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Even if the Patriots are not in the game, televisions throughout New England will be tuned to the Super Bowl next Sunday. Families and friends will gather together to cheer, jeer, eat chili and celebrate America's favorite sport. Given the almost mythical importance of this annual celebration, I suppose I should write about remarkable games and players. At the very least I should expound on the fun and festivities of past Super Bowl parties. But there's a problem. I'm football-impaired.

When I was growing up, we watched a lot of baseball and even more hockey, but I don't remember watching football. I don't know what we were up to that kept us so busy that we missed game after game after game. Throughout the spring and again in early fall we found time to watch the Red Sox on Saturday afternoons. We even caught a night game or two during the summer. In the winter we rushed through dinner and homework and managed to watch the Boston Bruins. When Bobby Orr spoke at a Cub Scout father-son dinner, I don't know who was more star struck, my dad or my brother John. Or who was more jealous, me or my mother.

But, back to football. Not only did I miss out on football as a kid; I lived in Switzerland for a lot of years. In Europe football is played with a round ball which is kicked around the field. Americans call it soccer. To differentiate, most Europeans call the game with the pig skin American football. At least when I lived there, the Super Bowl was not televised in Switzerland. Some savvy Swiss must have figured out that they could not make a buck televising a sport with little local appeal.

In spite of my impairment, I can (just barely) dredge up a Super Bowl story. It was 1990. I was still in Switzerland and dating a football fanatic. He was determined to watch his beloved, hometown San Francisco 49ers win the Super Bowl. He went on a mission to find someplace to watch the game. If he couldn't watch it in Europe he threatened to fly to the States.

His research paid off. He discovered that a premium cable station in France was televising the game live. France was a stone's throw from Geneva so he checked hotels, bars and restaurants along the border. Negotiating in broken French he found a hotel with access to the game.

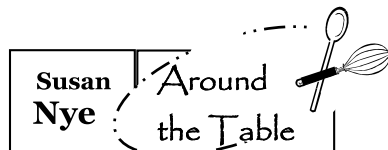
A plan was formulated and put into action. First, a couple of rooms were booked. Next, anyone and everyone who might be remotely interested in the game was invited. Finally, it was determined that this all-American sport could not be celebrated with French room service. Chips, dips and cold beer were surreptitiously lugged in. To top off the feast, hot dogs (and a microwave) and a crock pot of chili were smuggled upstairs.

A motley crew assembled. There were a few American expatriates but none had seen a game in years. Our European friends had never watched a football game let alone a Super Bowl. Besides our host, there might have been one, possibly two, diehard fans.

Looking back it was a pretty pitiful party. Any concern that the crowd might get too loud and disturb the rest of the hotel evaporated in about a minute. With the time difference, the game didn't start until midnight. Already pooped from a busy weekend most everyone left after the first quarter. It was late, Monday was a work day and for most of us football was either a mystery or distant memory or both.

So how is it that the United States can successfully export Elvis and Beyoncé, PC's and iPods, Coke and Pepsi but not football? I would love to wax philosophical and explore this question ... but I can't, you see I'm football-impaired. Enjoy the game!

Bon appétit! -- Susan



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My Favorite Chili: Chicken, Black Beans and Corn

A different take on an old favorite; this chili is a great party dish and easy to double or triple for a big crowd.

Serves 12

1 large onion, chopped
4 cloves garlic, minced
1 red bell pepper, seeded and chopped
1 yellow bell pepper, seeded and chopped
1/2 jalapeño pepper or to taste, minced
1 tablespoon or to taste of your favorite hot pepper sauce
1/2 teaspoon or to taste chipotle pepper flakes
1 teaspoon cumin
5-6 cups cooked black beans, drained and rinsed
1 teaspoon dried thyme
1 teaspoon dried sage
1 bay leaf
8 ounces cheddar cheese, grated
1 cup sour cream
1/2 -1 cup chicken broth
1/2 cup dry sherry
3 pounds cooked chicken, cut into bite size pieces
6 cups fresh or frozen corn kernels
Fresh cilantro, roughly chopped

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
2. Combine the onion, garlic, red and yellow peppers, jalapeño, hot pepper sauce, chipotle and cumin in a large Dutch oven. Toss with a little olive oil and sauté over medium heat for 10 minutes.
3. Add the black beans, thyme, sage, bay leaf, cheddar cheese, sour cream, 1/2 cup chicken broth and sherry to the pot. Toss to combine.
4. Cover and bake at 350 degrees for 30 minutes. Add the chicken and corn and combine. If the chili seems dry, add more chicken broth.
5. Continue baking, uncovered, for 30 minutes or until bubbling. Garnish with chopped cilantro and serve.

The chili can be made a day or two ahead. Complete through step 4. Cool to room temperature, cover and refrigerate. Bring to room temperature before proceeding with step 5.