

# The New York Times



## SPINACH 101

Betty Wilson teaches culinary skills to clients at the Fortune Society, where former prisoners can learn to cook for their families.

## A Recipe for a Second Chance

By **GINIA BELLAFANTE**

In 1991 Corey Ford, now a cheerful man of 34 who is shaped like a large panda, arrived at the Downstate Correctional Facility in Fishkill, N.Y., for 14 months on charges of drug and gun possession. Twelve years later circumstance sent him briefly to Riker's Island, leaving his wife, he feared, with renewed reason to re-evaluate her living arrangement.

To his disbelief, Mr. Ford's wife stayed with him, and were it not for her commitment and all the gratitude it engendered, destiny might have found little cause to deposit him in front of the raw materials for a pasta aglio e olio.

"Every time I'm in trouble, she is there for me, and I'm shocked, I'm shocked every day," Mr. Ford said of the woman to whom he has been married for 15 years. "She works hard, she is tired most of the time," he said, "and I barely take the meat out of the freezer."

His ambition to bring more to his kitchen than a thawed rump roast might not win him immediate marital parity, but for the time being it has brought him to Miss Betty's Practical Cooking and Nutrition Class. The eight-week-long course for young fathers who have been in prison is offered at the Fortune

### Fresh herbs as weapons in the war on crime.

Society, an advocacy group based in Chelsea that seeks to rehabilitate former convicts and those facing jail sentences.

Miss Betty is Betty Wilson, a 62-year-old woman not in possession of a penal record. A former television camera operator and fashion stylist, Ms. Wilson is a home cook who divides her time between the Upper West Side and Washington, where her husband works for the Rand Corporation.

Created 38 years ago, the Fortune Society has long offered classes in child rearing, anger management and health care, among others. "When I found out about the cooking classes," said Maria Perez, a senior counselor at the organization, "I thought, 'So they're going to learn to cook, so what?' What's that going to do?"

"But it's building self-esteem. For most of these guys, they're in a city, they've grown up on Kool-Aid and a bag of chips. This is building structure. They're at the point they have really accomplished something.

"You wouldn't think a Caucasian woman would blend in but the dynamics are awesome. It's 'Miss Betty' this and 'Miss Betty' that. They're learning manners. You really can change patterns."

Ms. Wilson organizes the class around the preparation of a big lunch. A Southerner by birth, she favors formal enunciation, and issues her directions - for cheese grating, for lettuce washing - as if she were overseeing a high school production of "Our Town." Before the meal is served, she requires students to take off their hats, removing some of them herself. "What did I tell you," she asked recently, "about sitting at Grandma's table on a Sunday?"

Last Thursday, Mr. Ford's first day in the class, found him assigned to chopping parsley for the aglio e olio, the first course of a menu that included broiled flank steak, baked artichokes and pound cake. Mr. Ford, whose voice rumbles along as if a motorized toy was whirring in his throat, moved the blade of a chef's knife in the requisite fan motion over a mound of herbs, disclosing that he had never before cooked anything but eggs and hamburgers.

Mr. Ford, who has four children between the ages of 6 and 19, said that in 1998 he opened a flower shop on Utica Avenue in Brooklyn and ran into trouble with drug dealers who were stationed outside. "I showed them a gun, I let them know I wasn't having it," he said. "They said they were there first, but I wasn't having it. My kids were in there all the time, and I wasn't having it." After seven months Mr. Ford, defeated, decided to shut the shop down and eventually, he said, he returned to selling drugs. "I was just trying to make ends meet, to pay some bills, to do a little something for my kids," he recounted. Mr. Ford was released on bail late last year after serving 32 days on another drug-related charge.

At this point Mr. Ford had chopped a tower's worth of parsley, and Ms.

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## Fighting crime, one balanced meal at a time.

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Wilson told him he had done well.

"Wait, I didn't make it pretty," he said. "Oh, thanks for stopping me. I was getting out of control, I made too much."

"No, no, you can never have too much parsley," Ms. Wilson assured him.

"Well see, now, that's something I can go home and say," Mr. Ford responded, as if given the secret to Stonehenge. "You can never have too much parsley."

Artichokes sparked less enthusiasm. The artichoke, Ms. Wilson quickly learned when she took a survey of hands, was a vegetable to which no one in the class had ever been introduced. "Whatever that thing is I'm not eating it, those nasty little pine cone things, I'm not going to touch them," a 20-year-old who would give his name only as Wayne announced. The previous week when Ms. Wilson had asked her students to draw a picture of a nutritionally balanced meal, Wayne sketched a small drumstick, about six peas, a glass of milk and a swath of mashed potatoes that resembled a map of Russia.

That same day when she asked if anyone could identify the purpose of acidulated water - she'd brought some to



**A Family Meal**  
Betty Wilson teaches practical cooking and nutrition to former prisoners at the Fortune Society in Chelsea.

keep a fruit salad from browning - Wayne answered that it could help you lose weight.

Most of the students in the cooking class come from the Fortune Society's Alternatives to Incarceration program, which works with courts to reduce or eliminate prison stays for offenders who participate in the society's social and educational programs. Occasionally Ms. Wilson, who has now taught dozens of these young men how to fry catfish, assemble a picnic lunch, identify basil and bake pineapple upside-down cake, loses momentary sight of her demographic, as she seemed to last week, when she advised her students to look for china and flatware at yard

sales. The suggestion prompted one man to ask Ms. Wilson if she had ever been to Bushwick.

"The guys are very resistant to vegetables and any kind of real change in the way they eat," Ms. Wilson said of the challenges she faces in her work. "There's a lot of opposition to pork. I think a lot of the guys who have been in prison have heard black Muslims talk about it and denounce it, and pork is just not one of the things I can bridge."

Ms. Wilson has kept a diary, making note of her most eager students. One of them, Kalween Rodriguez, whose name was inspired by his Halloween birth, graduated from the Fortune Society a few months ago after serving a five-month

sentence on an armed robbery charge. At 20, he has a son, 3, and a daughter, 1. Since January he has been cooking, drawing on the reams of notes he took in Ms. Wilson's class.

The dish he enjoys preparing most is Lomito Saltado. "It's got white rice, any kind of rice, fried potatoes, slices of steak, all mixed up with tomatoes," Mr. Rodriguez explained. "The French fries absorb the taste of the steak. You throw in the potatoes when the steak is simmering, and it's delicious, fabulous. Even closed-minded people who would

never eat out would like this."

And yet there remains much about kitchen life that he finds burdensome. "There's lots of stuff I don't like to do, the hard parts,

the freezing, the ripping apart the chicken," Mr. Rodriguez said. "I've got these special scissors that can cut through pennies and everything, but still I can't stand it."

For Mr. Rodriguez, who spent his younger years at Covenant House, cooking has unlocked the world of traditional family living.

"I lived in a home for most of my life," he said. "I never had a family dinner.

"Now I take my kids, we have a play table, a little art table, we set up the chairs around it and we eat. That's what I was missing and no one should miss this, it's beautiful."

