

## What to eat

Novices and experienced cooks alike find salvation in a Montrealer's online guide to menu preparation

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The fresh Quebec fiddleheads would never have found their way into Cindy Patriarca's grocery cart at the IGA Extra in South Shore La Prairie last Wednesday morning, had it not been for Cinzia Cuneo.

"I never bought fiddleheads before," Patriarca observed as she shopped with her two young daughters, "because I didn't know how to cook them."

Indeed, to the uninitiated, fiddleheads can seem like odd-looking, unapproachable greens. But Cuneo - a passionate amateur cook, an engineer by training and the founder of a whiz-bang website, SOS Cuisine.com, that suggests menu plans and provides recipes, grocery lists and even step-by-step action plans outlining the order in which meal prep can be done most easily - knows exactly how to cook fiddleheads. Knows that they need to be soaked first, then boiled in plenty of water. Knows that they can be puréed into a dandy, bright-tasting soup. And knew that they were on special last week.

Cuneo shares information like this, and a whole lot more, with subscribers to SOS Cuisine.com's free weekly newsletter - Patriarca among them. And so Patriarca bought the fiddleheads. Daughters Juliana and Olivia helped her with the prep - and that evening after dad Daren Saroop got home from work, the family started dinner with fiddlehead soup. "It was so good," said Patriarca, 33. "The girls gobbled it up."

When people ask Cuneo what she does, "I say, 'I tell people what to eat,'" she said during a recent interview in SOS Cuisine.com's office in a downtown Montreal high-rise. No, she tells them, she is not a dietitian. No, she is not a chef.



CREDIT: JOHN KENNEY, THE GAZETTE

Olivia (background) and Juliana watch mother Cindy Patriarca pour olive oil into a food processor with Italian parsley for a marinade. Right: Patriarca's weekly action plan from SOS Cuisine.com.



CREDIT: JOHN KENNEY, THE GAZETTE

1. The website Cindy Patriarca looks at SOS Cuisine.com at her La Prairie home.

The menus she plans are designed to match people's preferences to flyer specials from Quebec food retailers and to the local availability of seasonal fresh ingredients. The recipes are all hers. In a pilot project with Montreal's public markets, menus developed by Cuneo to showcase local produce as well as other products available at the city's public markets will be on the site, beginning next week.

A weekly electronic newsletter goes out to the site's 127,000 subscribers, gathered through word of mouth, media interviews and a weekly column Cuneo writes in *Le Journal de Montréal*, to remind them that their menus are ready. The menus are adapted to the food profiles subscribers submit when they register - whether they're omnivores or vegetarian, for instance, or want fish recipes - and to the number of people in their household; the site provides for quantities to be adjusted upward or downward. Nutritional information is provided, as well as the cost per serving of dishes.

The germ of the idea came to Cuneo, who has worked for such companies as 3M and Nortel, when she was still in the corporate world. She was in Europe on business - and she realized that her husband, who was back here in Montreal, didn't know how to eat properly.

"It was mind-boggling for me. I was writing the simplest recipes - but he was always missing an ingredient. And I realized it wasn't just the recipe, but more the organization. The system broke down because he had to do the shopping."

She realized that her husband wasn't alone, she said - that cooking from scratch is complicated for lots of people. It frightens them. The challenge, as she saw it, was to simplify something they saw as complex. Sure, she acknowledges, there are cookbooks, websites and television programs that provide recipes. "But when I go in my own Metro store, I see people's shopping carts full of frozen food," she said. "Many people find cookbooks too complicated - and food shows can be intimidating."

Cuneo says her website is different because "we think we are the only resource where attention to the individual is at the centre." Her business partner in the venture - which employs five full-time and a few more part-time - is her husband, fellow engineer Pierre Lamontagne. Since SOS Cuisine.com was launched three years ago, the two have invested about \$400,000 of their own



CREDIT: JOHN KENNEY, THE GAZETTE

2. The shopping She picks up fiddleheads with daughter Juliana, 5, as suggested by the site's weekly menu plan.



CREDIT: JOHN KENNEY, THE GAZETTE

3. The preparation Daughter Olivia, 2, rinses fiddleheads while Patriarca and Juliana break stems off parsley.



CREDIT: ALLEN MCINNIS, THE GAZETTE

Cinzia Cuneo's website, SOS Cuisine.com, provides subscribers with menu plans, recipes, grocery lists and step-by-step preparation tips.

money.

For now, the website's revenue comes from advertising; Cuneo's hope is to branch out eventually into more personalized services, including menus for those with particular preferences or health conditions, as well as such services as shopping and meal preparation. Although the basic service now offered will remain free, the plan is to charge for these customized services.

Enthusiastic subscribers email to say how helpful they find the weekly meal newsletter, how it takes the drudgery out of cooking - and leaves the fun.

"The best thing is that I can now cook from scratch," one user said. "I know what goes in my food, I know it's fresh (and I'm) not afraid to try out recipes on guests. I'm now a kitchen goddess. Well, almost."

Plateau resident Johanne Giguère, who has been subscribing to SOS Cuisine.com since she heard Cuneo in a radio interview last fall, is an experienced cook. So is her partner. Still, the site is a boon for them. "It's fun to cook with ingredients that are on special - and to have the recipes there for you," Giguère, a nurse and massage therapist, said in an interview. "It helps us to try different things - and generally makes life easier." She recalled a spinach soup the pair had enjoyed, for instance, and a chicken dish with cranberries.

Although Patriarca, an elementary-school teacher now at home with her daughters, isn't a novice cook, she welcomed help with the challenge of preparing three meals a day. In SOS Cuisine.com, she found a wealth of information. "And it's insanely easy," she said. "You get your menu every week and decide on the recipes you want. The recipes are based on the specials - and they include what's in season."

She likes that the website's grocery list, which she prints out when she goes shopping, saves her the time she used to take going through the circulars - and that the family's grocery bills have dropped now that she's buying only what they need. A bonus: She's no longer tossing spoiled produce onto the compost pile. And she likes how the recipes encourage the family to try new tastes and foods, like artichokes - and fiddleheads.

### Fiddlehead Soup

Makes 4 servings

Fiddleheads are rich in fibre and vitamins A and C. Their season is short, so if you want to try this recipe from SOS Cuisine.com, do it quickly. Since fiddleheads can be toxic if they're eaten raw, wash them well and soak them in a bowl of water for at least 10 minutes, and then cook them in plenty of water.

This soup takes about 15 minutes to prepare and 20 minutes to cook, according to the site. Each serving is equivalent to two servings in the vegetables and fruit category of Canada's Food Guide. Cost per serving is \$1.85 - it will be a few cents less if you buy chicken broth on special this week at IGA and Richelieu stores; SOS Cuisine.com also lists the weekly specials.

About 1 pound (500 g) fresh fiddleheads

2 tablespoons (30 mL) long-grain rice

1 tablespoon (15 mL) unsalted butter

1 shallot, chopped finely

4 to 5 cups (1 to 1.25 L) chicken or vegetable broth

Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

4 teaspoons (20 mL) sliced almonds (optional)

Wash the fiddleheads well and soak them for at least 10 minutes in a large bowl of water. Meanwhile, cook rice and set aside. Blanch soaked fiddleheads in a pot of boiling salted water for 8 minutes. Drain and set aside. Melt the butter in a good-size heavy-bottomed pot over medium-low heat. Add the finely chopped shallot and sauté 2 to 3 minutes, until translucent; take care not to let it brown or burn. Add the fiddleheads to the pot and stir for 1 minute, then add the broth and rice. Bring contents to a boil, then cover and simmer 5 minutes. Add salt and pepper to taste. Carefully purée the hot soup, ideally with a hand-held immersion blender, then spoon into bowls and serve. If desired, garnish each bowl with sliced almonds.

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