



Party hosts Noel MacDonald and Marg Meikle greet guests at their porridge party.

# Porridge for Parkinson's

*Oatmeal may be neither too cool nor too haute, but as the featured entrée at this wildly successful community fund-raiser, it was just right.*

By Bill Richardson

Recipe adapted by The Canadian Living Test Kitchen

When people talk about porridge – it sometimes happens – even thinking adults wax eloquent about its starchy smell, its viscous, throbbing bubbles, its propensity for sticking to the pan and the marvellous efficiency with which it ushers in “regularity.” But no one ever says that oatmeal is sexy. So how did Marg Meikle and her husband, Noel MacDonald, make this bland breakfast food the centrepiece of a fruitful home-

based fund-raiser? It's a success story that's still waiting for a happy ending.

Familiar to CBC Radio One fans as the onetime Answer Lady on “Gabereau,” Marg is also an award-winning writer and my long-standing friend. She was almost 42 when her first child, Mac, arrived in an epic mother-son tussle. Afterward, she and Noel put her persistently limp, draggy arm and creeping numbness down to a passing postpartum inconvenience.

Later, in a scary process of

elimination, more-sinister causes were sought. On the phone Marg would report her test results: No tumour on the brain. Or spine. No multiple sclerosis.

Then, one day in June, she said, “It's Parkinson's.” It was 1999, and Mac was 18 months old – lively, demanding and quite at odds with the deleterious certainties of Parkinson's disease. The disorder causes tremors, rigidity and loss of muscular control. It is complex, degenerative and unpredictable in the speed of its progression. Marg has



Sous chef Collis Wilson (left) stirs things up, while Noel MacDonald (right), assisted by his son, Mac, mans the other spoon. Bill Richardson (centre) spoons a topping onto the finished porridge under Marg Meikle's watchful eye.



“young onset” Parkinson’s – the same type that Michael J. Fox has – and it has galloped. Medications sometimes control the tremors, but Marg’s mobility is greatly impaired. And, like about 40 per cent of Parkinson’s patients, she has clinical depression – another result of the

shifting chemistry of the brain.

“I have a four-year-old and a great husband,” says Marg. “This thing has been very hard on our family, so we couldn’t just wait around for a cure. We had to do something. Then Noel suggested Porridge for Parkinson’s. It made sense for us. We have a big house that can accommodate a lot of people. Noel is gregarious and a great cook and loves a challenge. And the disease is much easier to manage in the morning, so I could actually take part.”

Marg has lived in Vancouver for most of her life. She knows a lot of people – really, really a lot. She invited everyone on her Christmas-card list and, at about 8:30 a.m. on a grey late-November Sunday, they started to arrive. By 10 you could scarcely move to pour cream or sprinkle sugar.

“We invited 200 people, planned for 150, and 180 came,” says Marg. “We used paper bowls and napkins and plastic spoons. We delegated like mad. We had greeters writing out name tags, someone to take donations for The Pacific Parkinsons Research Institute and explain the cause, two cooks, a general troubleshooter, someone to look after the coffee and a babysitter to keep the kids upstairs.” And – in addition to other brunch comestibles – they had great porridge with cream and

### Porridge for Parkinson’s

3 cups	water	750 mL
1 cup	milk	250 mL
1 tbsp	butter	15 mL
1 cup	steel-cut oats	250 mL
½ tsp	salt	2 mL

☞ In large saucepan, bring water and milk to simmer over medium heat.

☞ Meanwhile, in skillet, melt butter over medium heat just until beginning to foam. Add oats; cook, stirring constantly, until golden and fragrant, about 2 minutes. Stir into water mixture; reduce heat to medium-low and simmer, uncovered, until thickened, about 20 minutes.

☞ Stir in salt; simmer, stirring occasionally, until thickened and creamy and

almost all liquid is absorbed, about 7 minutes. Let stand, uncovered, for 5 minutes before serving. **Makes 4 to 6 servings.**

#### CROWD-PLEASING TIPS

- Chef Noel MacDonald and sous chef Collis Wilson made porridge in bulk. For each batch, they multiplied the recipe amounts by 6 and used a 14 L stockpot. You can, too, but you must cook the oats in the skillet, 1 cup (250 mL) at a time, using 1 tbsp (15 mL) butter for each cup (250 mL) oats.

- Noel recommends that you measure out the ingredients for each batch in advance, cook 2 potfuls to start the breakfast, then put on a fresh pot every 30 minutes.

- Along with milk, cream and brown sugar, you can offer other toppings, such as corn syrup; honey; maple sugar and syrup; molasses; raisins and diced dried fruit; diced fresh apples, bananas and pears; blueberries; strawberries; and nuts.

## Parkinson's Disease: A Snapshot

- Parkinson's symptoms vary, and the severity differs from person to person.
- Parkinson's is a neurological disorder that results from a dopamine deficiency. It is not known why the brain stops producing sufficient dopamine.
- Parkinson's is not contagious.
- Approximately 80,000 to 100,000 Canadians have Parkinson's. Eight per cent are younger than 40 when diagnosed; 20 per cent are under 50. The odds of getting Parkinson's are one in 1,000 for people over 55 and one in 100 for those over 65.
- Men and women are at equal risk.
- There is no cure – yet – but drug therapies are available. Exercise, physiotherapy, stretching and massage have been shown to be beneficial.

brown sugar, a tasty organic applesauce and a highly addictive fruit compote to top it off.

"Get this," says Marg, "our total costs were less than \$300, and we collected \$16,000 in donations." In the morning Marg can smile at this remarkable return on their investment, but by nighttime her facial muscles typically find it difficult to make a smile. When we discussed this story, she told me, "If you use words like *brave* or *courageous*, I will kill you – kill you." It was morning, she wasn't smiling, and I believed her.

If I'm not allowed to call her brave, I'll call her a pragmatist. Porridge for Parkinson's, which she and Noel hope will become an annual event in many communities, is their realistic – even joyful – way of taking care of business.

*Bill Richardson is an award-winning author, humourist, columnist and host of "Richardson's Roundup" on CBC Radio One. He donated his fee for this article to The Pacific Parkinsons Research Institute.*

For more information on Parkinson's disease, visit [www.parkinson.ca](http://www.parkinson.ca) or call 1-800-565-3000. For tips on organizing your own Porridge for Parkinson's event, visit [www.porridgeforparkinsons.com](http://www.porridgeforparkinsons.com).

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