Warm winter foods spice up family life

Here we are again, January in Minnesota. It’s cold, it’s dark and we’ve all resolved to eat better. So what are some good, healthy foods that respond to that need to warm up and don’t take a lot of time to make?

Here are a few ideas:

**Soups**

Few meals are easier to make than a hot bowl of soup with some fresh warm bread on the side. My brother-in-law recently brought over some cream of broccoli soup, still warm despite freezing outside temperatures.

When I complimented him on his soup, he said, “Nothing easier, I was just cleaning out the refrigerator!”

With a little sautéed onion, garlic, vegetables, butter or margarine, a bit of flour (for thickening) and some milk, you can have yourself a steaming “cream of anything” soup in no time.

Try this:

**Roasted vegetables—** squash, potatoes, tomatoes, carrots, onion and garlic—are delicious too. Brush them with olive oil, roast them at 425 degrees for 30-40 minutes until tender (stirring a couple of times), then chop or puree them for your soup.

**Pizzas**

These are fun to make as a family activity, and the 500-degree oven really warms up the kitchen. I make pizza dough in the bread machine with half whole-wheat and half white flour. (New dietary guidelines: “Make half your grains whole.”)

I have some pasta sauce on hand, a couple of different cheeses, a variety of sautéed vegetables and meat if you like. Make one big pizza, or let everyone make their own. Pizzaz cook quickly in the hot oven, so watch them closely. Serve them with a salad.

**Ethnic dishes**

Finally, why not try making a dish from a culture different from your own? Rice pilaf, found in Middle Eastern and South Asian cooking, can be made by cooking your rice in boulon or broth, and adding sautéed onion, raisins, almonds, sliced carrots or other vegetables, add curry if you want, or cinnamon. Make tacos by spreading a layer of refried beans on corn tortillas, followed by ground beef cooked with salsa, topped with freshly diced tomatoes and avocadoes.

And what about that fresh warm bread?

Spring will soon be just around the corner.

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**Take your burger’s temperature**

Are you using a food thermometer to check the internal temperature of your burgers? It’s important to always use a thermometer to make sure hamburgers are cooked to 160 degrees F for 15 seconds for best results in killing bacteria. E. coli 0157:H7 is the pathogen of concern. A number of foodborne illness outbreaks have been linked to under-cooked ground beef. This pathogen can survive both refrigerator and freezer storage, making proper thawing and cooking crucial.

Many food handlers and consumers believe that visible signs — such as color changes in the food, or the juices running clear — are indicators that the food is safe. However, a brown or grey burger does not always ensure a safe hamburger.

A study done by Kansas State University found that a sufficient number of ground beef patties were turning brown well before they reached 160 F, the temperature needed to thoroughly kill E. coli 0157:H7. In fact, some ground beef patties can look well-done at an internal temperature as low as 131 F.

Flipping the burgers several times while grilling or frying has been found to help the burgers reach a more even internal temperature, according to a study conducted at Washington State University. The frequent flipping helped eliminate cold spots inside the hamburger, which can harbor bacteria.

When checking the internal temperature of a hamburger patty, insert a meat thermometer in the side of the patty, rather than the top, for a more accurate reading.

Food thermometers are economical and readily available in the kitchen department of retail and grocery stores. They typically cost $5 to $10 each.

Using a thermometer to ensure proper cooking temperature is especially important for those serving ground beef to people most at risk for foodborne illness: young children, the elderly, and those with compromised immune systems.

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