

Winter Menu (Dinner For 6)

This menu was born of a pot-luck dinner we hosted. The theme was "comfort food": The perfect antidote to a freezing winter night. This is hearty, rich food, so I suggest small portions, especially the appetizer.

BRIE SOUFFLE

My friend Jewel Coburn, an excellent cook, brought this appetizer to our house. The list of ingredients will scare anyone who ever thought of low-fat or heart-healthy cooking. But Jewel looks fabulous and is a marathon runner. Do you suppose this dish is her secret?

1 lb. Unripe brie, rind removed

6 slices good quality fresh white bread, crusts removed

8 Tbs. Sweet butter (1 stick), at room temperature

1 tsp salt

a dash of Tabasco sauce

4 eggs

1 ½ cups whole milk

Butter a 1½ or 2 quart soufflé or baking dish. Butter one side of the bread and cut each slice in thirds. Whisk together the eggs, milk, Tabasco, and salt. Break, or cut up brie into small pieces. (I found a similar version of this recipe in the Silver Palate Cookbook, and they suggested grating the cheese. I say good luck trying to grate brie. However, the smaller the pieces of cheese the better). Arrange half the bread on the bottom of the baking dish. Cover with half the brie. Repeat. Pour egg mixture over cheese and bread. Let it sit 30 minutes. Bake at 350 degrees for about 30 minutes, until it's golden and bubbly. Speaking of golden and bubbly, we had a great bottle of champagne with this dish...mercy!

ROSEMARY-BRAISED LAMB

This is based on a recipe from Bofinger, which claims to be the oldest restaurant in Paris. I was working with a group of French musicians who took me there for dinner. The food was incredible and the atmosphere took you back in time. I kept looking over my shoulder to see if Henri Toulouse-Latrec was in the house. The original recipe called for lamb shanks. I substituted lamb shoulder steaks as they are easier to work with. You can use lamb stew meat or leg of lamb that has been cut into steaks or stew. I suggest you serve this over mashed potatoes or polenta. I resisted including my recipe for mashed potatoes after receiving threats from the American Heart Association.

- 1 ½ Tbsp. Olive oil
- 6 lamb-shoulder steaks (about 3½ pounds)
- 2 carrots, peeled and chopped
- 2 onions, chopped
- 1 celery stalk, chopped
- 1 cup dry white wine
- 3 large cloves of garlic, chopped
- 1 Tbsp. tomato paste
- 4 cups rich chicken stock*
- 1 cup water
- 2 large fresh sprigs rosemary or 1 teaspoon dry
- 2 sprigs fresh thyme
- 1 10 ounce bag frozen peas

Preheat oven to 300 degrees. Wrap herbs in cheesecloth and tie with a piece of string or place them in a small muslin bag. Heat oil in a large Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Brown lamb and transfer to a plate. Add carrots, onions and celery to Dutch oven and sauté until soft and starting to brown. Add wine and boil until all liquid evaporates. Add tomato paste and garlic. Cook for a minute (be careful not to burn the tomato paste). Add lamb, stock, water, and herbs. Cover and bake for about 1½ hours or until the meat is tender.

Remove lamb. Boil cooking liquid for 35 minutes until thickened to a sauce consistency. Season with salt and pepper. In the meantime, remove all fat, bone and connective tissue from the lamb. Break or cut it into bite size pieces. Discard herbs. Return lamb to sauce and add peas. (At this point, you can let this cool to room temperature, refrigerate overnight, then remove the hardened fat that settles on top, before reheating.) When the lamb and the peas are warm, serve.

Another option, is to strain the sauce, and press the solids through a fine sieve before adding the lamb, peas and blanched carrots: 6 carrots, peeled and cut into ¼ slices. Drop carrots into boiling salted water, cook for 4 minutes. Drain, and plunge them into ice water to stop cooking. Drain and set aside.

***RICH CHICKEN STOCK**

Rich chicken stock comes from using the bony parts of chickens that have been browned. I save the bones and drippings from roasted chickens in my freezer until I have enough to make stock. You can also get wings and backs from the butcher and roast them at 400 degrees with carrots, onions and celery for about 1 to 1½ hours until every thing has a nice brown color to it. Place bones and drippings, or wings, backs and vegetables in a stock pot and cover with water. Bring to a boil then reduce heat, partially cover the pot, and simmer (a few bubbles rising to the top) on very low heat for several hours or overnight. Strain stock, and refrigerate. Remove fat that hardens on top, then bring to a boil and simmer until it reduces to half. I make this in large batches and freeze it. It makes the best gravy and sauces you'll ever taste.

BRAISED CABBAGE

At Bofinger, the specialty is choucroute, which is a variety of meat and sausage on saurkraut. This cabbage dish is NOT saurkraut, but it has a bit of tang to it from the apple and vinegar. It is a perfect addition to this meal. The recipe comes from Alice Water's Chez Panise Vegetables cookbook. Her recipe calls for duck fat, which I replaced with butter and bacon drippings. I was fresh out of duck fat.

1 red or green cabbage

1 medium onion

1½ Tbsp. Sweet butter

1½ Tbsp. bacon drippings

1 Tbsp. Sherry wine vinegar

1 bay leaf

salt and pepper

½ cup water

1 apple

Remove the outer leaves of the cabbage. Cut it in half, remove the core, and slice the cabbage very thin. Peel the onion and slice it very thin.

In a large pan or Dutch oven, melt the butter and bacon drippings, add the onion and cook over medium heat for 5 minutes until the onion is soft but not brown. Add cabbage, vinegar, bay leaf, salt, pepper, and water. Cover and simmer for 20 minutes. Peel and grate the apple, add it to the cabbage, and cook for another 5 minutes. Taste, adjust seasonings and serve.

THREE-GINGER GINGERBREAD

This was not the dessert we served the night of our pot-luck dinner, but it is one that I have had numerous requests for. I found it in the R.S.V.P. section of Bon Appetit several years ago and it was an instant winner. The original recipe called for this to be made in a spring-form pan. I divide the batter into two loaf pans. 1 for now, one for later.

3 cups all-purpose flour

1 Tbsp. ground cinnamon

2 tsp. Baking soda

1½ tsp. Ground cloves

1 tsp. Ground ginger

¾ tsp. Salt

1½ cups sugar

1 cup vegetable oil

1 cup unsulphered light molasses

½ cup water

2 large eggs

1 Tbsp. Minced, peeled fresh ginger

½ cup chopped crystallized ginger

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line two 4"x 8"x 2" baking pans with parchment paper. Sift first 6 ingredients into a medium bowl. Combine sugar, oil, molasses water, eggs and fresh ginger in a large bowl, whisk together. Mix in crystallized ginger. Stir in dry ingredients. Pour batter into prepared pans. Bake until tester inserted in center comes out clean; about 60 minutes. (This cake will fall, so don't be alarmed or disappointed. It's not how it looks, it's what's on the inside that counts). Cool on a rack for 1 hour. Remove paper and cool to room temperature. (Can be prepared 1 day ahead. Wrap in foil and refrigerate. Bring to room temperature before serving)