

PRESS DEMOCRAT FEB. 2020

BIG DEAL DINNER

All of us occasionally need to do what I call the “Big Deal” dinner. Maybe the Boss is coming over to dinner, or the in-laws or future in-laws or anybody else that you’d like to impress with a special dinner. How about Valentine’s Day? Here’s an interesting menu for that occasion.

- Grilled Wild Mushroom and Citrus Salad with Aged Goat Cheese
- Radicchio Soup with Smoked Goat Cheese
- Filet of Beef Wrapped in Parchment with Sauce Béarnaise
- Floating Islands

GRILLED WILD MUSHROOM AND CITRUS SALAD WITH SOFT RIPENING CHEESE

Serves 6

Any wild or exotic cultivated mushroom such as oysters, trumpets, maitake, morel, chanterelle could be used. Use any soft ripening (bloomy rind) goat or cow’s milk cheese that you like. I’m also including peppered maple walnuts in this recipe. You could use just plain toasted, but these are very tasty plus you’ll have some leftover to serve with more cheese!

1/2 cup olive oil
2 tablespoons or so white balsamic vinegar
2 teaspoons finely minced shallots
1 teaspoon fresh thyme, finely chopped
Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
1-pound wild mushrooms, cleaned and sliced thickly
6 cups lightly packed savory greens such as a combination of frisée, arugula and cress
Walnut oil vinaigrette (recipe follows)
4 cups orange, grapefruit, pomelo sections or a combination
1/2 cup or so peppered maple walnuts (recipe follows)
6 ounces soft ripening cheese sliced into 6 wedges

Garnish: Savory sprouts such as daikon, corn, lentil or fenugreek, if desired.

Whisk together the olive oil, vinegar, shallots, thyme, salt and pepper. Brush the mushrooms with this mixture and grill over moderately hot coals on both sides until tender and lightly browned. You can also use a ridged grill pan on the stove top. Set aside.

Toss greens with the vinaigrette and arrange artfully on plates with the citrus, mushrooms, walnuts and cheese. Scatter sprouts over and serve immediately.

Walnut oil vinaigrette

Makes about 1 cup

1/3 cup grapefruit juice
2 teaspoons honey, or to taste
1 tablespoon finely chopped shallots
1/3 cup toasted walnut oil or fragrant extra virgin olive oil
Drops of hot sauce
Salt and freshly ground pepper

Add the grapefruit juice, honey and shallots to a blender. With motor running slowly add walnut oil to form an emulsion. Add drops of hot sauce and salt and pepper to your taste.

Peppered Maple Walnuts

Makes 3 cups or so

These are delicious as a little snack with cocktails, to add to salads or serve with a cheese plate. The first time you make these use 1 teaspoon pepper and if you like them spicy add more the next time.

4 tablespoons (1/2 stick) unsalted butter
1 teaspoon salt
1 - 2 teaspoons freshly ground black pepper or in combination with pure chile powder such as ancho
1/3 cup maple syrup
2 tablespoons water
3-1/2 cups (10 ounces) raw walnut halves

Preheat oven to 300 degrees. Combine all the ingredients except the walnuts in a small saucepan, stir and bring to a simmer. Simmer for 3 minutes or so or until thickened. Place the walnuts in a large bowl and pour the butter mixture over, tossing them to evenly coat.

Line a baking sheet with parchment, foil or a silicon baking mat and spread the coated walnuts out in a single layer. Bake for 45 minutes stirring and turning the walnuts every 10 minutes or so. After 45 minutes, walnuts will appear fairly dry and maple glaze will be mostly absorbed. Resist the temptation to eat them at this point because they will be very hot!

Slide them off the tray onto a wire rack and let them cool. Store in an airtight container for up to 2 weeks.



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RADICCHIO SOUP WITH SMOKED GOAT CHEESE

Serves: 4

This is a very simple soup but brings together interesting contrasting flavors - - bitter from the radicchio and smoke from the cheese that I think are delicious and intriguing. The cheese I like to use for this is the smoked goat cheddar from Redwood Hill Farms www.redwoodhill.com. You could use any good smoked cheese such as smoked gouda, mozzarella or Scamorza.

1 small head of fresh radicchio
1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil
Salt and freshly ground pepper
2 tablespoons each finely sliced garlic and shallot
1/2 teaspoon fennel seed
2 cups (1 15-ounce can) canned diced tomatoes in juice (preferably fire roasted)
1/2 cup hearty red wine such as zinfandel
3 cups rich chicken or vegetable stock
Kosher or sea salt and freshly ground pepper
2 cups cubed (1/2 inch) good quality peasant style bread, crusts removed
1/4 pound or so smoked goat cheddar, cut into 1/2-inch cubes
1/4 cup loosely packed fresh basil leaves coarsely chopped.

Quarter and wash the radicchio. Remove cores and slice thinly. Add 2 tablespoons olive oil to a deep saucepan and over moderately high heat, sauté the radicchio until it just starts to wilt, for a minute or two seasoning lightly with salt and pepper. Remove and set aside.

Add two more tablespoons olive oil to the pan and sauté the garlic and shallot until softened but not brown. Add the fennel seed, tomatoes, wine and stock and bring to a boil then reduce heat and simmer for 5 minutes or so. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Meanwhile toss the bread cubes with the remaining olive oil. Quickly sauté bread in a large sauté pan over moderately high heat until they are golden brown. Add more oil if necessary. Can be made a day ahead.

To serve, stir the radicchio into the hot soup. Divide the cheese and bread cubes among 4 large soup bowls and ladle soup over. Sprinkle basil over the top and serve immediately.

Note: If making soup ahead do not add radicchio until serving time. Soup will become too bitter if radicchio is left in for more than a few minutes.



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FILET MIGNON WRAPPED IN NEWSPAPER WITH SAUCE BERNAISE

Serves 8

This is an old caterers' trick. Cook the beef ahead and then wrap in lots of newspaper to keep it warm for at least a couple of hours. Serve with butter braised spinach or green beans.

1 3 – 4 pound filet mignon trimmed and tied at 2-inch intervals
2 tablespoons good brandy (optional)
2 tablespoons coarsely ground mixed pepper peppercorns
2 tablespoons sea salt
Olive oil
Sauce Béarnaise (recipe follows)

If using the tail end, fold the thin tail of the filet under and tie-up the filet using cotton kitchen twine at 2 to 3-inch intervals. Brush brandy if using over the meat and then rub the ground pepper and salt into the filet.

Let the filet stand at room temperature for 1/2 hour before cooking. Preheat the oven to 500 degrees. Heat the oil in a large sauté pan over medium high heat. Brown the meat on all sides.

Place the filet in a rimmed roasting pan and put in the center of the oven and reduce the heat to 450 degrees. Cook the filet for 25 to 30 minutes (120 degrees using an instant read thermometer for rare), depending on size but never more than 30 minutes. Remove the filet and wrap it snugly in a sheet of parchment paper.

Stack 12 sheets of newspaper (preferably the Wall Street Journal when the market is up!) on the counter and place the parchment-wrapped filet on top of the pile of newspaper. Wrap all the layers of newspaper around the filet tucking it tightly underneath. Let it sit for at least 1/2 an hour or longer. Whenever you decide to unwrap it, it will be still warm and perfectly done. If you prefer it to be served hot, warm it very briefly in the oven.

Slice and serve with Sauce Béarnaise.

Blender sauce béarnaise

Makes about 1 cup

Can be made a couple of hours ahead and kept warm in a warm water bath or a thermos.

1/3 cup dry white wine
1/3 cup white wine vinegar
2 tablespoons chopped shallots
3 tablespoons chopped fresh tarragon leaves and stems, divided
8 black peppercorns, crushed
3 large egg yolks
2 sticks (1/2-pound or 16 tablespoons) hot melted unsalted butter
Sea Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Combine wine, vinegar, shallots, 1 tablespoon tarragon, the stems and peppercorns in a heavy saucepan, bring to a boil over high heat and boil until reduced to about 3 tablespoons, about 8 minutes. Remove from heat and cool. Strain pressing on solids and discard solids.

Combine the strained reduction with the egg yolks in a blender and pulse until smooth. With blender running at medium speed add the butter in a slow stream thru the hole in the lid. Add remaining 2 tablespoons of tarragon leaves and pulse once or twice. Thin sauce if desired by whisking in a tablespoon or so of warm water. Season to your taste with salt and pepper. Keep warm.

FLOATING ISLANDS

Serves 6

Based on the classic French dessert “*oeufs a la neige*” or snow eggs, this is one of the most elegant yet simple desserts that everyone should know how to make. It consists of light airy poached meringues floating on a sea of custard sauce. Typically, the meringues are drizzled with a caramel sauce and I’ve included that recipe below if you decide to do this. Make the custard sauce ahead so that it has time to chill.

Vanilla Custard sauce (recipe follows)

4 cups whole milk

1 cup superfine sugar

6 egg large egg whites

Neutral vegetable oil

2 cups fresh berries of your choice

Make a batch of the vanilla custard sauce and refrigerate.

Place the milk and 1/4 cup sugar in a wide, deep sauté pan and add enough water to bring the combined liquid up to a depth of about 1 inch. Place over moderate heat and bring just to a simmer, about 160 degrees.

Beat the egg whites to soft peaks and then sprinkle in the remaining sugar and continue to beat until whites form stiff peaks and are still glossy. With two large spoons dipped in cold water, form 6 large egg-shaped ovals of meringue and gently slide them into the simmering liquid as they are formed. (You may need to work in batches - - the meringues should not touch as they poach.) Poach the meringues on one side for about 2 minutes and then gently turn over and poach on the other side for 2 - 3 minutes or until they are delicately firm to the touch. If not poach a little longer. Lift the meringues from the liquid and drain briefly on a clean, dry kitchen towel. Transfer to a light oiled sheet of foil.

To serve: Spoon the chilled custard sauce into shallow bowls and place a poached meringue in the middle. Garnish with berries and a drizzle of caramel sauce over the meringues, if desired.

Vanilla Custard Sauce

Makes about 2 cups

This classic dessert sauce, called *Crème Anglaise* in French, is something everyone should know how to do. It can be flavored endlessly and is the base for the best homemade ice cream you’ll ever taste.

1/4 cup sugar
4 large egg yolks
1-1/2 cups light cream (half and half)
1/4 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

Beat sugar and egg yolks together until lightly colored. Heat cream in a small saucepan until steaming but not boiling. Slowly beat hot cream into yolk mixture being careful not to scramble the eggs. Return mixture to pan and cook over moderate heat, stirring constantly, until sauce just begins to thicken. Off heat and strain sauce thru a fine mesh strainer to catch any errant bits of scrambled egg. Stir in vanilla. If you are not serving the sauce warm, pour into a bowl and let cool stirring occasionally. Place a sheet of plastic wrap directly on the surface of the sauce and refrigerate up to 3 days.

Caramel Sauce

Makes 2 cups

1 cup heavy cream
1-3/4 cups sugar
3/4 cup water
4 tablespoons cold unsalted butter, cut into bits
1 teaspoon vanilla
1/8 teaspoon salt
2 tablespoons rum, brandy or bourbon

Scald cream in a small saucepan and keep warm.

Combine the sugar with the water in a deep saucepan. Cover and bring to a simmer for 3 or 4 minutes to thoroughly dissolve the sugar. Uncover and increase heat to maintain simmer. Do not stir but wash down any sugar crystals clinging to side of pan with a pastry brush dipped in water. Watch pan carefully, swirling it from time to time until syrup turns a deep golden brown (registers 325 degrees on a candy thermometer), 10 minutes or so.

Off heat and slowly stir in cream in a steady stream. Caramel and cream will bubble dramatically so stir carefully. Stir in butter by bits until completely combined. Stir in vanilla, salt and rum. Stores indefinitely covered in the refrigerator. Can be reheated.



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