

THE GREAT FOODS OF SUMMER

“Summer afternoon—summer afternoon; to me those have always been the two most beautiful words in the English language” (from Henry James)

“When one has tasted watermelon, he knows what the angels eat” (from Mark Twain).

“Oh when I look back now / That summer seemed to last forever / And if I had the choice / Yeah, I'd always wanna be there / Those were the best days of my life...” (from Bryan Adams song in Summer of '69)

"In summer, the song sings itself" (from William Carlos Williams)

All of these sum up my feelings about summer and its foods. We naturally crave foods that reflect the season that we are in. When you think of summer you think of bright colors, intoxicating aromas, fresh ripe flavors and simple cooking without turning on the oven. A visit to your local Farmers Market adds inspiration. How can you miss? I'm taking advantage here of the grill. Definitely a tool of summer!

Sooo . . . with the following recipes, some of my favorites by the way, you don't have to do them all unless you an over achiever! Take them on one at a time and see if you like them. As always adjust flavors to your own taste.

- Frozen Strawberry Daquiris
- Zucchini Pickles
- Chilled Heirloom Tomato Soup with Summer Relish
- Watermelon, Fig and Feta Salad
- Grilled Butterflied Leg of Lamb with Salsa Verde
- Sweet and Sour Eggplant
- Grilled Fruits with Mint Custard Sauce

FROZEN STRAWBERRY DAIQUIRIS

Makes 4 servings

This is a very simple but delicious. Leave out the rum for a “virgin” alternative. Substitute whatever berry you like best.

3/4 cup rum
1/2 cup thawed limeade concentrate
3 - 4 cups fresh or frozen sliced strawberries
1 tablespoon sugar, preferably organic, to your taste
1-1/2 cups or so crushed ice

Fresh strawberries for garnish

In a blender, combine the rum, limeade concentrate, strawberries and sugar till smooth and ice. Cover and process until smooth and thickened. Taste for sweetness and add more sugar if desired. Use more ice for thicker daiquiris. Pour into cocktail glasses.

To garnish each daiquiri, cut a 1/2-in. slit into the tip of a strawberry; position berry on rim of glass.



ZUCCHINI PICKLES

Makes 3 cups

Adapted from The Zuni Café Cookbook by Judy Rogers

- 1 pound zucchini
- 1 small yellow onion
- 2 tablespoons kosher salt
- 2 cups cider vinegar
- 1 cup sugar
- 1-1/2 teaspoons dry mustard
- 1-1/2 teaspoons crushed yellow and/or brown mustard seeds

Scant 1 teaspoon ground turmeric

Wash and trim the zucchini, then slice them one-sixteenth-inch thick; a mandolin works best. Slice the onion very thin as well. Combine the zucchini and onions in a large but shallow nonreactive bowl, add the salt and toss to distribute. Add a few ice cubes and cold water to cover, then stir to dissolve the salt. Alternatively, transfer the salted zucchini and onion slices to a Japanese pickle maker and screw down the top; do not add any water or ice cubes.

After about 1 hour, taste and feel a piece of zucchini -- it should be slightly softened. Drain and pat dry.

Combine the vinegar, sugar, dry mustard, mustard seeds and turmeric in a small saucepan and simmer for 3 minutes. Set aside until just warm to the touch. (If the brine is too hot, it will cook the vegetables and make the pickles soft instead of crisp.)

Return the zucchini to a dry bowl and pour over the cooled brine. Stir to distribute the spices. Transfer the pickle to jars, preferably ones that have "shoulders" to hold the zucchini and onions beneath the surface of the brine. Seal and refrigerate for at least a day before serving to allow the flavors to mellow and permeate the zucchini, turning them a brilliant chartreuse color.



CHILLED HEIRLOOM TOMATO SOUP WITH SUMMER RELISH

Serves 6 - 8

Unfortunately, regular hothouse tomatoes don't work in this recipe. Wait until you can get great heirloom tomatoes and select the most flavorful, vine-ripened ones you can find. I'd try to use tomatoes of the same color but if you want to be fancy, you could separately do reds and yellows and with two ladles simultaneously pour them into chilled soup plates to create a "yin – yang" effect. For variety I sometimes will add up to a cup or so of freshly juiced cucumber, sweet red bell pepper or carrot to the soup mixture.

4 pounds coarsely chopped ripe tomatoes

1/4 cup balsamic vinegar (or to taste)

Kosher salt and freshly ground white pepper

Summer Relish (recipe follows)

Garnish: Sliced avocado fans, yogurt or crème fraiche (recipe follows) and basil oil (recipe follows)

Using a food mill, puree the tomatoes -- a food mill is preferred. In using the food mill, move from the coarsest to the finest blade, depending on the texture you desire. Discard the skins and seeds. If you don't have a food mill you can also use a food processor to puree. Strain pureed tomatoes through a medium mesh strainer, pushing down on the solids with a rubber spatula to capture seeds and skin. Season to your taste with vinegar, salt and pepper. Cover and refrigerate until very cold.

To serve, ladle soup into chilled soup bowls. Place 1 or 2 tablespoons of the Summer Relish in the center and garnish with sliced avocado fans, a dollop of yogurt or crème fraiche and a drizzle of basil oil around.

Summer Relish

1 tablespoon chopped fresh basil

2 teaspoons chopped fresh mint

1/4 cup diced red onion

3 tablespoons diced red bell pepper

1/4 cup seeded and diced cucumber (lemon cucumber preferred)

2 teaspoons extra virgin olive oil

Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

In a bowl gently combine the relish ingredients. Correct the seasoning with salt and pepper.

Basil oil

Any fresh leafy herb or combination can be used such as mint, chives, cilantro, parsley, shiso, etc.

2 cloves garlic, peeled
3 cups packed herbs; large stems discarded
2 cups or so cups olive or canola oil
Sea salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

Add garlic to a deep saucepan with lightly salted boiling water and boil for 1 minute. Add herbs and stir until they turn a bright green (about 5 seconds).

Drain and plunge immediately into ice water to stop the cooking and set the color. This blanching step inactivates the enzymes which causes the herb to turn brown and develop an oxidized flavor.

Squeeze herbs as dry as you can and add to a blender along with garlic and enough oil to cover by at least 2 inches. Puree till smooth. Strain thru a fine mesh strainer or cheese cloth. I let it drain slowly for an hour or so. Oil should be a very bright green and fragrant. Season with salt and pepper to taste and store covered in refrigerator for up to 3 weeks.



WATERMELON, FIG, ONION AND FETA SALAD

Serves 6

This brings together 4 of the “basic flavors”: sweet, sour, salty and pepper. As with all recipes, adjust these elements to your own taste.

1 small sweet red or white onion, peeled, cut in 1/8-inch thick rounds
Raspberry vinaigrette (recipe follows)
1 bunch young watercress or other peppery greens such as arugula, stems discarded
8 cups chilled seeded watermelon, cut into 2" cubes
6 ripe fresh figs, cut into fans
3 ounces or so drained firm feta, cut attractively

Drain onions, pat dry and separate into individual rings and pour vinaigrette over.
Marinate onions for at least 30 minutes refrigerated.

On chilled plates, arrange a bed of watercress and top with cubed watermelon. Arrange onions and figs attractively around and drizzle vinaigrette over. Place feta on top and garnish with mint sprigs. Serve immediately.

Raspberry Vinaigrette

1 tablespoon finely minced shallots or white part of green onions
1/4 cup rice or cider vinegar
1/3 cup raspberry puree made from either fresh or IQF frozen berries
1/4 cup fresh orange juice
2 teaspoons honey (or to taste)
3 tablespoons olive oil
Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

In a blender puree the shallots, vinegar, raspberry puree, orange juice and honey till smooth. Gradually add the oil with the motor running to thicken and emulsify the mixture. Season with salt and pepper and adjust sweet/sour to your taste.



BUTTERFLIED LEG OF LAMB WITH SALSA VERDE

Serves 8

Do NOT leave out the anchovies in either the marinade or the sauce. You won't taste them I promise!

6 anchovy fillets in oil
4 cloves garlic
3 tablespoons fresh rosemary needles
1 teaspoon or so freshly ground black pepper
2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar (not the good stuff)
1 tablespoon olive oil (again, not the good stuff)
1 (4-pound) boned and butterflied leg of lamb
Salsa Verde (recipe follows)

Combine the anchovies, garlic, rosemary, black pepper, vinegar and olive oil in a blender and grind to a paste.

If the leg of lamb is tied, remove the strings or netting. Lay it on the cutting board, skin-side down, and cut deep slices in the thickest portions to allow the meat to open like a book. The goal is to have the meat relatively the same thickness. You can also have your butcher do this for you.

Place the meat in a plastic bag, pour the anchovy paste over it, press out the air and seal the bag tightly. Rub the paste all over the surface of the lamb and refrigerate for 4 hours or overnight.

Prepare coals for a medium hot grill. Place the lamb on the grill fat-side down and cook for 12 minutes or so. Turn the lamb over and cook for another 10 – 12 minutes or until lamb is nicely browned on both sides. Pull out your instant read thermometer. Before resting you'll want 120 - 125 degrees for medium-rare, 130 - 135 degrees for medium.

Remove the lamb to a carving board and let it rest 10 minutes. Carve it crosswise into thin slices and serve with the salsa Verde.

Salsa Verde

Makes about 1 cup

This is a quick little sauce of Spanish origin that is delicious on all kinds of grilled, pan seared or roasted meats, fish and vegetables. Note that I've used blanched or roasted garlic rather than the fresh raw type. I think this is especially important if you are going to make the sauce ahead. Within an hour, raw garlic can become harsh and hot. Blanched or roasted garlic maintains its more subtle and sweet flavor and doesn't overpower the sauce as it sits.

1 cup coarsely chopped parsley
4 anchovy fillets in oil
2 tablespoons drained capers
2 tablespoons poached or roasted garlic (see note below)
2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil or mint, or 1 tablespoon chopped fresh tarragon
1 tablespoon finely grated lemon zest
2/3 cup or so fruity extra virgin olive oil
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Add the parsley, anchovies, capers, garlic, basil and zest to a food processor or blender. With machine running, slowly add the oil until just blended. Sauce should still have a little texture. Season with salt and pepper. Can be stored covered and refrigerated for up to 1 day.

Note: To poach garlic, separate cloves but don't peel. Place in a small saucepan and cover with at least ½ inch of cold water. Place on stove over high heat and bring to a

boil. As soon as water boils, drain and repeat process one more time. Rinse to cool off cloves. Remove husk from poached garlic and store covered in refrigerator for up to 2 weeks.

To roast garlic, cut off top quarter of a whole head to expose each of the cloves. Drizzle with a little olive oil and season with salt and pepper. Wrap loosely in foil and roast in a preheated 375-degree oven for 30 – 40 minutes or until garlic is soft when gently squeezed. Store covered in refrigerator for up to 2 weeks. Squeeze out as needed.



GRILLED SWEET AND SOUR EGGPLANT

Makes about 5 cups serving 6 – 8

This is a great picnic or alfresco salad that is also delicious served on crostini and as a topping for almost any grilled or crisply fried fish or meat. If good ripe fresh tomatoes are not available substitute drained canned, preferably San Marzano, chopped. You can also roast the eggplant in the oven instead of grilling.

2 medium eggplants (2 pounds), ends removed and sliced about 1/2 inch thick
1 large white onion (3/4 pound), peeled and thickly sliced in rounds
1/3 cup or so extra virgin olive oil
Sea salt and freshly ground pepper
4 large peeled garlic cloves
2-1/2 cups seeded ripe tomatoes cut in 1/2-inch dice
2-1/2 tablespoons sherry vinegar, or to taste
1-1/2 tablespoons sugar, or to taste
2 tablespoons each coarsely chopped mint and parsley
1/4 cup toasted pine nuts

Brush eggplant and onion slices liberally on both sides with 4 tablespoons or so of the olive oil and season with salt and pepper. Skewer the garlic cloves and brush with olive oil. Grill all until eggplant is nicely browned, onions crisp-tender and garlic nicely browned but not burned. Chop eggplant and onion into 3/4 inch or so dice, the garlic into slivers and set aside in a large bowl.

Add the remaining olive oil, tomatoes, vinegar, sugar and herbs and toss gently. Season with salt and pepper and adjust sweet and sour elements to your taste. Cool, cover and allow to sit for at least an hour or so for the flavors to marry. Stir in pine nuts just before serving. Can be made ahead and stored covered in refrigerator for up to 3 days.

GRILLED FRUITS WITH MINT CUSTARD SAUCE

Serves 8

Grill sauce

1/4 cup dry white wine
4 tablespoons unsalted butter
3 tablespoons honey
1/4 teaspoon ground white pepper

1/4 teaspoon ground allspice

Suggested Fruit for Grilling

2 large firm ripe nectarines or peaches, halved and pits discarded

4 ripe plums, halved and pits discarded

8 figs, halved

1 small fresh pineapple, peeled, cored and cut in thick slices

Mint custard sauce (recipe follows)

3 cups mixed fresh berries of your choice

In a small saucepan combine the ingredients for the grill sauce and simmer until thickened, about 6 minutes. Off heat and whisk to combine into a smooth sauce. Brush or dip fruits in sauce and then quickly grill over medium hot coals until nicely marked, about 2 minutes total. Remove and slice fruit boldly.

Arrange the grilled fruit attractively in shallow soup plates. Spoon custard sauce around and scatter berries over top. Serve post haste!

Mint custard sauce

Makes about 3 cups

This sauce also is a marvelous base for ice cream. Simply add the cooled sauce to an ice cream freezer and follow manufacturer's instructions. Remember that there are many varieties of mint available and each will have its own unique flavor.

1/2 cup sugar

5 egg yolks

2 cups light cream (half and half)

1/2 cup lightly packed fresh mint leaves

1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract

In a bowl, whisk the sugar and egg yolks together until light and sugar is dissolved. In a small saucepan scald cream with mint leaves. Off heat, beat cream mixture into egg mixture slowly.

Return mixture to saucepan and cook over moderate heat, stirring constantly, until sauce just begins to thicken, about 3 minutes. Be careful not to cook too long or egg will scramble. Immediately strain discarding leaves and refrigerate with a sheet of plastic wrap pressed onto the custard to keep a skin from forming. Can be made 3 days ahead.

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