

# Let's Eat

Food, family, friends & kitchen comforts.

## **[THE GATHERING PLACE]** Baking Her Way Home

A Midwesterner learns to love the food of her childhood by sharing it with her kids.

BY SHAUNA SEVER



LEIGH BEISCH

**Shauna Sever returned** to Illinois to live—and bake—with children Andrew and Caroline after 13 years in California.



**M**y husband and I decided that our West Coast days had run their course. Though my career flourished during our 13 years in Los Angeles and San Francisco, in October 2015, we felt an undeniable shoulder tap from the universe telling us it was time for a big change. We wanted our two little California-born children to grow up in the central states, as we both had.

So, with an exciting job offer in hand for him—and for me, some concern that by settling in the Midwest, I would lose any cool quotient I had in the food world I worked in—we moved to Chicago. We moved to be close to family and friends, to increase our hot dog intake and to give our kids more seasons and less exposure to kale. The first Thanksgiving and Christmas that we didn't have to buy plane tickets to visit family was magical. I also found myself looking at food here, and particularly heartland baking, in a whole new light.

When I left for California at 25, my culinary interests hadn't yet found me. As a midwestern mutt, with everything from German and Scandinavian to Irish, Greek and Italian heritage, I thought of my upbringing and all the food we ate as fun and delicious, but never as anything particularly interesting. The inventiveness of the California food scene did little to elevate those early food memories.

Still, I felt the old-school cravings. As the empty moving trucks pulled away from our new home in Illinois, the distant familiarity I'd longed for became real life. I unpacked our boxes and thought about what I wanted my kids' childhoods to be.

Since then, it's been a mission of sorts to pull meaningful meals

and sweet treats from the oven—dishes that have a connection to the new life we're building here as a family. I want to pepper these new heirloom recipes with the vast array of cultural influences that have long been part of the story of this region—the funky quilt of ethnicities that make up not only our cuisine, but our actual DNA. Most of all, I want my children to have detailed, active food memories and a deep appreciation for this place, something I never gained while I was growing up.

What I love about Midwest baking is that the goal isn't to smack you in the face with bizarre ingredients and fancy, impressive techniques. Instead it celebrates the creative use of pantry staples, a people-pleasing

approach that will simply never go out of style.

There's a thread of flavor that runs through cooking and baking here, and often it's found in the marriage of butter and flour. This is food that yields to the tooth. It's friendly, like the Midwesterners who wave you ahead of them in the grocery line, or strangers readily exchanging recipe ideas over a market bin of early-season cherries, saying, "After a long winter and cold spring, isn't it great to see cherries again?" To me, these are some of the most nourishing things in life.

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**Shauna Sever** is a baker, cookbook author, TV and radio host and mom of two. She lives in Oak Park, Illinois. Her fourth cookbook, on midwestern baking, will be published in fall 2019.

**Shauna Sever** has grown to love "people-pleasing" midwestern food.



SHAUNA: TYLER CORE; CAKE: SHAUNA SEVER





## Cherry-Almond Coffee Break Cake

Consider swapping the cherries for other in-season fruit. Rhubarb would be nice here, too.

—SHAUNA SEVER OAK PARK, IL

**PREP:** 20 MIN. • **BAKE:** 70 MIN.  
**MAKES:** 8 SERVINGS

### Cooking spray

- 1 cup plus 2 Tbsp. sugar**
- 8 oz. almond paste**
- 1 cup plus 2 Tbsp.**  
**all-purpose flour, divided**
- ¾ cup butter, cut into**  
**pieces, softened**
- 2 tsp. vanilla extract**
- 1 tsp. finely grated lemon zest**
- 6 large eggs, at room**  
**temperature**
- 2 tsp. baking powder**
- ¾ tsp. fine sea salt**

**8 oz. whole, pitted,**  
**unsweetened dark cherries**  
**(fresh or thawed frozen)**  
**Confectioners' sugar**

**1.** Position a rack in center of oven; preheat the oven to 325°. Spray a 9-in. springform pan with cooking spray and line the bottom with parchment paper.

**2.** In the bowl of a food processor fitted with a steel blade, combine sugar, almond paste and ¼ cup of flour. Process until blended and resembling sand, about 1 minute. Add the butter, vanilla and lemon zest. Blend continuously for 2 minutes, until the batter is smooth and lightened in texture.

**3.** With the food processor

running, add eggs one at a time, giving each about 5 seconds to blend into the batter. When all the eggs have been added, stop the processor and scrape down the sides and bottom of the bowl.

Process for 15 seconds more. Add remaining flour, baking powder and salt. Pulse 20 times to blend.

**4.** Scrape batter into the prepared pan. Scatter cherries over the top.

**5.** Bake until cake is puffed and golden and a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean, about 70 minutes. Cool completely in the pan. Remove from pan and dust with confectioners' sugar.

**1 piece:** 530 cal., 29g fat (13g sat. fat), 185mg chol., 508mg sod., 61g carb. (42g sugars, 2g fiber), 9g pro. ■

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