

CONNECTION

Business is blooming

Broadband helps florists grow

LISTENING ROOM

EXPLORING CAVES



By SHIRLEY BLOOMFIELD, CEO
NTCA—The Rural Broadband Association

Supporting the Universal Service Fund

For more than 100 years, America has embraced the belief that everyone should have reliable access to reasonably priced communications services. Today, the federal Universal Service Fund, known as the USF, continues its vital role in this mission. The fund helps rural consumers access services comparable in price and quality to those in urban areas, making services more affordable for low-income families. It also supports critical connections important to schools, libraries, health care and businesses.

As we work with NTCA members daily, we see the good the USF does for rural America. We proudly support the continuation of the USF even as new broadband programs expand access to unserved areas. Simply, it makes a practical difference.

Consider, for example, the economic value of broadband, which exceeds \$1.5 trillion annually. It sustains hundreds of thousands of jobs and adds billions of dollars to local economies. With the growing demand for broadband, the USF supports the advanced, sustainable services rural businesses need to compete globally.

Similarly, fast and reliable broadband access helps narrow health care disparities between rural and metropolitan communities. The USF expands the reach of medical services through telehealth and fosters improved patient communication as well as the adoption of electronic health records.

Join us in support of the USF and its essential mission to provide broadband access to all rural residents. I encourage you to learn more about the critical role of the USF by visiting ntca.org/universalservice. 📱



Illustration by Abarks/Adobe Stock

Help may be a click away

Thanks to telehealth services, a trip to a physician's office isn't always necessary, and when you're fighting a winter bug, that convenience counts. Here are a few tips to make your telehealth visit as productive and easy as possible:

CHOOSE THE RIGHT SPOT: Find a quiet, well-lit space for your telehealth session. It's not a Broadway audition, but good lighting helps your doctor see you better. Eliminate background noise as much as possible — you don't want the family pet stealing the spotlight during your appointment!

HAVE YOUR INFO READY: Make a mini cheat sheet with your symptoms, questions and any medications you take. It's easy to forget things during a virtual visit. Plus, it makes you look like a pro patient!

DRESS APPROPRIATELY: Pajamas might be comfy, but consider saving them for bedtime. Dressing appropriately can not only help your doctor assess your physical condition but also put you in the right mindset for a serious health chat.

BE HONEST AND OPEN: Telehealth works best when you're open about your symptoms and concerns. Don't be shy. Doctors can only help if they know the whole story. 🗨️



Tugging at your purse strings

Online romance scams can break more than just your heart

Falling in love can make anyone vulnerable. Shady cybercriminals know this and are all too eager to steal hearts and much more.

According to the FBI, a romance scam occurs when someone creates a fake online profile and fakes romantic interest to gain trust to steal the victim's money or personal information. Also known as "catfishing," romance scams can be devastating, both financially and emotionally.

Nearly 70,000 people reported being the victim of catfishing in 2022, and losses hit a staggering \$1.3 billion, according to Federal Trade Commission statistics. But actual losses are likely much higher — romance fraud is grossly underreported due to its sensitive nature.

Romance scammers often prey on older people, who may be divorced or widowed. Online dating apps are just one place they lurk. They also reach out through popular social media sites like Facebook and Instagram. They target victims' insecurities and work to develop intimacy as quickly as possible — a practice known as "love bombing." Scammers attempt to make the victim feel special or like they're the "only one who gets" the culprit.

Sometimes a scammer will ask for a short-term loan to get out of a bad situation and start a new life with the victim. Or, they'll say access to a credit card would smooth the way to a relationship. Other gifts include asking for money to cover the customs charges for an expensive gift, or a crypto investor who wants to help the victim cash in on the trend.

Despite the warning signs, victims are often too lovestruck to realize it's a swindle.

Romance scam victims can be male or female, young or old. Their only common denominator is that they believe in true love, and they feel they have found it. 📧

Follow your head, not your heart

- Allow relationships to develop slowly and naturally.
- Set up a video chat to verify the identity of the person you are messaging.
- Research the person you are messaging.
- Conduct a reverse image search to make sure the person you are talking to is really the person in the photo.

If you've been scammed

Falling victim to a scammer can happen to anyone. Talking about your experience can lessen feelings of shame and help protect others from being victimized.

- Immediately contact your bank or financial institution.
- Report it as soon as possible to the FTC at reportfraud.ftc.gov.
- Alert the FBI's fraud division — the Internet Crime Complaint Center — at ic3.gov/. Be prepared to share any records of your communication with the scammer.
- Contact the platform where the scammer first contacted you, so it can prevent others from being victimized.

A communications network built for today and tomorrow

When Colorado Valley Communications committed to bringing a fast, reliable internet network to our community, we understood the work would be equal parts challenging and rewarding. Also, it would require a significant investment. However, our decisions are always guided by fiscal responsibility, and we've built with an eye on today's needs while planning for tomorrow's innovations.



KELLY ALLISON
General Manager

When it comes to technology, nothing is truly futureproof. Eventually something better will come along. But the systems and infrastructure that make our internet-based services possible are as close to futureproof as possible.

The start of 2024 is an opportunity to appreciate all the work that's gotten us this far. It's also a time to look at the exciting possibilities ahead, knowing CVCTX is ready for a future we are only beginning to imagine.

First, let's look at some of today's less visible, but vital, uses of fast internet service. Consider medical records. Generally, these files have been digitized, making it possible to securely store information while allowing physicians locally and nationally to share the details needed for a modern medical

system. The performance of our internet network is the link needed to give local health care providers a quick, reliable way to share information.

Businesses often exchange large files or rely on videoconferencing to keep teams connected, meet with clients and collaborate. Even an industry such as agriculture — which at first seems far removed from the digital world — relies on the internet and connected devices to monitor machinery, soil moisture, weather conditions and more.

These are just a few of the ways services like those provided by CVCTX are woven into the background of businesses, government services, education — all the fundamental parts of our lives.

But that's just the beginning. Our homes are increasingly tied to the digital world. Streaming music and video services are popular options. Countless songs, TV shows, movies, short films and more are just a click away.

Many new appliances can connect to the internet, and it's often very handy. Keep watch on a slow cooker simmering away while you're at work, thanks to a home Wi-Fi connection and smartphone app. Also, internet-connected security systems let you keep an eye on your world, even if you're away for a few days.

Gaming — including the use of virtual reality devices offering elaborate, immersive communities — is extremely popular. The key to the best performance and most enjoyable experience? A fast, reliable internet connection just like the one available to you from CVCTX.

As the number of connected devices expands and cloud-based tools become even more important, experts forecast an ever-growing need for internet services capable of moving greater amounts of information even faster.

The network created by CVCTX — one many major cities would envy — is capable and prepared to serve you in 2024 and beyond. Thank you for being part of CVCTX. 📶

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To sign up for service, to increase your bandwidth or to let us know where to build out our fiber network next, visit cvctx.com.

Customers in several parts of our service area can access fiber to the home, while expansion for access is in the works for other locations.

For more information on Colorado Valley's service area, visit cvctx.com/maps. The area served by the Cooperative can be seen in the link for Colorado Valley Exchanges. Fiber availability outside the Cooperative service area can be seen under the Colorado Valley Communications header.

Produced for CVCTX by:



On the Cover:



Two local florists rely on broadband service to communicate with suppliers and customers, especially around Valentine's Day. See story on Page 12.

Adobe Stock image
by Piotr Skubisz



Scholarship opportunity!

Colorado Valley Telephone Cooperative will award \$5,000 scholarships to graduating seniors from local high schools. To be eligible to receive a scholarship, applicants must be graduating high school seniors and live in a household that receives telephone service from the cooperative. For all the details, and to get an application, go to cvctx.com/scholarships. Applications must be received by April 1.

Colorado Valley is proud to be an active member of the communities it serves and welcomes this opportunity to invest in the future of those communities by supporting higher education.

Stay in the know

CVCTX shares cybersecurity suggestions, digital technology tips and community announcements on our social media channels. Find us on social media and be sure our "fam" is part of your "gram!"



MLK MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. DAY CLOSURE

The offices of Colorado Valley Communications will be closed on **MONDAY, JAN. 15**, in observance of Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

\$ave by going paperless

Simplify your life and reduce recycling clutter by going paperless. SmartHub is the most convenient and secure way of viewing and paying your monthly CVCTX bill.

Customers who haven't already registered get a one-time \$5 bill credit when they sign up for paperless billing. Learn more at cvctx.com/billing.



Caverns of Sonora

BEAUTY LIES BELOW

Area caverns contain links to the past

Photo courtesy of Bill Sawyer



Photo courtesy of Brandon McClelland and Cascade Caverns

Stalactites in Cascade Caverns are just a few of the geologic wonders visitors experience.

Story by KATHY DENES

Deep in the heart of Texas are thousands of caves — 3,000 in the Hill Country alone — and about a half-dozen of these are known as “show caves,” open to the public for tours and events. Preserved within many are examples of their past, artifacts of indigenous peoples and bones from the animals that once sheltered there. But they are also alive and active, from colonies of bats to ever-growing stalactites and stalagmites and flowing underground waters.

One cave that’s home to all of the above is Boerne’s Cascade Caverns. Artifacts dating to its use by Lipan Apaches in the 1700s and even a mastodon tusk are among its treasures. Private tours were first offered in the 1870s, so it’s touted as the oldest cave attraction. The cave started welcoming the public in 1932. Tours start on the hour every day from 10 a.m.-4 p.m., and there’s plenty of activity to enjoy aboveground, as well. Learn more at cascadecaverns.com.



Photo courtesy of Bill Sawyer



Photo courtesy of Brandon McClelland and Cascade Caverns

Visitors can experience a unique adventure at Caverns of Sonora, known for its extreme beauty.

Boerne's Cascade Caverns first hosted private tours in the 1870s and started welcoming the public in 1932.

CAVE WITHOUT A NAME

Near Boerne, Cave Without a Name has welcomed visitors since 1939. It's open for tours every day except Thanksgiving and Christmas, reservations recommended, and often hosts musical performers and private events. The cave deemed "too beautiful to have a name" has held the bones of prehistoric animals that fell through what was its original sinkhole opening, and in the days of Prohibition it was home to a small moonshine distillery in its uppermost cavern. Additional details are online at cavewithoutaname.com.

CAVERNS OF SONORA

Halfway between San Antonio and Big Bend National Park is another show cave, Caverns of Sonora, touted as one of the

world's most beautiful due to its crystal formations. It opened to the public in 1960, and to protect the environment visitors may only carry cameras inside. Free kennels are available for pets, and with its constant temperature of 72 and high humidity, no jackets are needed inside. Learn more at cavernsofsonora.com.

NATURAL BRIDGE CAVERNS

Heading north from San Antonio, show caves include Natural Bridge Caverns, offering everything from concerts to yoga classes; Inner Space Cavern in Georgetown, called one of the state's best-preserved caves; and Burnet's Longhorn Cavern, the "National Cave of Texas," with a varied history as a Comanche hideout, dance hall and even a church. 📍



DIG DEEPER

For more on popular Texas caves, visit texasspeleologicalsurvey.org. To dig a bit deeper about caves across the country, visit worldofcaves.com.

SMALL WONDER

In San Marcos, the smallest and longest-operating of the state's show caves is still a big draw as the center attraction of Wonder World Cave and Adventure Park. Wonder Cave, formed as a fissure by a quake along the Balcones Fault Zone, was opened to visitors about 1903. But for youngsters, the real wonders of it now are above the ground — a petting zoo, anti-gravity house, "train" ride, gem mining and more. Learn more at wonderworldpark.com.



Photo courtesy of Bill Sawyer

Delicate formations give the Caverns of Sonora's Crystal Palace its name.

The Right Note

Bugle Boy Foundation connects Fayette County through music

Story by JAMIE BIESIADA

When Fayette County residents reach the end of their lives, they are invited to request a private concert in the music style of their choice.

Musicians go to them — be it in their home, a hospital or care facility — and play for the resident and family. The concerts are organized by the Bugle Boy Foundation, an ambassador of the Austin-based Swan Songs organization, and they are powerful.

“We’ve actually had a couple of patients over the years who were sleeping and hadn’t been communicating with anybody in days, and the music brought them back into the present,” says Heather Allbright, the executive director of the Bugle Boy Foundation. “They will open their eyes and acknowledge that their friends and their family were there. We had one man even request a song.”

In fact, Heather says, the concerts can be so emotional that she sometimes needs to step out of the room. But it’s rewarding work. “It’s often a time where the family can spend one happy memory together,” she says.

Musician Phil Hurley has played a number of Swan Songs concerts. He says they are moving experiences, especially when the music reaches a patient who hasn’t been communicative.

“I got to share profound moments of joy,” Phil says. “And it’s not me. I don’t claim that I’m any extra-special musician — it’s just the power of music. And to be a conduit of that, to be able to bring that moment of joy for people and to bring families

together, has been uniquely profound and unexpected. I will do it anytime, anywhere, because it just is a gift that I didn’t know I could share. But it has been life altering.”

Over the years, Heather says, the foundation has organized Swan Songs concerts in a number of genres, from Elvis impersonators to polka concerts — reflecting the area’s German and Czech heritage — and even a metal concert.

Those concerts are one of a number of services the foundation offers, in addition to operating its listening room for Friday and Saturday concerts, beloved by audiences and performers alike.

A UNIQUE LISTENING ROOM

The foundation’s listening room, called The Bugle Boy, is now in a converted World War II-era Army barracks in La Grange. But its history spans nearly 20 years. It was founded by Lane Gosnay in early 2005 as a coffee shop. She booked musical acts and drew a group of regulars. From that, the idea of creating a nonprofit music venue was born, and the foundation was recognized in 2009 as a tax-exempt charitable organization.

The foundation’s purpose, Heather says, is to present original,





Photos courtesy of the Bugle Boy Foundation

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Austin-based Jackie Venson plays a soulful acoustic set. The Phil Hurley Band sings “King of Friday Night” during a performance at The Bugle Boy venue. Beat Root Legere performs at the listening room.

live music and support independent musicians. The listening room is open for 90 shows annually. In fact, with so many musicians interested in playing the venue, most can typically only perform there once a year.

Inside the foundation’s listening room are 60 theater seats purchased from a movie theater and another 20 padded chairs for a capacity of 80.

“It’s almost like every seat in the house is like sitting in the orchestra section of a larger theater,” Heather says.

The audience is engaged, and performers like playing The Bugle Boy because of its listening room designation. There is no talking during the performance and the focus is totally on the artists.

Phil lives nearby in Bastrop and has played The Bugle Boy five or six times. “It makes a very different environment when you know that people are truly listening and are there with the intent to understand the story you’re trying to tell as a songwriter,” he says.

FOCUS ON OUTREACH

In addition to Swan Songs concerts, the Bugle Boy Foundation works with the local community in a number of ways.

For instance, any veteran who participates in a chapter of the nonprofit Soldier Songs and Voices can record the songs they’ve written with The Bugle Boy’s professional sound engineers, Heather says.

Regular concerts are arranged by the Bugle Boy Foundation in assisted living and nursing home facilities. “Those audiences are typically our most appreciative,” Heather says. “They all love music, but they can’t get out anymore to appreciate it.”

Newer musicians are also on the foundation’s mind with the Talent Trust. The Bugle Boy will advance them money to help record or promote an album, Heather says. Then, they come back to play and pay off that advance, which is passed on to the next artist. Seven artists have been recipients since the trust began in 2009.

This is an important year for the Bugle Boy Foundation. “We’ll be celebrating our 20th musical season in 2024, which is a large accomplishment seeing that we are a music venue in rural, central Texas,” Heather says. “It’s all thanks to the support we get from donors.” 📞

IN THE GAME

Esports growth offers students community and opportunity

Story by DREW WOOLLEY

The Texas Wesleyan esports program started with a 2017 conversation that wasn't about video games at all. Eugene Friar, who was then working in student affairs and is now director of esports and gaming, approached the vice president of his division to talk about what the university could do to be a fun and exciting option for prospective students.

"I was hoping he'd give me some answers, but he flipped it on me and was like, 'Bring me some ideas, and we'll discuss it,'" Eugene says. "I wasn't thinking esports at all, even though I've been a gamer since the Commodore 64 days."

While brainstorming, Eugene came across fledgling esports programs at places like the University of California, Irvine, Missouri's Maryville University and Robert Morris University in Pennsylvania. Groups of students were coming together to compete in multiplayer games like Overwatch, Super Smash Bros. and League of Legends.

Today, the National Association of Collegiate Esports, or NACE, recognizes more than 240 schools with competitive esports teams. The experience not only opens doors in the gaming industry but can also help students develop skills for a variety of careers.

Texas Wesleyan's esports team evolved from a group focused primarily on competition to one that welcomes anyone from casual hobbyists to hardcore gamers. For Eugene, it's an important community that supports students who might not share other interests on campus. But it's also a

Trojan horse for helping them find their path through school and beyond.

"We tell our recruits early in the process my job is to trick you into learning," Eugene says. "If you want to try out for one of our teams, hopefully we'll go to the stadium and play. But what's your major? What are you going to do after you graduate? How is this going to help you get there?"

LEVELING UP

As access to high-speed internet expands from urban centers to rural areas, competitive gaming's popularity has soared. A study by Pew Research Center found that about 70% of college students say they play video games at least once in a while.

While the Texas Wesleyan Rams have teams for the squad-based shooter game Overwatch 2 and the fighting game Super Smash Bros., it's also important for Eugene to appeal to that larger audience. When the program was more focused on competitive gaming, he found that some students with a casual interest in gaming felt like they didn't belong. That's why the



The Texas Wesleyan University Overwatch team reviews video for a match.

Photo courtesy of Eugene Friar



ABOVE: University of Kentucky students enjoy competing in the school's new esports lounge.

RIGHT: Students try out the gaming lounge at the University of Kentucky's Latinx Open House.

club includes a team that creates, edits and streams content for platforms like Twitch and YouTube, as well as groups for fans of anime, Dungeons & Dragons and more casual gaming.

Eugene says overall participation increased by slightly deemphasizing competition and offering more ways to participate with casual gaming clubs, a social media team and an event team. "We went from having seven competitive teams to two, and the number of students in our program has actually gone up a little bit because there's more ways for people to get involved," he says.



Bryce Edwards, a junior, received a scholarship to help run the esports program and became captain of the school's Smash Bros. team. He says the social and leadership skills he learned in that role will be invaluable as he pursues a career in marketing.

For Kelvin Coker, a senior criminal justice major and wrestler, it's been a new way to connect with people. "People need a place that allows them to be themselves and interact with people of different backgrounds so that they can develop the skills necessary to go through life," Kelvin says. "It was a different vibe than wrestling, which was extremely refreshing. It felt good to be among people who shared interests in things outside of sports."

Heath Price, associate vice president of partnerships at the University of Kentucky, found the same enthusiasm when he first met with an informal esports club on his campus in 2018. With school resources behind it, the UK Esports Club has grown to include hundreds of members who enjoy the university's recently completed gaming lounge, along with approximately 70 students who play competitively.

"What we've seen is that the idea of a gamer just being someone who might be interested in building games is kind of a misnomer," Heath says. "A lot of these

young people have varying interests. I think as much of a career builder as anything is giving people some of those opportunities for exposure and to do things in the community."

TAILOR MADE

Eugene takes a similar approach at

Texas Wesleyan. Whether it's a student who wants to start a clothing line designing the school's esports jersey or a mass communications major building the team's content roadmap for the year, he always looks for ways the program can help students pursue their larger goals.

"The content team isn't about making funny content.

It's about project management," he says. "The student organizations aren't just about talking about the things you love. They're leading a meeting and organizing people."

With the gaming landscape constantly changing, that may even mean meeting students somewhere other than esports. Texas Wesleyan's teams currently compete in the second division of the NACE Starleague, the biggest collegiate esports league in North America.

The Rams had a national championship-winning team for the FIFA soccer game series. Today, that team doesn't exist because the game no longer exists. Earlier this year, Electronic Arts, publisher of the FIFA series of games, ended its branding partnership with global soccer organization FIFA. That left some competitive players out in the cold and highlights a unique challenge for esports.

"You don't win a national championship in football and a few years later it's like, 'Remember when we used to have a football team?' So when the publishers get involved it's tricky," Eugene says. "It wouldn't surprise me if the esports part of what we do goes away in time and you see the more content creation and pop culture things last. It's about meeting the students' needs and matching their interests in a really positive way." 🎮



The Texas Wesleyan University Super Smash Bros. team prepares for a competition.



Growing demand

Broadband helps local florists bloom

Story by RACHEL BROWN

Valentine's Day is by far the busiest time of the year for florists. Orders for roses can jump tenfold, and staffing demands can more than quadruple. Phones ring almost constantly as customers call in last-minute orders.

But Valentine's Day is also one of the best times of the year, says Jennifer Zaruba, owner of Frogs & Flamingos Florist in La Grange. She feels honored to be part of something that makes others smile. Besides, she says, "Who doesn't like to get flowers?"

Long before the big day arrives, florists are already planning and preparing for the rush.

FROGS & FLAMINGOS

Normally, there are three part-time employees in addition to Jennifer, but when Valentine's week rolls around, Frogs & Flamingos' staff increases to at least 12.

Jennifer took over the business in 2018 after her mother, Elaine Zbranek, who owned the shop since 2005, passed away suddenly. Picking up where her mom left off was a difficult decision for Jennifer at first, following a steady career in teaching and coaching. Ultimately, family members decided they didn't want to let go of the business, and Jennifer had experience helping her mother during holidays and over the summers.

"We just couldn't let go of what she

built up, so we all agreed for me to take it over and keep it going," Jennifer says. "I really enjoy what I do now."

Elaine worked at a local flower shop for a time when Jennifer was a child before going in a different career direction. But when the location at 101 W. Colorado St. came up for sale, Elaine bought it. She rechristened the business with its current name — a nod to how much she enjoyed sitting in her yard listening to frogs croak and admiring the flamingo decorations her children bought for the pond.

"My family has been my biggest supporter to take over the business that my mom built," Jennifer says. "I'm thankful for them to believe in me."

Jennifer enjoys spending her free time with her family, including her two elementary-age children.

BLOOMIN' JUNCTION

Brooke Smith, owner of Bloomin' Junction, 120 S. Main St. in La Grange, started working in the floral business in 2000 when she was a high school senior. In 2006, she bought the shop from her former boss and went into business with her family.

Brooke laughs when she recalls saying the profession was "an old lady kind of thing." Today, she recognizes her path as a florist pairs perfectly with her love of crafting, decorating and making people happy.



Photos courtesy of Frogs & Flamingos Florist

Still, it's not all fun and games, and when Valentine's Day rolls around, the pace picks up dramatically. In a normal week, Bloomin' Junction keeps 150 roses on hand. For the week of Valentine's Day, that number goes up to 1,500 — all carefully arranged inside one walk-in cooler.

Bloomin' Junction has changed hands several times since it was established in the 1970s. Its name is a nod to the building's original use as a train depot. Brooke's son and daughter spent a lot of time at the flower shop when they were little. And her cousin, Jordan Von Minden, works alongside her.



How to care for your flowers

Trim the stems

Once flowers are cut, the stems begin creating a seal that caps the tiny internal tubes that allow them to draw up water. Trimming a small amount from the bottom will reopen those lines, keeping the flowers hydrated for longer.

Keep away from drafts

Sitting your flowers by an open window, fan or air vent will dry them out. Find a location where the air is still.

Change the water

It may be tempting to fill your vase only once, but fresh cuts do best with fresh water. Dump out the old water every one to two days and refill. Arrangements that come with oasis foam should be checked daily to ensure they stay moist.



PHOTOS COURTESY BLOOMIN' JUNCTION



TOP: Jennifer Zaruba, bottom left, enlists the help of several family members to complete all of the Valentine's Day orders and delivery of flowers.

ABOVE: Frogs & Flamingos Florist and Bloomin' Junction offer vibrant Valentine's Day creations, as well as flowers for occasions year-round.

PETALS TO THE METAL

In a big city, florists can purchase inventory from wholesalers just down the road, but in small towns, it's common to get plant inventory orders once a week and flower orders just a few times a week.

Brooke and Jennifer recommend placing an order at least one to three days before Valentine's Day to ensure you're more likely to get the arrangement and container

you want. Both shops accept orders by phone or on their websites, frogsandflamingosflorist.com and bloominjunction.net.

Some people believe that if they place an order on Valentine's Day, the flowers will be the freshest, but that's just not true, Brooke says. All flowers are fresh, but orders placed at least a couple of days in advance are more likely to be comprised of the stems you would select.

In addition to bouquets in vases and special containers, customers can also select from a variety of other options, including corsages, ribbons and other decorations.

Both florists also note that customers should expect a busy day. "Our phone does not quit ringing," Jennifer says. "It's definitely a chaotic day, but it's fun." 📞

When one pot hits the spot

Simple, delicious and easy

Meals you can make in one pot are ideal for today's busy cooks for two reasons. For starters, little time is wasted going from one pot to another, making sure everything is cooking together nicely. Secondly, you're cooking in one pot, so there's minimal cleanup.

As the name implies, one-pot meals are just that. They are the secret to getting dinner on the table in a jiffy. Generally, the vegetables and protein are cooked together in the same pot. If any other side dishes are needed, it's usually nothing more than a green salad with buttery croutons or a nice piece of crusty bread.

One-pot meals are filled with comfort, something we all yearn for like a big, cozy blanket on a chilly winter's night.



**Food Editor
Anne P. Braly
is a native of
Chattanooga,
Tennessee.**

Photography by **Mark Gilliland**
Food Styling by **Rhonda Gilliland**

CHEESEBURGER PASTA

This is the perfect easy wintertime one-pot meal. It's like having a cheeseburger and spaghetti at the same time, and the kids will love it!

- 1 yellow onion
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1/2 pound ground beef
- 2 tablespoons flour
- 1 (8-ounce) can tomato sauce
- 2 cups beef broth
- 8 ounces pasta shells, uncooked
- 4 ounces cheddar cheese, shredded
- 2 tablespoons pickle relish
- 2 green onions, sliced

Finely dice the onion. Add the onion, olive oil and ground beef to a large deep skillet, and saute over medium heat until the beef is fully browned and the onion is soft and translucent. Drain off any excess fat, if needed.

Add the flour to the skillet and continue

to stir and cook for 1 minute more. The flour will begin to coat the bottom of the skillet. Be careful not to let the flour burn.

Add the tomato sauce and beef broth to the skillet and stir to dissolve the flour off the bottom of the skillet.

Add the uncooked pasta to the skillet and stir to combine. The liquid in the skillet may not fully cover the pasta, but that is OK.

Place a lid on the skillet, turn the heat up to medium-high, and let the liquid come up to a boil. Once it reaches a boil, give it a quick stir to loosen any pasta from the bottom of the skillet. Replace the lid, and turn the heat down to low. Let the pasta simmer, stirring occasionally (always replacing the lid), for about 10 minutes, or until the pasta is tender and the sauce has thickened. Turn off the heat.

Add the shredded cheddar to the skillet and stir until it has melted into the sauce. Stir the relish into the sauce, then top with sliced green onions. Serve warm.



FIVE-HOUR BEEF STEW

Delicious smells will fill your home as this stew cooks slowly in the oven.

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1 1/2 pounds chuck roast, cut into bite-size pieces | 4-5 tablespoons minute tapioca |
| 1 cup celery, chunked | 2-3 generous splashes of Worcestershire sauce |
| 4 carrots, chunked | |
| 2-3 medium potatoes, chunked | |
| 1 onion, sliced or large dice | |
| 1/2 cup fresh bread crumbs | |
| 1 large can tomatoes | |
| 1 cup red wine, optional | |
| 1 tablespoon salt | |
| 2 tablespoons sugar | |

Do not brown the meat. Combine all ingredients in a large baking dish with a tight-fitting lid or cover securely with foil. Bake in a 250 F oven for 5-6 hours. Do not hurry this stew. The slow oven is the key to success.

ONE-PAN CHICKEN PASTA

- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- 1/4 cup panko breadcrumbs
- 1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon minced garlic, divided
- 1 pound boneless, skinless chicken breasts, cut into 1/2-inch pieces
- 1 teaspoon Italian seasoning
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 3 cups chicken broth
- 1 1/2 cups crushed tomatoes
- 8 ounces penne pasta
- 1/2 cup shredded mozzarella cheese
- 1/4 cup shredded Parmesan cheese
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh basil

Heat 1 tablespoon oil in a large broiler-safe skillet over medium-high heat. Add panko and 1 teaspoon garlic. Cook, stirring, until the panko is golden brown, 1 to 2 minutes. Transfer to a small bowl and set aside. Wipe out the pan.

Heat the remaining 1 tablespoon oil in the pan over medium-high heat. Add chicken, Italian seasoning, salt and the remaining 1 tablespoon garlic. Cook,



stirring frequently, until the chicken is no longer pink on the outside, about 2 minutes. Add broth, tomatoes and penne. Bring to a boil and cook, uncovered, stirring frequently, until the penne is cooked and the sauce has reduced and thickened, 15 to 20 minutes.

Meanwhile, position an oven rack in the upper third of the oven. Preheat the broiler to high. When the pasta is cooked, sprinkle mozzarella over the penne mixture. Place the pan under the broiler. Broil until the mozzarella is bubbling and beginning to brown, about 1 minute. Top with the panko mixture, Parmesan and basil.



ONE-POT PRIMAVERA

- 4 skin-on, bone-in chicken thighs
- 1 pound small red potatoes, halved
- 1 pound Brussels sprouts, trimmed
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic
- 1 tablespoon olive oil, or as needed
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 1/2 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1 (1-ounce) package of ranch dressing mix
- 6 slices bacon, chopped

Preheat the oven to 400 F. Place chicken thighs in a 9-by-13-inch baking dish.

Toss potatoes, Brussels sprouts and garlic together with olive oil in a bowl until vegetables are lightly coated. Add vegetables around and between chicken thighs in the baking dish. Season with salt, pepper and thyme. Evenly pour the entire packet of ranch seasoning over the chicken and vegetables. Sprinkle chopped bacon on top.

Bake until chicken is no longer pink at the bone and the juices run clear, 30 to 35 minutes. An instant-read thermometer inserted near the bone should read 165 F.

Set an oven rack about 6 inches from the heat source and preheat the oven's broiler. Place the baking dish under the broiler, and cook until chicken skin becomes golden brown and crisp, 2 to 3 minutes. 🍴

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