the other activities that summer brings, it's a welcome break to come together at the dinner table and share one meal that everyone in the family enjoys. Kathy Strahs, the Los Gatos-based author of *The 8x8 Cookbook* and mother of two, shares some of her favorite family-friendly summertime recipes that are all conveniently prepared in an 8-by-8-inch square baking dish (a.k.a. a "brownie pan").

## Chunky Ratatouille Goat Cheese Pasta Makes 4 to 6 servings

When summer hits and your garden (or, in my case, farmers' market or grocery store) is brimming with fresh zucchini, tomatoes and eggplant, you'll want to reach for this simple, fresh recipe, inspired by the classic Provençal ratatouille vegetable dish. Soft goat cheese, mixed in at the end, creates its own tangy, creamy sauce for the pasta.

### INGREDIENTS

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| ■ 1 (6 to 8 ounces) Japanese eggplant, cut into 1-inch pieces | ■ ¾ teaspoon coarse salt                    |
| ■ 1 (6 ounce) zucchini, cut into 1-inch pieces                | ■ ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper    |
| ■ 6 ounces cherry tomatoes                                    | ■ ½ pound rigatoni or other short pasta     |
| ■ ½ small red onion, cut into 1-inch pieces                   | ■ 4 ounces goat cheese, at room temperature |
| ■ 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil                        | ■ 2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil         |

### DIRECTIONS

1. Heat the oven to 425° F.
2. Line an 8x8-inch metal baking pan with parchment.
3. Place the eggplant, zucchini, tomatoes and onions in a large bowl. Toss with the olive oil, salt and pepper to coat. Pour the vegetable mixture into the prepared pan and roast, stirring occasionally, until the tomatoes are blistered and the vegetables are cooked through and beginning to brown, 30 to 35 minutes.
4. Meanwhile, boil the pasta to al dente in salted water according to the package directions. Drain, reserving 2 tablespoons of the pasta water.
5. When the vegetables are done, add the cooked pasta, reserved pasta water and 2 ounces of goat cheese to the baking pan. (Alternatively, you can transfer it all to a separate serving dish.) Toss to coat. Dot the remaining goat cheese over the top and garnish with basil.



COURTESY PHOTO

## Hot Ham and Cheese Sliders

**Makes 9 sliders (about 4 servings)**

I know I've got a winner when my 5-year-old shouts, "I want that!" when he spies a dish I've pulled out of the oven. Little hot sandwiches like these are a weeknight treat to my kids – and I can always switch up what goes inside. Here, I've gone with classic ham and cheese on sweet Hawaiian rolls, with a pickle-and-yellow mustard nod to my favorite Cuban sandwiches.

### INGREDIENTS

- 9 Hawaiian rolls, split lengthwise
- 9 small slices Swiss cheese
- 3 tablespoons yellow mustard
- 18 dill pickle slices
- 9 slices deli ham
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter, melted

### DIRECTIONS

1. Heat the oven to 350° F.
2. In an 8x8-inch glass or ceramic baking dish or metal baking pan, arrange the bottom halves of the Hawaiian rolls in three rows. Assemble the sandwiches by layering on the cheese, mustard, pickles and ham. Close the sandwiches with the

top halves of the rolls, and brush butter on each top.

3. Bake the sandwiches until the cheese is melted, 10 to 15 minutes.

**Here's a tip:** Put the "wet" ingredients like mustard and pickles on the inside so the bread doesn't get soggy.



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## Roasted Shrimp, Tomato and Feta Bruschetta

**Makes 4 servings**

Don't you sometimes wish you had a nice hunk of bread to dip in the tasty juices left in the pan? Well, your wish is granted with this dinner bruschetta. The shrimp and tomatoes are roasted right on top of a bed of crusty bread, soaking up all of the goodness.

### INGREDIENTS

- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- 4 to 6 (½-inch thick) slices ciabatta or other rustic bread
- 1 pound medium-sized shrimp, peeled, deveined, tails removed
- 1 pound Roma tomatoes, sliced into wedges
- 3 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 teaspoons freshly squeezed lemon juice
- ¾ teaspoon coarse salt
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 2 ounces crumbled feta cheese

### DIRECTIONS

1. Heat the oven to 400° F.
2. Drizzle 1 tablespoon of olive oil in an 8x8-inch glass or ceramic baking dish, and swirl the dish to coat the bottom. Arrange bread slices inside the dish – the exact number of slices needed will vary according to the size of your bread, but you want to try and cover most of the bottom.
3. In a large nonreactive bowl, toss together the shrimp, tomatoes, parsley, the remaining 2 tablespoons olive oil, garlic, lemon juice, salt and pepper. Pour the shrimp mixture over the bread in the baking dish – don't worry about making anything fit precisely on individual bread slices, just pour it all on top. Scatter the feta cheese on top.
4. Bake until the shrimp is pink and cooked through, about 20 minutes.

**Knife and fork it:** Unlike traditional handheld bruschetta, you're going to want utensils for this one!

## Fluffy Baked Omelet With Pico de Gallo

**Makes 9 servings**

I'm like a little kid when it comes to watching food rise in the oven. My eyes are practically glued to the oven window, observing the puffing and browning action. The whipped eggs in this baked omelet start out without much action, but before too long they lift higher and higher, nearly edging themselves out of the dish. This is some fascinating kitchen entertainment!

Things settle down a bit once the omelet is out of the oven, but it still remains light and fluffy. Fresh pico de gallo makes a simple, flavorful topping. To dial down the heat, I omit the jalapeño when I prepare this for my children.



COURTESY PHOTO

### INGREDIENTS

#### Omelet:

- 10 large eggs
- 1 cup whole milk
- ¾ teaspoon coarse salt
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1 cup (about 4 ounces) shredded sharp cheddar or Jack cheese

#### Pico de Gallo:

- 2 cups seeded, diced tomatoes (about 3 medium)
- ¼ cup finely chopped red onion (about 1/4 medium)
- ¼ cup chopped fresh cilantro
- 1 tablespoon seeded and finely chopped jalapeño pepper (about 1) (optional)
- 1 tablespoon freshly squeezed lime juice (about 1/2 lime)
- ½ teaspoon coarse salt

### DIRECTIONS

1. Heat the oven to 450° F.
2. Set a rack in the upper third of the oven. Grease an 8x8-inch glass or ceramic baking dish with butter or cooking spray.
3. In a large bowl, whisk together the eggs, milk, salt and pepper. Mix in the cheese. Pour the mixture into the prepared dish. Bake until the omelet is set in the middle, puffed (it will puff quite a bit, but will settle down as it cools) and lightly browned on top, about 20 minutes.
4. While the omelet is baking, add all of the pico de gallo ingredients to a medium bowl and stir to combine. Allow the omelet to cool for several minutes, then, with a slotted spoon, top it with pico de gallo before serving.

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## Watermelon-Lime Jelly Cubes

**Makes 64 cubes**

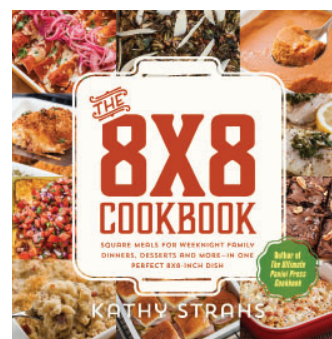
Sure, you can make store-bought gelatin in your 8x8 dish, but why not go for an even better treat and make your own from scratch? Watermelon is naturally bright pink, sweet and full of water, making it the perfect homemade gelatin flavor. Share these cubes as a refreshing, lighter dessert option for a summertime barbecue.

### INGREDIENTS

- 8 to 10 cups cubed seedless watermelon
- 3/4 cup sugar
- 5 (1/4 ounce) packets unflavored gelatin
- 3 tablespoons freshly squeezed lime juice
- 1/3 cup chopped fresh mint

### DIRECTIONS

1. Grease an 8x8-inch glass or ceramic baking dish or metal baking pan with oil or cooking spray and wipe out the excess with a paper towel.
2. Puree the watermelon in a food processor or blender. Pour the puree through a fine-mesh sieve into a medium bowl to strain out the pulp – you want a total of 6 cups of strained watermelon juice. Transfer 1 cup of the watermelon juice and the sugar to a small saucepan. Bring the mixture to a boil, stirring until the sugar is dissolved. Transfer another 1 cup of the watermelon juice to a large bowl and sprinkle the gelatin over the surface. Let the gelatin stand for 1 minute. Pour the boiling juice mixture over the gelatin and stir until the gelatin is completely dissolved, 1 to 2 minutes. Stir in the remaining watermelon juice and the lime juice.
3. Pour the gelatin mixture into the prepared dish or pan. Skim off any foam that may form on the surface with a spoon. Refrigerate the gelatin until it's completely set, at least 4 hours. Cut the gelatin into 1-inch cubes, and garnish each cube with mint. Serve chilled. ■



Kathy Strahs is a Los Gatos cookbook author, food blogger and mother of two. *The 8x8 Cookbook: Square Meals for Weeknight Family Dinners* is the first book from Burnt Cheese Press, the food-related publishing house she founded.

RECIPES EXCERPTED FROM  
*THE 8X8 COOKBOOK: SQUARE MEALS FOR WEEKNIGHT FAMILY DINNERS, DESSERTS AND MORE - IN ONE PERFECT 8X8-INCH DISH*

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