

A Conversation with Kelly Senyei, Author of “The Secret Ingredient Cookbook” and Founder of Just a Taste

Q. “The Secret Ingredient Cookbook” is something you’ve been working on for years—but coming out now, it’s turned out to be more timely than you could have imagined it would be.

A. This book is the answer to cooking fatigue. It uses pantry and fridge staples in entirely new ways and is designed to completely reinvigorate your recipe lineup.

I really want to show people how easy and refreshing cooking can be again. We’re going to make a quiche with a hash brown crust. We’re going to revamp your salad dressing with jam. We’re going to use balsamic vinegar for dessert. And that’s just the beginning!

Q. Let’s talk about some of these recipes. You have a Three-Cheese Queso that incorporates sweet potatoes. What inspired this recipe?

A. Queso can be so heavy, so what I love about incorporating sweet potatoes is that they help balance the savory heaviness with a touch of sweetness. They also make the queso so incredibly creamy while lending a pop of bright orange color. It may sound like the odd couple, but queso and sweet potatoes are a culinary match made in heaven.

That’s what I say about every recipe in this book: “I know it sounds crazy, but trust me!”

I spent hundreds of hours researching ideas for this book, dreaming up pairings that work: the sweet with the salty, the spicy with the sweet. Things start to click, and the flavors and textures pop.

Q. It’d be one thing to pull off the ingredient twist two or three times, but the fact that there are 125 recipes in this book that are all so good is incredible.

A. And those are just the ones that made the cut for *this* book! Every single recipe can be replicated time and time again—most of them in less than 30 minutes and with ordinary ingredients. We’re all cooking from what’s in the fridge or pantry. “The Secret Ingredient Cookbook” is meant to be a useful tool for home cooks because all of the secret ingredients are readily available, just used in surprising new ways.

I was also determined not to create recipes that take hours to make or break the bank because, as a mom of three little ones, I know just how critical it is to make every minute and every dollar count. You don't have to track down a spice for \$32 and use just a teaspoon of it. If you can't find the ingredient at Walmart, you won't find it in this book.

Q. Do you have a favorite recipe in the book, or is that impossible?

A. That's like naming a favorite child—I just couldn't do it! But one of my absolute favorites is Nutty Ramen Noodles with Shrimp. The secret ingredient is almond butter, which completely elevates the dish. It looks like it could be served at a five-star restaurant, but it's a 10-cent package of ramen revamped in an entirely new way.

Q. Do your sons have a favorite recipe in the book?

A. My boys love smoothies, and they help me make the Green Machine Smoothies recipe at least once a week. The secret ingredient is cottage cheese, which most kids wouldn't go near, but when you blend it with fruits and veggies, it results in the creamiest smoothies that just so happen to be packed with protein and calcium. It goes undetected by even the tiniest of taste-testers.

Q. “The Secret Ingredient Cookbook” is such a brilliant concept—and it's no gimmick. Every recipe in this collection is elevated by a really surprising ingredient. Where did you get the idea to use unexpected ingredients to take dishes just to the next level?

A. One day back in 2013, I was making classic chocolate chip cookies, and I wanted to switch things up a little bit, so I subbed some cream cheese for the butter, realizing that they have similar consistencies. The resulting cookies ended up being total knockouts. They were soft and chewy in the center and a little crispy on the edges. They're the ultimate chocolate chip cookie. I shared the cookies with families and friends, asking if they could identify my “secret ingredient,” which really kickstarted it all.

I've developed thousands of recipes in my career, and I knew I had to curate a collection of my secret ingredient recipes. That's truly how “The Secret Ingredient Cookbook” was born. It's been eight years in the making and a total labor of love.

Q. Your background is really interesting and makes me think you hadn't always planned on pursuing cooking professionally: Northwestern University for undergrad, a master's from The Columbia Journalism School, and only after all of that did you attend the Institute of Culinary Education in New York, from which you graduated with highest honors. When did your plans change?

We make you known.

A. I originally wanted to be a sports reporter while I was in college, but once I got to The Journalism School at Columbia, I knew I was going to make the push for food media in some way, shape, or form. It happened strictly out of passion, actually.

When I was studying at Columbia, my beat was Hunts Point in the South Bronx, which was the murder and prostitution capital of New York at that time. I spent six months there looking for stories and getting to know the community. It was the most eye-opening experience of my life, but it was also very emotionally draining. Every night, I would come home and cook as a way to decompress.

My mom, Noni, had me in the kitchen with her since I was 2 years old, so she instilled a love of cooking early on. Pairing that with the fact that I was living on my own in New York City, cooking became a hobby and a necessity. My family and friends were constantly asking me for my mom's recipes, and one day, I decided I wasn't going to continue emailing everyone the recipes, and instead, I was going to post them on a blog. Fast forward 13 years and my food site, [Just a Taste](#), has become an online destination where millions of home cooks every month come to find inspiration.

Q. Your background as a reporter makes a whole lot of sense when you think about the way you investigate recipes and try new things.

A. Absolutely! I married a journalism school degree with a culinary school degree. It's not a very common combination, but I knew that if I wanted to be taken seriously in the food media world, I had to know my way around a kitchen. It's one thing to write about how to make hollandaise sauce; it's an entirely different thing to go into a kitchen and teach someone precisely how to make it.

Q. While there are special occasion recipes in this book, most of what's here is for a weeknight home cook who needs to get something delicious on the table fast. Why do you feel like it's so crucial to emphasize this?

A. I have three little boys under age 5, so I always joke that I'm like a short-order cook in our house. Developing recipes for the book that were approachable, quick, and great for all ages was completely natural for me because that's exactly how I cook at home, seven days a week.

I also think that cooking fatigue is real. We've all been cooking at home so much more recently, and those pantry and fridge staples are starting to feel tired. Sharing my expertise on how to creatively use ordinary ingredients to make extraordinary dishes is the fastest, most economical, and most practical way to breathe new life into old favorites.

Q. What advice do you have for parents who want to try to help their kids explore different flavors but feel stuck on chicken nuggets?

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A. My number one tip: You can't make a big deal out of new foods. When we have something new for dinner, I just casually put it on their plates. I don't draw attention to it. Our boys still mimic everything my husband and I do, so if we're eating it and enjoying it, they tend to follow our lead.

Presentation matters a lot, too. I often pipe peanut butter and jelly polka dots on their toast, which sounds like an involved process but it only takes 30 seconds. They love the fun designs, and I'm thrilled that the often tired PB&J has taken on a new life.

I also cook with my boys a lot. When I can look at them and say, "You made this!" they feel so proud and are far more interested in eating the meal.

Q. What about advice for people who want to try new recipes but feel nervous?

A. The most helpful thing to remember when you're trying the inventive recipes in the book is that they've all been tested and re-tested so many times, and not just by professional chefs, but by home cooks of all skill levels. I also studied hundreds of flavor combinations to land on the recipes in the book, and there are some *really* creative combinations.

One of my most surprising favorites is the Caramelized Brussels Sprouts. The secret ingredient is fish sauce—and I know people have strong feelings about fish sauce! But you can take a lot of the saltiness out of fish sauce by whisking it into what's essentially a brown sugar caramel. It becomes the most unbelievable salty-sweet mash-up.

It really all comes down to trust. The recipes in this book have gone through such a careful, thorough development and testing process, so all I ask is for people to be open-minded. If there has ever been a time to get creative in the kitchen, it's now.

About Kelly Senyei

Professionally trained chef Kelly Senyei is making the kitchen fun again. In her new book "The Secret Ingredient Cookbook: 125 Family-Friendly Recipes with Surprisingly Tasty Twists," Kelly offers delicious, accessible recipes that each feature an unexpected star ingredient. Kelly's passion is the home cook, but she is no amateur: After earning her culinary degree, she became a professional chef and television host who appears regularly on Food Network Kitchen and The Hallmark Channel. Kelly's celebrated food site, [Just a Taste](#), draws millions of eyes monthly. Kelly lives in San Diego, California, with her husband and three young sons.