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Chef's Apron

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More information the web at
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I don't know why, but I usually think of spring as brunch season. There are lots of good excuses for a spring brunch. It's a lovely way to celebrate Mom's or Dad's day as well as Easter. Big fancy hotels roll out magnificent spreads. You'll find everything from eggs Benedict to a gorgeous rib roast with lots of yummy side dishes, pastries and fruit. As lovely as all that sounds, right now is the perfect time to host a brunch.

Why? Because there is NOTHING ELSE to do!

Unless you are one of those incredibly well organized people, it's too early to shop for Christmas. Come to think of it, if you're one of those organized people you finished your shopping in September. Since November is both the rainiest and cloudiest month of the year, most hiking trails are a muddy mess. Plus it's deer hunting season, so wandering around the woods might not be the best idea. It's too cold to kayak but there's rarely enough snow to ski. I suppose you could bake Christmas cookies but they'll either be eaten or stale before your halls are decked and the wassail is mulled.

Brunch was big when I was in my twenties. I was living in Vermont and teaching anthropology and art. A group of us survived damp, dreary weekends (and a few icy cold ones) with crepes, quiche and mimosas. The worst part of teaching is correcting homework, quizzes and exams. Sunday was prime time to get out my red pen and wade through forty essays on *Growing Up in New Guinea*. Our midday get-togethers were a welcomed relief, a way to postpone the inevitable. Besides brunch was new and trendy, we might have been living in the country but not a one of us had just fallen off the turnip truck.

Vermont is where I first started to cook and experiment in the kitchen. My mother gave me *Joy of Cooking* and my sister gave me the *Moosewood Cookbook*. I let Craig Claiborne intimidate me in the *New York Times* and happily tried recipes in the much less daunting *Boston Globe*. In my cramped little kitchen, I figured out how to make, among other things, quiche. Even if real men didn't eat quiche, I foisted it on my friends, male and female alike.

Brunch is the perfect way to keep boredom at bay between 11:00 and 3:00, longer if you add a marathon game of bridge or Trivial Pursuit. Whether you invite your friends for Saturday or Sunday, they will be delighted with the invitation and excuse to get out of the house.

If you have a full house over Thanksgiving weekend, cramming breakfast and lunch into a single meal might just save you a bit of time, trouble and clean up. Allow everyone sleep in, insist on it if you have to, and then relax around the table for a lazy brunch.

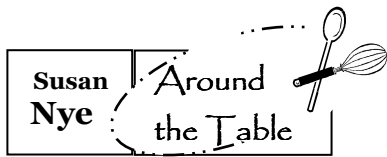
For the menu you can get all fancy with eggs Benedict or keep it simple with a bag of bagels, a smear of cream cheese and some smoked salmon. I prefer dishes with little if any last minute preparation. Bagels are a great idea and I love smoke salmon but when it's nippy, I like to welcome my guests with the warm and comforting aroma of something bubbling on the stove or baking in the oven.

Greet your guests with steaming cups of espresso or mugs of hot mulled cider or cocoa, spiked with a little rum or not. There's no need to rush through the meal. Take your time and relax; no one is in a hurry. When you're ready, let everyone meander over to the buffet table and serve themselves. Then just settle in near the fire to chat and whine about the weather.

Bon appétit!

Susan





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Spinach & Ricotta Pie

A nice variation on the quiche theme. Add a few chicken sausages, a big bowl of local apples and some scones or muffins (it's okay to buy them at your favorite bakery) and brunch is ready. Enjoy!

Serves 8

Flakey pastry (recipe follows)
1 small onion, finely chopped
Olive oil
1 garlic clove, minced
16 ounces frozen spinach
3 large eggs
16 ounces ricotta cheese
1/4 cup sour cream
Pinch of thyme
Pinch of nutmeg
2 ounces grated Fontina cheese
1 ounce grated Pecorino Romano cheese
1 ounce grated Parmesan cheese
Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper

1. Put the spinach in a colander and let thaw and drain.
2. Cook the onion in a little olive oil on medium low heat for 3 minutes or until it starts to become translucent. Add the garlic and cook for another minute. Add the spinach and cook off any excess moisture. Let cool for a few minutes.
3. Whisk the eggs in a large bowl. Stir in the ricotta, sour cream, thyme, nutmeg, salt and pepper. Fold in the spinach. Add the Fontina, Romano and Parmesan cheeses and combine.
4. Preheat the oven to 375 degrees.
5. Roll out the pastry dough and gently press it into a 9-inch deep dish pie plate. Spoon the filling into the pan. Bake for 40-45 minutes or until the filling and crust is golden brown.

Savory Flakey Pastry

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

1. Blend the flour and salt in a food processor. Add the butter and shortening; process until the mixture resembles coarse meal.
2. Sprinkle with ice water, 1-2 tablespoons at a time and process until the dough comes together in a ball. Remove the dough from the food processor and flatten into a disk. Wrap the dough in plastic; chill until firm, at least 30 minutes.