

# Cookin' Good

**Chef LaLa, a.k.a. Laura Diaz-Brown, shares her personal journey and fabulous recipes**  
As told to Kalia Doner

**“For most of my life I have** struggled with my weight. I tried just about everything to shed the pounds, but they always came back—and it worried me because of the life-shortening health effects of excess weight and the increased risk of diabetes.

“My first experience with diabetes was my grandmother; I lost three of my four grandparents to diabetes. My father and seven of his eight brothers had it! At one point a doctor friend even told me, ‘It’s in your genes, and unless a pill is invented to change your family genetics, I am afraid you are just going to have to work harder to lose weight than some other people do.’ It takes vigilance, but look at me—I did it, and I know you can too! That’s my mission and message.

“However, I’ve also learned that family history is not the whole story. We may be predisposed to put on weight, but it is the environment too. I grew up in a family of restaurateurs. When I was just eight or nine, I would take the bus after school to Mom and Pop’s restaurant and do my homework there. It was all an introduction to hard work and the love of food.

“There were other circumstances that also contributed to my battle to maintain a healthful weight and eat right. At the age of 12, I was part of an all-girl singing group that traveled with Menudo. It was an incredible experience, and it exposed me to all kinds of cuisines and foods. But life on the road is not easy, and it is certainly hard to eat healthfully.



“After several years of traveling, I realized that I wanted to go to college and then to school to become a cardio-pulmonary therapist. I picked myself up and headed off in that direction, although I also nurtured the hope that I might keep singing. Eventually, I discovered that I didn’t have the right temperament to work in a hospital environment. I was too attached to my patients ... I was losing people daily ... and I couldn’t bear the sadness of the families or the loneliness of the patients who didn’t have families.

“Then, at 24, I was in a bad car accident. It temporarily affected my ability to walk—and it permanently affected my ability to dance. Because I was inactive, I gained weight. And then I had an epiphany: Singing and dancing weren’t going to happen for me, but I was an entertainer at heart. So, I thought, I’ll open a restaurant—that’ll combine my love of food and cooking and still let me interact with the public.

“And then one day, the American Heart Association asked me to go teach cooking at a local Latino church. The people there had lots of questions about nutrition: They wanted answers about heart disease and diabetes and weight control. Over and over, they asked me how they could eat healthfully and still have the food they loved—the frijoles, the empanadas, the tacos. I realized I still needed to learn more if I was to give them a responsible answer. I went back to school and got a certificate as a nutritionist and overweight-management specialist.



“Finally, I found what I am passionate about—food, cooking, fighting diabetes and helping people become healthier. My philosophy about healthy eating is that it is not about what you can’t have but what you *can* have.

“Healthy Latino food is not a contradiction in terms. I want everyone to discover the great feeling you can get from eating wonderfully tasty, healthy food. If you are trying to avoid diabetes or if you have been diagnosed, just remember you have *so much* control. Knowledge of nutrition, cooking, healthy living—that gives you power. If you use it to your benefit, you can live a long, productive life.

“So let’s eat! Here are recipes from two of my cookbooks, *Latin Lover Lite* and *Best-Loved Mexican Cooking*. Enjoy!”

## Jicama Salad

Serves 1

- 6 oz orange, segmented
- 6 oz jicama, peeled and cut into 1-inch dice
- 4 oz cucumber, cut into 2-inch- by-¼-inch spears
- 1 lime
- Dash salt
- Dash cayenne pepper

- In a large mixing bowl, combine all ingredients. Gently toss. Chill, covered.

- Serve on a decorative plate.

### Per serving

198 calories; 1g fat; 2g protein; 26g carbohydrates; 8g fiber; 6mg sodium; 0mg cholesterol

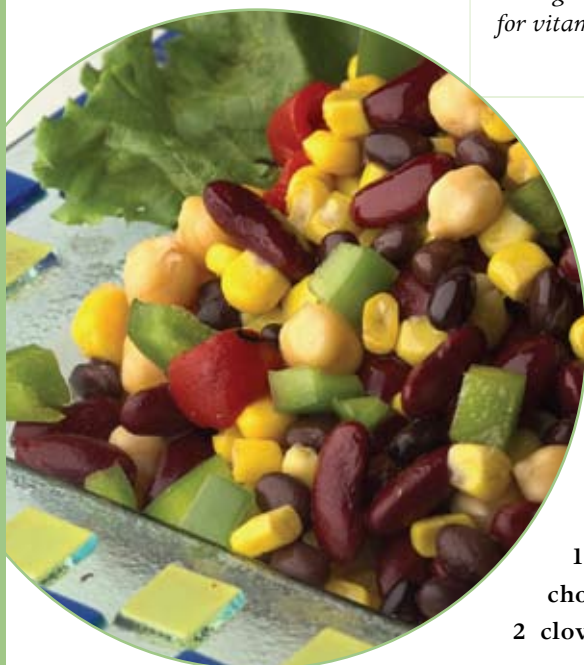
## Frijoles de Colores

Serves 10

- 16 oz garbanzo beans, canned
- 16 oz kidney beans, canned
- 16 oz black beans, canned
- 6 oz corn, canned
- 2 T apple cider
- 1 T extra virgin olive oil
- 2 oz roasted red bell pepper from a jar, diced
- 6 oz green bell pepper, seeded and cut into small dice
- 2 T cilantro, finely chopped
- 1 T Italian parsley, finely chopped

- Rinse and drain all canned items.
- In a large bowl, combine all ingredients.
- Chill for 15 to 20 minutes; serve.

**Per serving** 437 calories; 5g fat; 25g protein; 76g carbohydrates; 20g fiber; 4g sodium; 0mg cholesterol



## Salsa verde

Serves 10

- 1½ lb tomatillos
  - 1 serrano pepper
  - 1 clove garlic, peeled
  - 1 T cilantro, coarsely chopped
  - 4 oz white onion, cut into small dice
  - 1 t salt
- Peel the tomatillos. Boil 15 to 20 minutes. Drain, reserving ½ cup liquid.
  - Place the tomatillos, pepper and garlic in a blender. Blend at slow speed, adding reserved liquid as needed. Process until slightly chunky.
  - Transfer the mixture to a serving bowl. Add cilantro, onion and salt. Mix well and serve.

**Per serving** 27 calories; 1g fat; 1g protein; 5g carbohydrates; 234mg sodium; 15% of the RDA for vitamin C

## Fajitas de Pollo

Serves 6

- 1 lb boneless, skinless chicken breast halves
- ½ t olive oil
- 2 t light soy sauce
- 1 medium orange, juiced
- 1 medium lime, juiced
- 1 T cilantro, finely chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, minced

- 1 t seasoned salt
- 1 t fresh ground pepper
- 1½ t canola oil
- 3 oz red bell pepper, seeded, sliced lengthwise
- 3 oz green bell pepper, seeded, sliced lengthwise
- 5 oz red onion, peeled, thinly sliced
- 1 jalapeño, seeded, cut into small dice
- 1 T low-sodium soy sauce

- Slice chicken breasts into ½-inch slices.
- In a medium bowl, combine the olive oil, soy sauce, juices, chopped cilantro, garlic, seasoned salt and pepper.
- Pour mixture over chicken, stirring to fully coat. Cover, refrigerate and allow to marinate for 2 to 4 hours.
- Heat canola oil in a large skillet over high heat until it's hot enough for stir-frying.
- Drain excess marinade from chicken. Add chicken to skillet and sauté for 3 minutes, until golden brown.
- Add peppers, onion and jalapeño; sprinkle with soy sauce. Stir mixture constantly until vegetables are cooked but still firm.
- Serve immediately.

**Per serving** 161 calories; 4g fat; 24g protein; 5g carbohydrates; 1g fiber; 64g cholesterol; 611mg sodium

*Salad, frijoles, salsa and fajitas recipes are from Latin Lover Lite (Spencer Publications)*





## Pork and Plum Kabobs

Serves 8

- 2 dried chiles negros
- 2 dried ancho or pasilla chiles
- 6 tomatillos, peeled
- 3 garlic cloves
- ½ medium onion
- ¼ cup almonds, slivered, peeled
- 1 cup water
- 3 black plums, ripe but firm, pitted and diced
- 2 T sugar
- 1 t salt
- 1 lb pork tenderloin, cut into large pieces
- ¼ t garlic powder
- ½ t salt
- ½ t black pepper
- 1 T canola oil
- 3 black plums, ripe but firm, each cut into 6 wedges
- 8 wooden skewers

- Toast chiles in skillet or on griddle. (Be careful not to burn them or they will get bitter.) Transfer to medium bowl; cover with hot water and soak until soft, about 30 minutes.
- Char tomatillos, garlic and onion in skillet.
- Place drained chiles, tomatillos, almonds, water and plums in blender; puree until smooth. Transfer to large

skillet; add sugar and salt. Simmer 20 minutes, covered.

- Sprinkle pork chunks with garlic powder, salt and pepper. Heat oil in medium skillet over medium-high heat. Brown meat on all sides, about 1 minute per side. Remove; set aside.
- Thread skewers with pork and plum. Simmer skewers in chile sauce 5 to 10 minutes. Serve with extra sauce for dipping.

**Per serving** 211 calories; 8g fat; 22g protein; 55mg cholesterol; 15g carbohydrate (12g of that is sugars); 433mg sodium



Top, Pork and Plum Kabobs; above, Fajitas de Pollo.



**Chef LaLa Presents Best-Loved Mexican Cooking** (Publications International, April 2008). The Pork and Plum Kabobs recipe is from the book.

