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THE CHRISTMAS TABLE, THE SEASON OF LIGHTS

By ELIZABETH BRUNAZZI

I always think of the Christmas holidays as the season of lights. It is that time when we brighten our spirits with color and light, conviviality, and the promise of rebirth in the future as winter arrives: the tree glistening in the window or the yard, the lighted candles in windows or on buffets, bonfires in the pueblos, a season of hope, sharing, and renewal. I offer the following recipes as ideas for sharing and celebrating this special 2021 season!

DRINKS

Sparkling Cranberry Punch

1 large can jellied cranberry sauce
2-1/4 C water
1/2 C organic raw cane sugar
1/2 C fresh lemon juice
1 t almond extract
1-1/2 C ginger ale (your favorite, preferably very fizzy and not too sweet)
Clove-studded lemon slices
Fresh mint

Crush cranberry sauce in can with a fork and empty into a saucepan. Beat vigorously. Add water and beat until sauce is melted. Add sugar and cool. Stir in lemon juice, extract and 1 cup of ginger ale. Just before serving, dilute with remaining 1/2 cup ginger ale, and serve well iced in frosted glasses. Garnish with mint and clove-studded lemon curls. Serves 12 punch cups.

Inspired by a recipe in River Road Recipes, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1959

APPETIZERS

Cheese Biscuits

1 package refrigerated biscuits
1/2 C butter or plant butter
3 T blue cheese crumbled

Cut biscuits into quarters. Arrange in two 8-inch round baking dishes. Melt butter and cheese together, and pour mixture over the biscuit pieces, being sure to coat them all. Bake in hot oven, 400 °, about 15 minutes or until golden brown. Serve warm. Makes 40 biscuits.

Inspired by a recipe in Cotton Country Collection, Monroe, Louisiana, 1972

Cheese-Pecan Crisps

1/2 lb sharp cheddar cheese
1 stick butter or equivalent with plant butter
1 T Worcestershire sauce
1-1/4 C flour
1/2 t salt
Dash red pepper flakes
Dash tabasco or cholula sauce
1 C finely chopped pecans, small, dark, native, if you can get them

Grate the cheese. Cream butter and cheese and add remaining ingredients. Refrigerate and then roll into round rolls the size of a silver dollar. Put rolls in freezer for 24 hours. Remove, and after a few minutes for slicing, slice into thin rounds. Place on an ungreased cookie sheet and bake about 10 minutes at 350 °.

Inspired by a recipe in Cotton Country Collection

ENTRÉES

Chicken Stuffed with Herbs and Mushrooms

2 chicken legs, thighs attached
2 boneless, unskinned chicken breasts, main wing bone attached
Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste
6 small or 3 large mushrooms, about 1/8 of a pound (white button or baby bellas recommended)
2 T finely chopped shallots, white or green onions
2 T finely chopped parsley
1 T finely chopped tarragon (optional)
1 t finely chopped fresh thyme, or 1/2 t dried
3 T butter or plant substitute
Juice of half a fresh lemon
1/4 C dry white wine (optional)
1/2 C cream or half & half
2 T extra finely chopped parsley for final garnish

Preheat oven to 375 °

Sprinkle chicken pieces with salt and pepper to taste. I like white pepper or a medley of white, black, pink and green peppers. Chop mushrooms finely, about 1/2 cup. Rinse and dry thoroughly. Combine mushrooms, shallots, parsley, tarragon, thyme, 1 Tablespoon of butter and lemon juice. Blend thoroughly.

Partially skin each of the chicken pieces and make a pocket to hold 2 T of the mushroom mixture. Replace the skin and press to distribute, filling evenly under skin. Melt remaining 2 T of butter or plant butter in a large, heavy skillet (cast iron is always my preference), add chicken pieces skin side down. Cook over low heat 5-10 minutes until lightly browned, carefully turning pieces. Place skillet in the oven and bake 15-20 minutes, testing for doneness with a sharp fork. Transfer chicken pieces to a warm platter, pouring off fat from the skillet. Add wine, to taste, and cook down until evaporated. Add cream and cook over high heat 1 minute, stirring constantly. Spoon sauce over the chicken and serve sprinkled with remaining parsley.

Serves 4 but can easily be doubled. The same treatment can be used for a large, whole chicken or a turkey.

Recipe inspired by Pierre Franey's Sixty-Minute Gourmet, 1981.

Pork Loin Roast with Leeks, Sage, and Juniper

3 lbs boneless top-loin roast, trimmed and tied
6 plump fresh garlic cloves, cut in slivers
2 T coarse sea salt
Handful fresh sage leaves, crumbled
1 sprig fresh thyme
24 baby leeks, or 6 medium leeks
2 T peanut oil (if allergic, olive or sesame)
Several pork bones, coarsely chopped
6 medium onions, halved
3 ripe tomatoes, cored, seeded, and chopped
2 T organic raw cane sugar
1 T red wine vinegar
1 cup white wine (or non-alcoholic substitute)
Ground white pepper
5 to 6 juniper berries
1 T unsalted butter or plant substitute

On the day before serving, stud the pork roast with garlic slivers. Rub entire surface of the meat with salt, half the sage, and half the thyme leaves. Wrap securely in plastic wrap and refrigerate.

On serving day, remove roast from fridge, rinse thoroughly and pat dry. Set aside for room temperature. Prepare the leeks: trim leeks at the white bottom part to 6 inches. Cut the greens into 4 sections. Place all the leek sections in a large bowl of hot salted water to soak 10 minutes. Remove leeks and dry thoroughly. Set aside. In an ovenproof casserole, heat oil over moderately high heat. When hot, add the roast and bones, and cook, turning frequently, until the meat is thoroughly browned. Add onions and tomatoes, and continue cooking for 3-4 minutes. Dissolve sugar in vinegar and add to pork mixture. Add wine to taste, and stir to blend. Cook to reduce slightly, about 5 minutes. Add leeks, placing around the meat, for a tight fit. Season lightly, and add remaining sage and juniper berries. Roll thyme leaves between your hands to release the small leaves and sprinkle over meat. Add butter. Cover, reduce heat to low, and simmer, stirring occasionally. Ensure leeks are evenly distributed in the cooking liquid, cook for 1-1/2 hours, or, alternatively cook in a 325° oven.

To serve, untie the roast and slice thinly. Place pork slices on a warm serving platter. Arrange leeks and onions around the meat. Strain cooking liquid through a fine-mesh sieve into a sauce boat, and serve immediately. Serves 6-8.

Inspired by a recipe in Simply French, 1991

VEGETABLES & SALADS

Acorn or Butternut Squash, Au Naturel or Stuffed

For four servings, split 2 good-sized acorn or butternut squashes lengthwise down the middle. Remove the seeds and place them face-down on an oiled tray for 30 minutes at 350 °s, until tender. Remove, turn up, and dot with butter and dashes of organic raw sugar or brown sugar, cinnamon, and fresh lemon juice. Increase heat to 375-400 °. Return squash face-up to finish baking for about 10 minutes.

For a stuffed squash follow directions above for initial baking of 30 minutes. While the squash is baking, prepare the following stuffing.

2 medium apples, your favorite for cooking, chopped
2 C cottage or Ricotta cheese
Juice of one fresh lemon
1/2 C chopped white onion
3 T butter or plant substitute

Dash of cinnamon
3/4 C grated cheddar, your favorite

Sauté apples and onion in butter until onion is clear. Combine with remaining ingredients. Remove the squash from the onion, cool slightly, and stuff. Cover and return to the oven. Bake 15-20 minutes.

Inspired by a recipe in Molly Katzen's original Moosewood Cookbook, 1977

Blue Moon Waldorf Salad

4 medium apples in chunks. I like Galas.
1 stalk chopped celery
1/4 C toasted walnuts or pecans, to taste

Dressing:

1/3 C crumbled blue cheese
1/2 C mayonnaise
1/2 C yogurt
Juice from 1/2 fresh lemon
Honey to taste (about 1 T)

Combine all ingredients. Serve cold on fresh, crisp greens. A good complement to any of the dishes presented. Can easily be doubled.

Inspired by a recipe in the original Moosewood Cookbook, 1977

Citrus and Avocado Salad with Lime Honey Dressing

Sections of fresh oranges \and/or red grapefruit
Thinly sliced sections of a perfectly ripe avocado

Dressing:

1/3 C lime juice
1/3 C Honey
1 C salad oil
1/2 t paprika
1/2 t Dijon mustard (no seeds)
1/2 t salt
Grated peel of 1 lime

Arrange fruit and avocado in chilled cups and drizzle with dressing.

Dressing from Helen Corbitt's Cookbook, 1957

DESSERTS

Cranberry Nut Bread

2 C flour
1/2 t salt
1-1/4 t baking powder
1/2 t baking soda
1 C organic raw cane sugar, to taste
Finely chopped rind and juice of 1 orange
2 T shortening, plant-based
Boiling water
1 beaten egg
1 C chopped nuts, preferably pecans
1 C raw cranberries, cut in half

Sift together dry ingredients. Put rind and juice of orange in a cup, add 2 T shortening, and fill remainder with boiling water to 3/4 cup full. Add the beaten egg to dry ingredients. Add nuts and cranberries. Combine all thoroughly. Bake in one large or two small greased loaf pans for 1 hour at 350 °

Helen Corbitt's Cookbook, 1957

Very Merry Lemon-Berry

Mini Trifles

Lemon Custard:

2/3 C organic raw cane sugar
2 T cornstarch
1/4 t salt
1-1/2 C buttermilk
1/2 C freshly squeezed lemon juice from 2-3 large lemons
4 egg yolks, lightly beaten
2 T butter or plant substitute
1 t vanilla

Sponge Cake:

Buy your favorite at your local store, fresh and usually available for the holidays.
Cut into 1-inch cubes.

Fruit:

2 C frozen raspberries, or fresh if available
2 C frozen blueberries, or fresh if available
2 T organic raw cane sugar
1-1/4 C heavy cream, whipped and sweetened to taste

Custard:

Whisk sugar, cornstarch, salt, buttermilk, and lemon juice in a heavy saucepan. Cook over medium heat, stirring constantly, until thickened and bubbly. Stir about 1/4 of this mixture into egg yolks; add egg yolk mixture back into saucepan, stirring constantly over medium heat, about 2 minutes. Remove from heat; add butter and vanilla, stirring until butter melts. Cover with plastic wrap, gently pressing it onto surface. Chill at least 2 hours.

Assembly:

Mix thawed or fresh berries and sugar in a bowl. Set aside. Whip cream with an electric mixer, adding your preferred sweetener and flavoring to taste. Fold a couple of heaping spoonfuls of the cream into the custard. Set aside the rest for topping.

In trifle cups or a small glass serving bowl, layer custard, cake cubes, and berry mixture. Repeat layers until you run out of ingredients. Top with remaining custard. Cover and chill. When ready to serve, top with whipped cream.

Inspired by Natalie Perry's Perry's Plate, 2021



Holiday Libations!

BROUGHT TO YOU BY ACTIVE8 YOUTH COALITION

Vida Del Norte's Active8 and other collaborators have been working on ways to "redefine the word party" so non-alcoholic drinks come into play for the holidays. Did you know? Libation is defined as a drink made as an offering to a higher power, so we decided to create sophisticated drinks that could be offered to the "Gods," God, Higher Power, and also be fun to drink, especially as we see our bodies as a temple, to be treated as Godly.

We would like to encourage our community to join in with us: make it a fun family-friendly event by naming your non-alcoholic drinks as we have, and post them to #questalibations to be entered into a drawing for a gift certificate. Some fun names to consider: immaculate concoctions, gentle spirits, junior varsity, minor indulgences, non-toxicants, uber juice, nocktails.

Christmas Punch

1 orange, sliced
1 C cranberries
1/2 C pomegranate seeds
2 C cranberry juice
2 C orange juice
1 C pomegranate juice
2 C Sierra Mist or Sprite
Rosemary for garnish
Ice
Combine all ingredients in a large pitcher or punch bowl over ice.

Peppermint Julep

1 C crushed ice
1-oz Peppermint Simple Syrup
2-3 oz Cranberry Ginger Ale
A sprig of fresh pine or fresh mint)
Candy Cane for garnish

Put Peppermint Simple Syrup on the bottom of a glass. Add the crushed ice. Top off with the Cranberry Ginger Ale. Add a sprig of fresh pine and a candy cane for holiday flair.

Ginger Basil Grapefruit Mimosas

1 grapefruit; plus additional grapefruit for garnish
2 C crushed ice
3 x 12-oz cans of ginger soda
handful of fresh basil
1/4 C basil simple syrup

Basic Simple Syrup

1 cup sugar
1 cup water
1 cup loosely packed fresh basil
Place sugar and water in a small pan over medium heat until sugar is fully dissolved, about 2 minutes. Add the basil. Allow to steep for 15-20 minutes and strain and discard basil.

Juice one large grapefruit and segment additional grapefruit for garnish if preferred. Fill a pitcher half full of ice. Pour in soda, fresh grapefruit juice and simple syrup. Mix well. Garnish with grapefruit slices and fresh basil.

White Chocolate Peppermint Mocktini

3 oz white hot chocolate
2 oz peppermint mocha coffee creamer
White chocolate syrup
Crushed peppermints for garnish

Dip edge of a chilled martini glass in white chocolate syrup, then dip in crushed peppermint. Repeat with additional glasses. Add white hot chocolate and coffee cream to a cocktail shaker filled with ice. Shake vigorously, strain into glasses and serve immediately.