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Life after State Dept!

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Cooking with Lissa Muscatine

By: Marian Burros

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Whether they've retired, resigned or been voted out of office, many Washingtonians are experiencing some dramatic life changes. After 18-hour days in the federal government, many for decades, the "formers" need to find something else to do. Some decide to sail around the world, some enter the private sector, some veg out. Not many find their way into the kitchen.

But anyone who knows Lissa Muscatine — whose last of many jobs with Hillary Clinton was as her director of speechwriting and senior adviser at the State Department — isn't surprised that she has made a beeline for her kitchen.

Her mother Doris Muscatine was a famous food and wine writer in San Francisco, and a close friend of Alice Waters, James Beard and other West Coast cooking glitterati. (She was ordering shallots from a New Jersey farmer once a month long before the vegetable came into vogue.) She was a great cook, and her daughter learned from her. "Cooking was a big part of family life, Muscatine said. "It was sort of embedded in the way we lived. I've always liked cooking, but I've never had enough time."

Released from the daily grind when she retired in October, she has been spending more time than ever in her beautifully appointed Bethesda kitchen, cooking for her husband, Brad Graham, whom she met when they were both reporters at the Washington Post, and their three teenagers: 17-year-old twins, Wynn and Cole and 13-year-old Max. The state of the art kitchen is about to be enhanced with her mother's extensive collection of French copper pots — but not, Muscatine said, until she finishes polishing them.

As she sprinkled chipotle powder on simmering chicken and tended to several other pots on the stove, Muscatine said she left the State Department "utterly exhausted." Muscatine had been with the now secretary of State off and on (but mostly on) since 1993 and was the chief collaborator on Clinton's book, "Living History."

"When she asked me to come to the State Department, I said I would stay a year and left

after 18 months. My father had passed away, and it made me reflect on how valuable family time is, and I didn't want to miss out on the last two years of my older kids being home."

Her children like the change, too. "We love having her home, and we love her cooking," said Wynn. Cole observed that dinner is generally better when it's just been cooked rather than reheated, while admitting that "As a teenage male, I eat anything in the refrigerator."

Muscatine said she reached a stage in her life when "things like cooking and making meals matter more. I found myself wanting to make nice things. I'd pull out cookbooks and take more time in the grocery store, spend more time being more adventurous, talking to my friends about cooking and finding more emotional and creative satisfaction in it.

"I knew when I left my job I was going to spend more time cooking because I've always liked it. It was always a matter of not having enough time," she said. "So far it's pretty much for the family, only occasionally for friends."

Muscatine went to work at the White House in 1993 and had twins in October of that year, so she relied on a standard repertoire in the kitchen: some sort of stir-fry with a choice of protein, barbecued chicken tenderloins, Asian chicken salad and various pastas with clam sauce and pesto. "I could throw things together but I wasn't being adventuresome."

Just because she has time to experiment now doesn't mean the children welcome all her efforts. "Kids are extremely picky," she said. Her daughter Wynn became a vegetarian at 10, which, she said, "makes it more challenging."

They must have been on their best behavior when this reporter was there one recent school night. The children tried to dredge up some of her experiments that bombed but Muscatine had to prompt them: chickpea walnut burgers, a vegetarian dish for Wynn, never to be repeated. On the other hand, a sample of cannellini beans with sun-dried tomatoes and spinach was a winner. So was the salad of arugula, fennel, dried apricots, frisee, radicchio, shallots with a white balsamic-olive oil dressing and the chipotle chicken. Desserts, the kids said, are only for holidays.

Muscatine is an intuitive cook. Two of the dishes she made were ones she'd whipped up for the first time. "Before I would never have done that," she said. "I was cautious." She starts with a recipe from a cookbook or online and then adjusts as she goes along. The chicken needed some lime juice and more salt. She added more olive oil to the dressing.

The cooking gene appears to have been passed down to all the children.

"Brad," on the other hand, said Muscatine, speaking of her husband, "has never cooked a meal in his life."

It's clear he wouldn't even try. His parting words: "Lissa's a great cook and it's great to have her back."