

eats before the treats

Before the trick-or-treating begins, give kids a nutritious dinner that's full of spooky fun

BY MARIA BLACKBURN | *Special to The Baltimore Sun*

To get good and scared on Halloween night, a parent doesn't have to look far.

There's the fear of a wayward Ju-jube getting lodged in your preteen's braces, the terror of running out of candy and leaving your neighbors on the front stoop to survey your messy house through the storm door and the horror of your kids hauling home pounds of cavity-inducing confections that everyone at home finds impossible to resist.

But what really scares many parents on Halloween is something entirely prosaic and yet altogether necessary: dinner. Figuring out a healthful, fast meal that kids will actually eat and preparing it and serving it in the tiny window of time between school, homework, getting costumed and hitting the streets to forage for candy can seem like an impossible task.

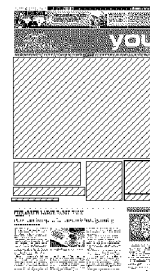
"The central problem of Halloween dinner is complete lack of focus," says Stacia Linz, who lives in Westminster and has two children, Otto, 2, and Ava, 5.

"Kids can't focus on your dinner because how can that possibly compete with the exciting desserts to follow?"

Yet Linz has managed to come up with a winning formula for getting her children to concentrate on dinner before the start of trick-or-treating: She gets them involved in the cooking, and together they craft a Halloween meal that's nutritious, fun and "kind of like an art project," she says.

This year's Halloween dinner menu at the Linz home includes turkey meatloaf "spiders," individual meatloaves made with seasoned ground turkey, shredded zucchini, oatmeal and 12-grain bread and baked in muffin tins.

The children will "frost" the cooked spiders with mashed sweet potatoes and add carrot- and celery-stick legs and sliced olives, scallions or black-eyed



peas for eyes. She'll serve the spiders on a web of hoisin sauce the kids will help draw on their plates using plastic squeeze bottles.

See **HALLOWEEN**, page 8



Celery sticks make spider's legs. BALTIMORE

SUN PHOTO: CHIAKI KAWAJIRI

To round out the meal, Linz is making berry smoothies garnished with a green slime of kiwi puree.

"I'll consider this meal a success if I involve the kids in something that distracts them from the candy and gets them to eat some real food," she says. "My primary goal is to get some protein and long-acting carbs in them to stave off the inevitable sugar crash. Then I'll feel less guilt over the fact that I'll probably let them eat whatever candy they want that night."

Anglecia Brewton, associate prepared-foods team leader at Whole Foods Market in Mount Washington, suggests serving kid favorites like macaroni and cheese, pizza and chicken fingers. Just giving the dish a new name can link it to Halloween. "It's not so much what you put in it," she says. "It's what you call it."

Some of Brewton's ideas include serving chicken fingers or fish sticks in a hollowed-out pumpkin, drizzling them with ketchup and calling it "Dead Man's Fingers," or adding yellow food coloring or pureed butternut squash to macaroni and cheese and calling the dish "Earwax Casserole." What to serve on the side? Steamed cauliflower "brains."

"Don't ignore the season, embrace it," says Cricket Azima, author of the children's cookbook *Everybody Eats Lunch* and the food editor of *Kiwi* magazine. Azima suggests playing up the holiday with a seasonal soup made from fresh pumpkin that comes together in less than an hour.

For the soup, she starts with diced celery, onion and carrot, adds chicken stock and fresh pumpkin and simmers the mixture until the vegetables are tender. Then she purees the soup with an immersion blender and seasons it with salt and pepper, ground ginger and a touch of cinnamon.

The soup can be served with the addition of shredded chicken or simple flour-and-water dumplings, and paired with salad and bread, and fresh blueberries for dessert.

"Or you could do an all-black-and-orange meal," says Azima, the mother of a preschooler. Ideas for that menu could include squid-ink pasta and cantaloupe. "The key is keeping it to a theme and making it

fun, fun, fun," Azima says.

Themes may be fine for Halloween parties, but for Halloween dinner, Ellen Briggs of Towson is looking for something "a little less Martha." Instead of dinner along a theme, she prepares a straightforward entree like grilled Beer-Can Chicken or chicken kebabs that can be served hot as dinner to her in-laws and then cold in a gyro sandwich or on a salad later in the evening when the trick-or-treating is over.

You see, Briggs is one of those parents who would rather embody Halloween than serve it for dinner. She and her husband, Todd, and their 9-year-old daughter, Samantha, usually wear theme costumes for Halloween. One year, they were the Cheetah Girls. This year they are going as Hannah Montana, Billy Ray Cyrus and an "over-the-hill" Hannah Montana.

"Before we had Sam, I thought it would be fun to cut up pumpkin shapes for sandwiches for dinner on Halloween," Briggs says. "But it's different now that I'm a mom. Now on Halloween night, I have places to go and candy to get."



Stacia Linz gets help from her children, Ava, 5, and Otto, 2, in creating mini turkey meatloaves with sweet potato spiders. BALTIMORE SUN PHOTO: CHIARI KAWAJIRI

Turkey Meatloaf and Sweet Potato Spiders

(makes 6 servings)

3 large sweet potatoes, scrubbed
1/2 cup quick oats
1 soft piece 12-grain bread
1 1/2 pounds ground turkey
2 envelopes dried onion-mushroom soup mix
2 eggs
1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce, or to taste
1 large unpeeled zucchini, ends trimmed
1 jar hoisin sauce, about 7.5 ounces (divided use)
2 tablespoons butter, or 1 tablespoon olive oil
sea salt and pepper to taste

DECORATING

LEGS: carrot and celery sticks, cut in small, thin pieces (about 4 inches), enough for 8 per spider (or use whole-grain pretzel sticks)

EYES: black-eyed peas, sliced olives, scallions cut into small rounds or peanuts

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Prick potatoes with fork and put in microwave. Bake potatoes in microwave for 12 minutes or until soft.

Make bread crumbs by pulsing oats and bread in food processor.

Place turkey, soup mix, eggs, Worcestershire sauce and bread crumbs in large bowl. Grate the zucchini, skin and all, directly over the mixture in the bowl. Using your hands, mix very gently, until just combined. Do not over-mix or it will be tough.

Spoon a generously mounded mixture into 6 greased muffin cups (3 inches across). Measure

out 1/2 cup of hoisin sauce and pour the rest into a squeeze bottle for webs. Use the 1/2 cup sauce to brush the top of each meatloaf.

Place muffin pan on a cookie sheet in the oven. Bake for 35 minutes or until a meat thermometer inserted in thickest part of a meatloaf reads 160 degrees. Let sit for 5 minutes.

While meatloaves are cooking, scoop flesh of potatoes into a food processor and pulse with the butter or oil until just smooth. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

TO ASSEMBLE: Have kids help make a web on each plate by squeezing hoisin sauce into concentric circles, then pulling a toothpick or plastic knife from the center outward. Lay one meatloaf body on each plate and, using an ice cream scoop sprayed with cooking spray, top each with one scoop of potatoes. Allow kids to decorate spiders by pressing "legs" into the potatoes (or the loaves), and adding eyes of their choice.

NOTE: Kids also can help by rinsing the black-eyed peas, cutting vegetables if possible, and setting decorations out in small bowls.

Courtesy of Stacia Linz of Westminster

PER SERVING (WITHOUT DECORATIONS): 443 calories, 28 grams protein, 18 grams fat, 6 grams saturated fat, 41 grams carbohydrate, 5 grams fiber, 164 milligrams cholesterol, 862 milligrams sodium

pumpkin soup

(makes 6 to 8 servings)
1½ pounds pumpkin flesh
1 onion
2 stalks celery
2 peeled carrots
2 tablespoons vegetable oil
½ teaspoon ground ginger (or to taste)
¼ to ½ teaspoon cumin (to taste)
8 cups chicken broth
salt and pepper (to taste)

Dice the pumpkin flesh, onion, celery and carrots. In a large saucepan, heat the vegetable oil over a medium-high heat. When the oil is hot, add the onions. Cook until the onions are transparent. Add the pumpkin, celery and carrots.

Cook for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add the ginger and cumin to the pot and mix well. Cook until all of the vegetables are tender. Add the chicken broth.

Cover the pot, reduce heat to low and simmer for 45 minutes or until vegetables are tender. At this point, the soup may be pureed in a blender to make a smooth soup, or left chunky. Adjust the salt and pepper to taste.

VARIATIONS: Add shredded chicken from a store-bought rotisserie chicken for added protein.

From Kiwi magazine

PER SERVING (BASED ON 8 SERVINGS): 107 calories, 6 grams protein, 5 grams fat, 1 gram saturated fat, 10 grams carbohydrate, 2 grams fiber, 0 milligrams cholesterol, 807 milligrams sodium