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# It's the one thing I know I can make

Leigh Ito, vice president of development for Alan Wong Restaurants

*A few tweaks transform a soup-box recipe into a favorite meatloaf for busy Leigh Ito*

By Joleen Oshiro / joshiro@staradvertiser.com

If you're out on the food scene even occasionally, you know that chef Alan Wong is everywhere — from a cookbook launch to support an author to a student culinary competition to serve as a judge, not to mention food fundraising dinners (if he didn't chair it, he's cooking at it) and more. And if you've spotted the chef, Leigh Ito is surely nearby.

Ito is a seamless mix of class, graciousness and warmth, the sort of person who instantly makes others feel at ease. Quick with a smile and always ready to share a laugh, she is the friendly face in the crowd. If Wong's celebrity brands him intimidating, Ito's warmth humanizes him — it's not uncommon to see the chef laughing merrily when Ito is at his side.

But just what does Ito do for Wong's company? "Most people think I'm his right-hand man," she said with a laugh. "Ask anybody. Ninety percent will say I'm his admin."

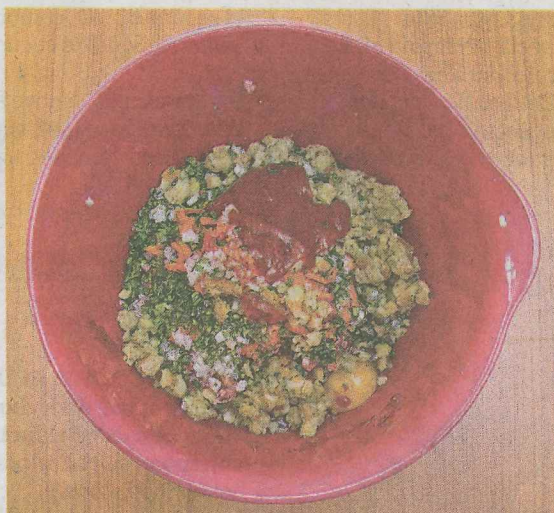
Those 90 percent need to think bigger. Way bigger. Ito is vice president of development for Alan

Please see **DISH, D4**



Local food industry professionals share recipes they prepare at home.

Leigh Ito, vice president of development for Alan Wong's Restaurants, selected meatloaf as her favorite dish to prepare at home. She uses a stuffing mix and onion soup mix along with fresh grated and other vegetables.



Scan this QR code with your smartphone to see a video of Leigh Ito. Find a scanner on the Star-Advertiser breaking news app. Or see this video at [staradvertiser.com](http://staradvertiser.com).

PHOTOS BY DENNIS ODA / DODA@STARADVERTISER.COM



## TRICK OR TREATS

# VERY SCARY, PLENTY SWEET



ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Alison Ladman  
 Associated Press

It's true: Despite what the kids think, not all Halloween treats need to rot your teeth on contact.

Which isn't to say the goodies we've gathered here — a muddy punch and a granola-like snack — don't have a sweet side. Rather, we decided to take a more balanced approach to our sugar rush. You know, just in case somebody over the age of 12 wants some.

Start with the spicy-sweet mole pumpkin seed clusters. Think of it as a savory-sweet granola that packs tons of addictive crunch and just a bit of heat (easily adjusted to your taste). It definitely has that potato chip-like can't-stop-at-just-one quality. Embrace it.

To wash it down, we created a spooky, muddy punch. Sure, it's jammed with chocolate, but it tastes more fruity than sugary. We kept it simple —

**Spicy-sweet mole pumpkin seed clusters are a granola-like snack that takes a more balanced approach to our Halloween sugar rush.**

Please see **SNACKS, D4**





Ingredients for Leigh Ito's meatloaf include stuffing mix, onions, parsley and carrots.

## DISH: Events with Wong help sharpen cooking skills

Continued from D1

Wong's Restaurants. She's responsible for branding, communications and the expansion of the company. That involves everything from Wong's King Street restaurant and his Pineapple Room at Macy's to such projects as the Adopt-a-Beehive program and the award-winning "Blue Tomato" cookbook. Right now Ito's involved in the opening of another restaurant in Shanghai, set for the end of the year.

After long days handling such duties, you'd think Ito would head home and put her feet up. Instead, she adds Wong's event schedule to her own.

"I go along because I like to hear him talk to people, to get inside his head and understand his vision," she said.

That leaves little time for her own cooking. In fact, her son, Jordan Ito, 23, does most of the cooking at home. But Ito does have a favorite recipe that she raised Jordan on, and it's one that she still makes for her parents today.

"It's a meatloaf that was inspired by a recipe on the Lipton onion soup mix box," she said. "It's the one thing I know I can make that I'm not gonna mess up."

The recipe was inspired by her former father-in-law, who learned to cook after his wife died.

"He made an awesome pot roast in a slow cooker using a recipe with Lipton onion soup mix," she said.

Ito morphed her box recipe by consulting "The Joy of Cooking," which led to her adding parsley, onion and carrots to the bowl and replacing regular breadcrumbs with Stove Top stuffing, which she prefers for its savory flavor.

"Plus, I could use the other half of the cooked stuffing to eat with a slice of meatloaf."

ITO BEGAN working for Alan Wong's Restaurants in 1999, when she was hired as a project coordinator to help manage operations between the newly opened Pineapple Room and the Hawaii Regional Cuisine Marketplace, a 7,200-square-foot space on the fourth floor of Macy's, where the public had ac-

cess to restaurant-quality produce, seafood, artisan breads, butchered meats, oils and spices — "everything chefs had access to."

"It was ahead of its time," Ito said. "It was a dream of what's starting to be in the mainstream now."

Though the marketplace barely lasted two years, Ito's ascent in Wong's company was just beginning. In 2000 she was promoted to operations manager; in 2002 she became project manager and an officer of the company. In 2011 she took on her current position.

Ito, 54, was raised in Kaimuki, where she still lives today. She was raised by a mother who worked full time but always packed home lunches and "made sure dinner was waiting for us every day," Ito said. "She cooked simple stuff: salad, entree, and dessert once in a while."

Ito graduated from Kalani High School and went on to earn a business degree at the University of Hawaii, with an emphasis on travel industry management.

After graduation in 1982, she entered Amfac Resorts' management training program while working at the then-Waiohai Resort in 1983. Stints at Mary Charles Resorts, the Halekulani and the Hawaii Prince Hotel (where she worked for another Hawaii Regional Cuisine chef, Gary Strehl) followed before she went to work for Wong.

FOR ALL the heady projects surrounding the world-renowned chef, Ito says Wong's company "is still a mom-and-pop in size." There are about 150 employees and just under 20 folks on the management team. And like a mom-and-pop, Ito's workplace and its people are an important part in not just her life, but her son's life as well.

"A good handful of us are here seven days a week," she said. "My son was in preschool when I started with Alan. He grew up in and around this company, and sometimes he's even helped with events."

Perhaps it's his mother's work — or her boss's influence — that has contributed to Jordan's lifelong love of cooking. In fact, when he was in the fourth grade, Jordan took second

### EASY MEATLOAF Courtesy Leigh Ito

- 1/2 package Stove Top stuffing, cooked and cooled (substitute with 1 slice bread, broken into pieces)
- 1-1/2 pounds ground beef
- 1 package Lipton onion soup mix
- 1 medium onion, finely chopped
- 1 medium carrot, grated
- 2 to 3 tablespoons finely chopped parsley
- 1 large egg
- 3 tablespoons ketchup, plus more to top loaf if desired
- 2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce
- 1/2 teaspoon Tabasco
- Pepper, to taste
- Vegetable oil to grease pan
- 1/3 cup chopped chives (optional)

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Combine half to all of stuffing with remaining ingredients (for firmer meatloaf, use half of stuffing; for softer, use all). Combine well but do not overmix. Reserve any remaining stuffing to eat with meatloaf.

Place in greased loaf pan. If you like, spread thin layer of ketchup over top of loaf. Bake 1 hour, then turn off heat and let meatloaf sit in oven 5 to 10 minutes. Take out of oven and cool before slicing. Serves 3 to 4.

Approximate nutritional information, per serving (based on 4 servings, 15 percent fat beef, Stove Top dressing and NOT including salt to taste): 530 calories, 30 g fat, 11 g saturated fat, 165 mg cholesterol, 900 mg sodium, 29 g carbohydrate, 2 g fiber, 8 g sugar, 37 g protein

place in a youth version of the Pillsbury bake-off with a carpaccio and spinach pocket recipe.

And ironically, though Leigh's busy schedule keeps her mostly away from her own kitchen, her time out in the community with Wong has rubbed off on her cooking skills.

"When we're traveling to do events, if the other chefs are busy, I'm Alan's sous-chef," she said. "My knife skills are OK, and I've watched and learned about ratios. This is done for taste and balance. I've watched the chefs experiment and throw things together. So now the palate part is OK, but I've got to transfer that to my hands. They say repetition is the mother of skill — I don't have that yet."

No matter, she says. "It's fun to help Alan because it makes me feel like I know what I'm doing."

## MORSELS

### Chefs to create binational meal

Aiming to promote cross-cultural dialogue and understanding through food, the U.S.-Japan Council has gathered 12 chefs from Hawaii and Japan to work together to create dishes for "Celebrating Connections: A U.S.-Japan Culinary Festival," 6 to 8 p.m. Friday at the Hilton Hawaiian Village Waiiki Beach Resort.

Using local ingredients such as mahi-mahi, opihii, wild boar, guava, macadamia nut honey and taro, the following paired chefs will work together to present a dish:

>> Chef Alan Wong (Alan Wong's restaurants) with chef Toshiya Konna (Ukai)

>> Chef Chris Kajio (Restaurant CK) with chef Yasuhiro Sasajima (Il Ghiottone)

>> Chef Alan Takasaki (Le Bistro) with chef Toru Totoki (Gina Totoki)

>> Chef Vikram Garg (Halekulani) with chef Keigo Tamura (Kyoryori Manshige)

>> Representative from Sun Noodle with chef Kenji Chiba (Chibakiya)

Chefs Roy Yamaguchi and Michelle Karr-Ueoka will also be providing dishes.

The price is \$200 per person or \$1,750 for 10. Go to [usjapan-council.org/culinary-festival](http://usjapan-council.org/culinary-festival) to register.

### Caribbean food is festival fare

Take your pick of dishes from Puerto Rico, Mexico, Cuba and the Caribbean, as well as favorite local fare, at Saturday's Hispanic Heritage Festival and Health Fair, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. at Kapiolani Park.

Organizers are requesting that visitors bring a can of food for Hawaii Foodbank, or school supplies that will benefit an adopted school.

See cultural displays and crafts, entertainment and a display of cars and bikes from the Low-Riders Pride Car Club. Call 285-0072 or visit [HispanicEvents-Hawaii.com](http://HispanicEvents-Hawaii.com).

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## SNACKS: Delicious treats are sweet, but not overly so

Continued from D1

and nonalcoholic — in case you're willing to share it with the kids. But after they go to bed, we suggest

sheet with waxed paper.

In a medium saucepan over medium-high heat, combine almond butter, honey, cayenne, salt and cocoa powder. Bring to sim-

