Healthier chili brings comfort without guilt

Editor's note: The Busy Kitchen is a Monday column written by two area chefs — Tiffany Poe and Valerie Carter — who also happen to be mothers of young children. They write about nutrition, cooking for kids and more.

I hear it's fall.

All the familiar signs point to fall — football, turning leaves, school in full swing, holiday planning and the cool, crisp weather. Wait. I haven't really experienced much cool, crisp weather yet, but when I do, I'm going to be ready to feed my family something warm and comforting.

I'm sure that "warm and comforting" is different for different people, but for me, it's a bowl of spicy chili and some down-home cornbread.

My mom grew up in Fort Worth, Texas, and I grew up eating chili made from the wonderful blends of chili powder available at Pendery's in Fort Worth — tulsaworld.com/penderys. As a kid, I enjoyed chili and RC Cola on many a cold Saturday. Probably part of the reason I remember it so fondly is because we only got to have soda pop when we had pizza, Mexican food, burgers and chili, but I digress.

These days I lighten up my mom's classic beef chili, chili con carne, with brown lentils, diced zucchini and ground poultry. The result is pretty great and it's a hit with everyone in the family from my 3-year-old on up.

My mom forgives me for changing her recipe a bit. The additions supply fiber, vegetable protein and lessen the fat considerably.

At our house, if you're not enjoying your chili in the form of a Frito chili pie, you're having homemade cornbread. And not that "cornbread" made from ultra-fine, processed cornmeal that's so sweet that it's barely discernible from shortcake.

If you haven't had the pleasure of experiencing a rustic cornbread made from stone-ground or coarse ground cornmeal, consider making this recipe soon. My dad is a farmer and every year he grinds a few bushels of corn into meal and gives it as gifts. Everyone loves it and we don't eat cornbread any other way.

While you can't buy my dad's, you can find coarse ground cornmeal at the grocery store.

Cornbread made from coarse ground cornmeal and without sugar is lower on the glycemic index and you could easily substitute the wheat flour in the recipe for a gluten-free variety, if desired.

So enjoy this temperate weather while it lasts, but when chilly days are the norm, you'll be ready. With chili.

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RUSTIC CORNBREAD

¾ cup butter (1 stick)
2½ cups stone-ground cornmeal
½ cup all purpose flour
3 teaspoons baking powder
1 teaspoon baking soda
2 teaspoons salt
4 eggs
3 cups buttermilk
1. Preheat oven to 425. Place 10-inch cast iron skillet in oven.
2. In a medium mixing bowl, combine dry ingredients.
3. In a separate bowl combine eggs and buttermilk and whisk well with a fork.
4. Place butter in skillet and leave in the oven until melted and foamy.
5. Meanwhile, stir wet ingredients into dry mixture until just combined. Don’t over mix. It’s OK to see a small amount of unincorporated dry ingredients.
6. Remove skillet from oven, pour melted butter into batter and mix well.
7. Pour batter back into skillet and return to oven.

8. Bake 25-30 minutes or until an inserted pick comes out clean and cornbread is golden brown. Serve immediately.

Note: This cornbread doesn’t keep well for leftovers but makes excellent cornbread dressing.
NEARLY VEGGIE CHILI

2 pounds ground meat of your choice – turkey, chicken, beef or pork. I use 1 pound beef, 1 pound turkey
2 teaspoons salt
1 teaspoon freshly ground pepper
6 tablespoons chili powder
3 tablespoons ground cumin
1 medium onion, diced small
3 cloves garlic, crushed and minced
1 pound dry lentils, rinsed
1 14.5-ounce can petite diced tomatoes
3 small zucchini, diced small

1. Place a large Dutch oven over medium-high heat. (You may need to add 1-2 tablespoons of vegetable oil to the pan if you are using only chicken or turkey because they are lean and may stick).
2. Add ground meat and begin to sauté. Add salt and pepper.
3. Add onion and cook until onions are translucent and meat begins to brown.
4. Add garlic and cook 2-3 minutes. (Don’t brown the garlic or it can taste bitter.)
5. Add chili powder and cumin. (Adding the spices during the sauté step will allow the spices to develop a richer flavor.)
6. Add lentils, tomatoes and enough water to cover the entire mixture.
7. Reduce heat to a simmer, cover and cook for 30 minutes or until lentils are tender.
8. Stir in diced zucchini and cook 5 more minutes. Adjust salt and pepper to taste.

Note: Leftovers freeze beautifully.