

Cooking with Lee

Liberace didn't only have chops when it came to playing the piano, he knew how to cook 'em too

COOKING WITH THE KING OF BLING

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Back in the 1950s, Liberace was as big a star as Elvis. He just played to a different crowd.

And while The King had his mama to whip up his favorite fried peanut butter sandwich (with or without the bacon and bananas), Liberace's mother taught him how to rattle those pots and pans.

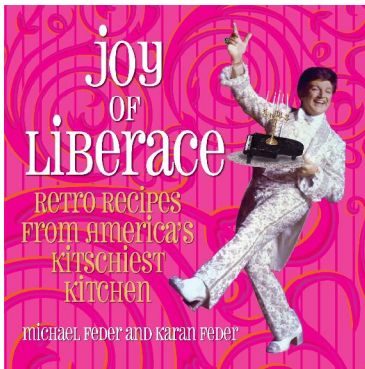
"He was quite an accomplished chef," says Michael and Karan Feder, authors of "Joy of Liberace: Retro Recipes From America's Kitchiest Kitchen." "And he liked to take his pots and pans on the road." Well, it was the 1950s.

The couple is in Palm Springs tonight for a book signing at Peppertree Bookstore during Villagefest.

In the 1960s, Liberace opened his own restaurant, the Tivoli Gardens (now Carluccio's Tivoli Gardens) and spent a lot of time himself in the kitchen. What is so cool about this cookbook is that it's a real "slice of life" look at food of the era. The recipes are the same ones you could have found in Ladies Home Journal or McCall's Magazine.



Liberace & Mom in the kitchen



There are great photos (Cindy Ellis, Riviera Hotel Garden Manager, who worked as the food stylist provided the photos) that give the book the true look of the era.

Our nomination for best photo: the Polish radish salad with sassy sour cream sauce (pages 84-85) with the ruffled radishes in perfect colors like tangerine, aquamarine, burgundy and salmon pink. "Cindy took weeks to come up with the custom-made food dyes and then days soaking the radishes so that they came out looking just right," Michael says. "What I loved was that the recipe called for hard cooked eggs as garnish," Karan adds.

The Liberace bling is evident in every food photo. There's a ruby-studded sourdough bowl with diamond ring handle on the lid for the creamed spinach with nutmeg (page 91-92); emerald studded pumpkins surround the precious pumpkin soup (with Liberace in script in chocolate across the dish) (pages 80-81) and the diamond, emerald and sapphire studded "hello gorgeous" lime soufflé pie (pages 108-109).

"I think we set a new standard for garnishing with bling," says Karan, who is an award-winning Hollywood costume designer (she worked with Bob Mackie and has her own line of handbags). "Liberace was the patron saint of glitz long before any of today's rappers ever thought of bling. And he could out-bling all of them."

Michael is an entrepreneur whose background is in law and business. He leads the licensing efforts for the Liberace Foundation. The duo are the principals in Fame Farm, which creates branding strategies for celebrity clients.

Then they discovered the Liberace Foundation when they moved to Las Vegas in 2004 and got involved in a big way. They are the team behind www.iloveliberace.com.

"All the photos in the book are from the Liberace Museum photo archive," Michael says. While they look wonderful in the book, getting them ready for print was a painstaking two-year process.

There were literally thousands and thousands of photos, in all sizes, negatives and prints (luckily Liberace owned most of his photos so there was no problem in obtaining or working with the pics). But negative or prints had to be sorted, cleaned, scanned, digitally cleaned, color corrected and, in a number of cases, made to look like they were hand-tinted to preserve the look of the era in which they were taken. A crisp, clean color photo of Liberace in his Midcentury Modern kitchen with his mother (in heels, gingham dress, lacy hand-embroidered apron and pearls, page 43) would have been out of place.

"Karan restored every photo in the book," Michael says. "Some of the (tinted) photos took up to 60 hours to restore completely."

It's obvious that the Feders truly love Liberace. They worked with the foundation raising money for scholarships and to preserve Liberace's image for future generations. "We're really tremendous fans of the museum and with our backgrounds we're working to make it a viable commercial enterprise," Michael says. "The book is one way to keep his image alive."