

no denying

'Top Chef' alum makes healthy eating 'Pretty Delicious'



PHOTOS BY QUENTIN BACON

BY PATTY LEE

Candice Kumai is no stranger to keeping fit.

Before launching her culinary career, the 30-year-old chef ran around L.A. as a model. To keep her weight down — she needed to maintain a 26-inch waist — Kumai sometimes made meals of Diet Cokes and a handful of nuts. Unhappy with this hectic lifestyle, Kumai turned to her childhood hobby: cooking.

"I was never that studious at school. I was more of the socialite," says the former "Top Chef" contestant. "When I found cooking, it was the only thing that really held me down. I wasn't distracted."

Back in the kitchen, Kumai started to create meals inspired by her family's mixed cultural background. Her mom is Japanese and her dad, Polish-American.

The flavorful dishes are the stars of her debut cookbook "Pretty Delicious" (Rodale, \$30).

"My mom never promoted 'diet this' or 'deprive yourself of that.' It was more like 'Candice, stop eating the processed foods,'" Kumai says. "It took 10 years until I understood what she was trying to get at."

Not a fan of crash diets or celeb-inspired detox plans, Kumai favors low-calorie and low-fat ingredients

that she affectionately calls Foods With Benefits.

"All you need to do is make a couple of changes or be more aware of your calorie counts and you can have whatever you want," says the host of TLC's "Home Made Simple."

She swaps out white rice for brown rice in her One-Pan Paella and tosses in heart-healthy artichokes and fresh herbs for flavor.

The goal: Making healthy eating fashionable — and cheap. "Buy foods that are in season and typically those are the ones on sale at the store anyway," she says.

Other easy ways to stretch your grocery budget: Make your own sauces and dressings, boost meat with veggies and turn yesterday's dinner into leftover-friendly meals including omelets and burritos.

Kumai, who blogs under the name of the Stiletto Chef, has been strutting the streets of New York since she moved here in September, scouring the city for delicious eats.

"I really love the energy of the East Village at places like the Northern Spy Food Co.," she says. "The variety here is incredible and so authentic. New York is a very well-seasoned city."

One-Pan Paella Serves 8

CALORIES PER SERVING: 387

- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 large yellow onion, coarsely chopped
- 1 tablespoon sea salt
- 3 garlic cloves, finely minced
- 1 cup cremini or button mushrooms, stemmed and coarsely chopped
- 2 cups brown rice
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 2 pinches of saffron
- ½ cup dry white wine (optional)
- 4 cups low-sodium chicken broth
- 1½ pounds large shrimp, peeled and deveined
- 1 pound cultivated mussels or littleneck clams, scrubbed under cold water
- 1 can (14 ounces) artichoke hearts, drained, rinsed and quartered

- 1 lemon, halved
- 2 teaspoons hot paprika or red-pepper flakes
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped fresh basil or flat-leaf parsley leaves

1. Heat the olive oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Reduce the heat to medium-low, add the onion and salt, and cook, stirring occasionally, until the onions are lightly golden and soft, 13 to 15 minutes. Stir in the garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add the mushrooms and cook until they've released their liquid and are tender, about 5 minutes.

2. Add the rice, tomato paste and saffron and cook, stirring, for 2 minutes, or until the rice is somewhat opaque. Stir in the wine, if desired. Add ¾ cups

of the chicken broth, increase the heat to medium-high, and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to low, cover, and gently cook until the rice is just tender, 40 to 45 minutes.

3. Place the shrimp, mussels or clams, and artichokes on top of the rice. Pour in the remaining ½ cup broth, cover, and cook until the shrimp have cooked through and the mussels or clams have opened, 6 to 8 minutes (discard any that haven't opened).

4. Squeeze one lemon half over the paella and sprinkle with the paprika and basil or parsley. Slice the remaining lemon half into 4 wedges, then slice the wedges in half crosswise. Divide the paella among 8 bowls and serve with a lemon piece on the side.



CONTINUED OVER