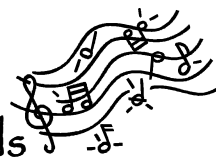


Susan
Nye

Around
the Table



Deck the Halls



Holiday 2006/volume 13

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December is filled with holiday parties from intimate gathering to big open houses. Office parties, cookie swaps, neighborhood parties, family get-togethers and fundraising events fill the month. We bring out the decorations and fill our houses from the floor to the rafters with greenery, lights and colorful balls and baubles. And of course, we always find places of honor on our trees for those special decorations made by little hands from Popsicle sticks, bits of felt, glitter and miniature pine cones.

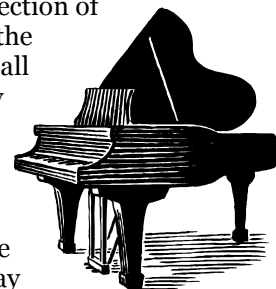
Throughout the month, our houses are filled with the glorious smells of spicy ginger, cinnamon and nutmeg. Even people who never bake, bake at Christmas time. Stained and faded index cards with family recipes come out. We scour foodie magazines for new ideas. It took me years of haphazard searching to track down the world's best Christmas cookie. I first made them in college from the recipe on the back of a pecan package, and then promptly lost the recipe. I finally found these buttery delights again in 2000 when they were written up as an honorable mention in a magazine cookie contest. And not surprising since finding it, I have bumped into the recipe at least a half dozen times.

While my claim to fame and tradition has always been Thanksgiving Dinner, my friend Julie is famous for kicking off the Christmas season. Her birthday falls in early December and throughout her childhood her family celebrated the start of the season with a combined birthday and Christmas party. Even after she moved to Switzerland, Julie continued this family tradition and has made it her own.

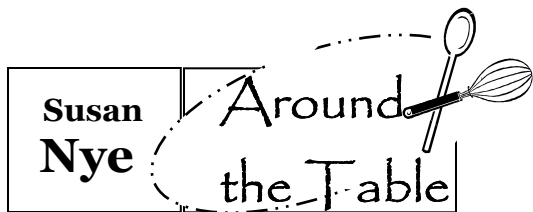
I met Julie when we were young, single and lived in apartments the size of shoe boxes. Her first parties were a table of 8 or 12 friends in a restaurant and went on until the wee hours of the morning. As she gradually moved to bigger and better digs, Julie moved the party home. Julie is in her element when it comes to throwing a Christmas Party. She takes decking the halls very seriously and has lovely decorations, including a snowy village, lots of garland and a big collection of tree ornaments. Julie is an enthusiastic baker and she pulls out all the stops for her yuletide gathering. The party has expanded from a small band of revelers to 30 or more. Married now, she is ably assisted by her husband who makes a knock-you-out-of-your-socks eggnog. And she has two, small pastry chefs to help her sift, stir and roll out dozens of cookies and loaves of cranberry bread.

The best thing about celebrating the season at home with Julie is the piano. Julie is a piano teacher. Scrooges and blasé sophisticates may find it corny and uncool, but I love to sing Christmas carols. I am tone deaf and can not sing a single sweet note, but what I lack in quality I make up in enthusiasm. And while I often forget where I parked my car and need a To Do list to keep track of errands and chores, I know the first verse of every carol ever written.

I received my invitation to Julie's party last week and as always she promises joyful noises will be made. Switzerland is a bit too far to go for the evening; even one filled with fun and song but on the night of the party I will raise my glass to distant friends and fond memories. I wish you all a wonderful holiday season, full of happy celebrations and joyful noise!



Bon appétit! - Susan



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Christmas Party Menu

The Christmas season has its many delights; but it is also a hectic time. Look for easy to prepare, easy to serve dishes for your holiday party.

Smoked Salmon Mousse Beef Tenderloin with Red Wine Mushroom Sauce Gratin Potatoes Mixed Reds & Greens Salad Aunt Anna's Pecan Pie

Smoked Salmon Mousse

1 pound smoked salmon
¼ cup mayonnaise
¼ cup sour cream
¼ cup lemon juice
⅛ teaspoon cayenne pepper

For garnish –
Freshly ground black pepper
1-2 tablespoons salmon roe
1 tablespoon finely chopped chives

1. In a food processor fitted with steel blade, process fish until fine. Add mayonnaise, sour cream, lemon juice and cayenne pepper and process for 30 seconds. Taste for seasoning.
2. Spoon into a 2 cup ramekin. Refrigerate for at least 2 hours to meld the flavors.
3. Garnish with chives and salmon roe. Serve cold.

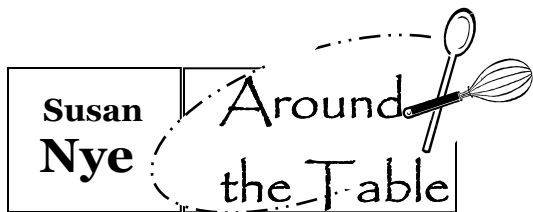
Can be made ahead and kept up to 3 days in the refrigerator. Remove from refrigerator ½ hour before serving.

Beef Tenderloin with Red Wine Mushroom Sauce

Serves 12

2 (3-3 ½ pound) center-cut beef tenderloin roasts, trimmed, tied at room and temperature
½ teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon freshly ground pepper
1-2 tablespoons olive oil

1. Put a rack in the middle of the oven and preheat oven to 350°.
2. Pat beef dry; sprinkle with salt and pepper. Heat oil in a large flameproof roasting pan over moderately high heat; brown beef well on all sides, about 10 minutes. Transfer pan to oven and roast until a thermometer inserted 2 inches into the center of the roasts registers at 110-120°, 20-30 minutes. Transfer to a cutting board and let stand loosely covered with foil for 15 minutes. The beef will continue to cook until it reaches 120° for rare or 130° for medium rare.
3. Remove string from beef and discard. Cut beef into ½ inch slice and serve with red wine mushroom sauce.



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Red Wine Mushroom Sauce

1 pound mushrooms, cleaned and thinly sliced
2 tablespoon Dijon mustard
2 shallots, minced
3 cloves garlic, minced
1 teaspoon herbs de Provence
¼ teaspoon salt
Freshly ground pepper
1 cup dry red wine
1-2 tablespoons cognac
1-2 tablespoons butter, cut into pieces

Salt and freshly ground pepper

1. Combine the mushrooms, shallots and garlic in large, heavy skillet; sprinkle herbs de Provence, salt and pepper and toss. Sauté over medium high heat until mushrooms are tender and all of the liquid has been absorbed, 5-10 minutes; reserve. (The sauce can be made ahead up to this point. Cool to room temperature and then refrigerate. Return to room temperature and continue with step 2.)
2. Drain excess fat from the roasting pan. Stir in the wine and deglaze the pan. Add the mustard and stir to combine. Add the mushrooms. Simmer stirring frequently until liquid is reduced by ¼, about 10 minutes
3. Stir in the cognac, cook for 1-2 minutes. Whisk in the butter. Check for seasoning.

Potatoes au Gratin

Serves 12

3½ pounds red (or other boiling) potatoes, cleaned, peeled and sliced ¼" thick
8 ounces shredded Gruyère
2 cups whole milk or half-and-half
Pinch of nutmeg
Salt and pepper

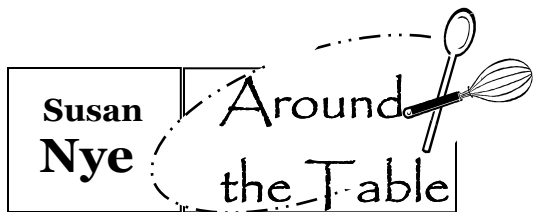
1. Preheat oven to 375°. Generously butter a large, oven proof casserole dish.
2. Arrange a layer of potatoes on the bottom of the pan, overlapping them in tight concentric circles sprinkled with salt and pepper and cheese. Continue to layer the potatoes and cheese.
3. Sprinkle the top with nutmeg. Pour the milk over the potatoes.
4. Bake until the potatoes are tender, about 1 hour at 375°. Remove from the oven and let stand for 10-15 minutes before serving.

The Gratin can be made a day ahead. Let cool to room temperature and then refrigerate. Bring to room temperature before reheating, covered at 350°

Mixed Reds & Greens Salad

Serves 12

12 ounces mixed lettuces, washed, dried, and torn into bite-size pieces
1 head radicchio, thinly sliced
3-4 tablespoons Roasted Shallot Vinaigrette (recipe follows)
4 ounces feta cheese, crumbled
¼ cup toasted pine nuts



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1. In a large bowl, combine lettuces and radicchio; toss with roasted shallot vinaigrette.
2. Transfer to a serving platter, sprinkle with cheese and nuts or seeds. Serve immediately.

Roasted Shallot Vinaigrette

Makes about 1 cup

3-4 cloves garlic, peeled
1 shallots, peeled and quartered
½ teaspoon dry thyme
½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
3 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
1 tablespoon freshly squeezed lemon juice
Coarse salt and freshly ground pepper

1. Preheat oven to 350°. Place garlic, shallot, thyme and oil in a small oven proof baking dish (I use a custard cup), and season with salt and pepper. Roast until garlic and shallot are very soft, about 30 minutes. Set aside to cool.
2. In the bowl of a small food processor, combine roasted garlic and shallot, oil, balsamic vinegar, mustard, and lemon juice. Process until combined and smooth.

Aunt Anna's Pecan Pie

My Grandmother Westland hated to cook and never baked even at Christmas, but her sister-in-law was famous for Pecan Pie.

Serves 8

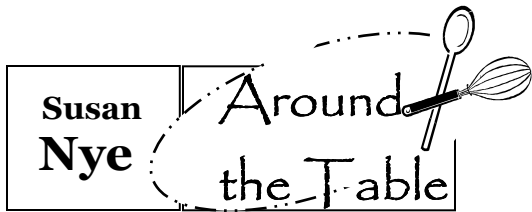
1 cup brown sugar
1 cup light Karo syrup
3 eggs
1 cup nuts, coarsely chopped
2 tablespoons flour
½ teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon vanilla
Flakey pastry – recipe follows
For garish: 1 cup heavy or whipping cream whipped with 1 teaspoon vanilla

1. Preheat oven to 425°.
2. In a large bowl beat the eggs until light and frothy. Add the brown sugar, Karo syrup, vanilla, salt and flour; whisk to combine. Stir in the pecans.
3. Pour into the chilled pie crust. Bake in the center of the oven at 425° for 15 minutes. Reduce heat to 300° and continue baking for 30 minutes or until firm.
4. For garnish: Whip cream and vanilla in a cold bowl until soft peaks form.

Flakey Pastry:

Enough for 1 crust

1 cup all purpose flour
1 teaspoon sugar
½ teaspoon salt
4 tablespoons (½ stick) chilled butter, cut into pieces
3 tablespoons solid vegetable shortening, cold
2-4 tablespoons ice water



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1. Blend flour, sugar and salt a food processor. Add butter and shortening; and process until mixture resembles coarse meal.
2. Sprinkle with ice water, 1-2 tablespoons at a time, and process until dough comes together in a ball. Flatten into disk. Wrap dough in plastic; chill until firm enough to roll, at least 30 minutes.
3. Roll out on a lightly floured work surface into a round about 11 inches in diameter. Drape the pastry over the rolling pin and ease it into a 9 inch pie pan, pressing it into the bottom and sides. Trim and crimp the edges. Freeze for 30 minutes.