

Rockin' Mama

Theater performer juggles cooking savvy meals and rocking on stage to keep the home fires burning *BY DIANA COMER*

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN doing the laundry, cooking, cleaning and helping kids with homework, Wendy Hearn fits in a career at a rock-n-roll theater. More than that, this willowy blonde makes it look easy.

She's married to Russ Hearn, the creative man behind the Rockbox Theater in Fredericksburg, Texas, and she's always on stage when the curtain rises—sharing the limelight with her husband and fellow cast members. Because the team does four live performances on the weekend and holds rehearsals throughout the week, they all have a demanding schedule. But for Wendy, the challenge is intensified because she is

determined to keep the home fires burning for Russ and their two children, Faith and Marty. "Russ and I are very traditional and conservative in our outlooks and values," she says. "I never want to let my work overshadow my home life, family or faith."

How does she do it all? "I don't," she says. "There will always be something that falls through the cracks."

But when it comes to answering the dreaded question, "What's for dinner?" Hearn excels. Not only does she manage to put home-cooked meals on the table virtually every night of the week, but get this: Her kids actually eat what she prepares. Says Hearn, "We only eat out about twice a month, and sometimes not that often. My kids have informed me that they don't really care much for fast food. So as a family we enjoy meals together, in our home, with a minimum of hassle."

She credits much of her comfort level in the kitchen to her mother-in-law, Clydean Hearn. "She was a West Texas rancher's wife and she has a lot of know-how," Hearn says. "She taught me everything from how to boil water to how to make a good pot roast and gravy. I would never have been so at-home in the kitchen without her help."

Hearn explains that her secret is not a secret at all: "I just spend 45 minutes to 1 hour each week in planning." In fact, before she so much as dices a carrot or turns on the oven Hearn plans her work, and works her plan. "When I stick to this routine of planning, planning, planning, I find cooking to be a pleasure, not a chore," she says.

To learn more about the Hearn's Rockbox Theater and the shows it presents, see "After-dinner Entertainment" on www.countrylifestyle.net. For tickets and other details, visit www.rockboxtheater.com.

Savvy Meal Tips

Follow these steps and you'll be rockin' too

Plan the menu. Schedule at least 45 minutes a week to write out your menu.

Keep it simple. Remember that recipes don't have to be elaborate to be good; in fact, simple ones are often the best.

Get family input. Kids get excited about a meal they asked for.

Make a smart grocery list. Double-check the refrigerator, pantry and spice rack for ingredients already on hand. Check your freezer for items that still need to be used and search for recipes that make use of stray ingredients you find.

Waste not, want not. Work leftovers into your weekly plan.

Stretch that budget. Leave a little room in the budget for bargains. For example, if you find that the store has steak on sale but it is not on that week's menu, buy it for future use and freeze it. Just include it in upcoming menu planning.

Think what you can do ahead of time. Remember to defrost meats the day before you plan to barbecue, for instance. Says Hearn, "If I'm tired when I get home, but I've taken care of the pre-cooking activities, it's much easier to pull the meal together."



Wendy Hearn joins Carey Dyer with their special version of the Sonny & Cher classic, "I Got You Babe."



Wendy Hearn pays tribute to the girl groups of the 1960s with "Barbie and the Bridemaids," when songs were about boy meets girl, making up and breaking up, and even marriage.



Russ Hearn is "Bro" of the comedy duo Blue Suede Brothers.

Bringing Down the Haus

Rockbox Theater

As if Fredericksburg didn't already have enough character with its restaurants and wineries, the Rockbox Theater troupe brought their kinetic variety show to 109 N. Llano St. last year.

Rockbox Theater's professional entertainers have been performing together in various capacities for years and hundreds of shows. Now they've brought their contagious energy to Fredericksburg.

How contagious? Just try not to dance when vocalist Linda Morgan belts out "Rollin' on the River," Tina Turner style.

"We pull most of our material from the last 50 or 60 years of pop music," says creative director Russ Hearn. "Last weekend we did Stevie Ray Vaughn, Sgt. Pepper, and Billie Holiday."

The troupe also mixes in family-friendly comedy, which Hearn promises is appropriate for your kids and pastor alike. One favorite Rockbox original is "Doehemian Rhapsody," a takeoff of Queen's hit, reworked around a popular Hill Country dilemma: road-darting deer.

The show changes every weekend. But it always closes with a rendition of "Amazing Grace" and a thank-you to veterans.

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Wendy's Super Simple Weeknight Meal

Here's a sample of a super-easy weeknight menu that Wendy Hearn's family loves. All recipes, including two favorites inherited from her mother-in-law, are kid-tested and approved.

Grilled Marinated Chicken

Chicken tenders (12-15 pieces, as needed)

Fat-free or Light Italian dressing

Place chicken and Italian dressing in a plastic zip-top bag and marinate for at least 3 hours. Grill chicken for 5-6 minutes on each side on a medium hot grill.

TIP: Use leftovers on a salad the next day. Remember, you don't have to use tenders. Select chicken breasts, drumsticks or whatever you want to use. But the tenders cook quickly and make nice child-size portions.

Clydean's Corn Pudding

1 14oz. can yellow, cream-style corn

½ tsp. salt

¼ cup flour

¼ cup sugar

3 eggs, slightly beaten

1 cup milk

¼ cup butter or margarine, melted

Mix together corn, salt, flour and sugar. In a separate bowl mix the eggs and milk. Add egg/milk mixture to the corn mixture and stir well. Add butter. Oil or butter a 1½ qt. or 2qt.-baking dish. Pour mixture into the dish and bake at 425 degrees for 30-35 minutes or until set. A knife inserted in the center should come out clean (not dry, just clean).

TIP: If you double the recipe, cook it about 5 minutes longer. This dish is a crowd pleaser at potlucks and is quick to prepare. Because it takes 30-35 minutes to bake, put it in the oven first and then prepare the rest of the meal.

Golden Coins

2 Tbsp. brown sugar

5-7 medium carrots

Butter

Peel carrot and cut into 1/4-inch wheels. Steam the carrots in a steamer basket, or in a pan with a small amount of water. Cook to desired tenderness. Drain and add a little butter and the brown sugar. Let the brown sugar and butter melt. Stir well.

"Kids love them!" Wendy says. "Just don't overdo the brown sugar. Steaming helps the carrots to retain their nutritional value if you don't cook them too much."



Despite keeping up a busy schedule performing on stage, Wendy Hearn still finds time to cook up savory meals for her family.

Roasted New Potatoes

4-5 red skin potatoes

2 Tbsp. olive oil

Seasoned salt

Tarragon (or other spices)

Black pepper

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Oil a cookie sheet with a light layer of olive oil and put it into the oven to heat. Cut potatoes into ¼- to ½-inch chunks. Put potatoes in a large zip-top bag with olive oil and shake

the bag to coat the potato chunks with oil. Spread the potato chunks on the hot cookie sheet. Cook about 7-8 minutes and stir. Cook until tender, maybe 5 more minutes. Let the potatoes sit on the cookie sheet another 2-3 minutes, and salt to taste.

TIP: "These will stick to the cookie sheet, but that's part of what makes them good," Wendy says. "Scrape them off with a spatula, and they're almost like French fries, without frying, and they have more flavor. You can spice them to match your meal. Sometimes I add tarragon if I'm serving fish. The sweet of the tarragon complements the fish, or I add cracked black pepper if I'm serving hamburgers."

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Romaine and Mandarin Orange Salad with Super Simple Vinaigrette

- 3 cups cut romaine lettuce
- 1 can mandarin oranges, drained
- 1/3 cup honey roasted sliced almonds

"I don't toss this salad, just cut the greens and lay the oranges on top and sprinkle with the almonds. It's very pretty," Wendy says.

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Super Simple Vinaigrette

- 1/3 cup salad vinegar (Use your choice: red wine vinegar, balsamic or another favorite.)
- 1/3 cup water
- 1/2 cup olive oil
- 1 tsp. onion powder
- 5 packets of artificial sweetener, or 1 tablespoon of sugar
- Salt and pepper

Pour water into a small bowl and then add onion powder. Let the bowl sit for about 10 minutes, which allows the onion powder to reconstitute. Add remaining ingredients and mix thoroughly.

TIP: To keep the greens fresh, serve the vinaigrette on the side rather than dressing the salad. Include a ladle when serving because the oil and water will separate and people can mix them together again before adding to the greens.

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