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Chef's Apron

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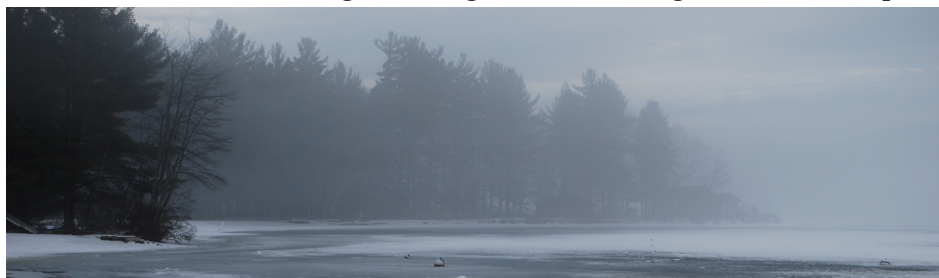
More information the web at
www.susannye.com

Yes, we've heard all the jokes about living in New England and New Hampshire. There are countless references to the Patriots and the Red Sox. You know you are a New Englander if you named your dog Brady or Fenway. Or if you learned about the Curse of the Bambino in history class, right along with /instead of the Battle of Gettysburg.

A few have the audacity to malign our culinary expertise. You know you are from New Hampshire if you only have three spices in your cupboard: salt, pepper and ketchup. Or if you have not one but several recipes for moose in your repertoire. That's moose as in the big animal with antlers not mousse as in chocolate.

But most jokes about New England focus on both the duration and intensity of our winters. You know you live in New Hampshire if your local Dairy Queen opens in May and shuts down in September. Or if you've taken your kids trick-or-treating in a blizzard, keep an ice scraper in your car year-round or consider six inches of snow nothing more than a dusting.

These jokes maligning our Yankee winter all seem to overlook the January Thaw. As in, you know you are in New Hampshire when you wake up one grey and misty January morning and it's a balmy 40, maybe even 50 degrees. The January Thaw is not a figment of our collective imaginations but a well observed if unexplained phenomenon. The likes of the Blue Hill Meteorological Observatory has observed it. The Old Farmer's Almanac, the definitive source for all things New England and all things weather, has reported it.



What would life be like without the January Thaw? Well, you'd miss that mid-winter glimpse of your neighbor's knees. Who else but a New Englander would don shorts as soon as the thermometer crept above freezing? Or ride around in a convertible with the top down to stay cool in a 40 degree heat wave? That's 40 degrees Fahrenheit not Celsius.

Unfortunately, the Thaw is frequently accompanied by rain. So without the Thaw, you'd miss the excitement of ice dams and leaks in the attic, a flooded garage or damp basement. On the other hand, you would be spared the annoying moaning and groaning of your skier friends lamenting, "if only it was 5 degrees colder ... we coulda had a foot of powder."

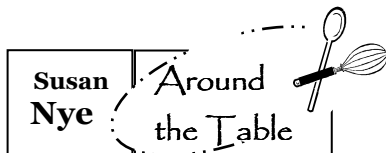
The rain is invariably followed by a bone-chilling, blast of cold air. Without this duo of Thaw and arctic freeze, those same moaning and groaning skiers would be robbed of the thrills, chills and spills of traversing an ice covered mountain. Thank goodness, we are both a hardy and cheerful bunch. Who else but a New Englander would spend a day slipping and sliding over thick sheets of pearl-grey ice? And then shrug, smile and call it hard packed powder?

It would be nice to think that after New Year's balmy temps and subsequent return to chilly normalcy, we'd be done with the Thaw. Unfortunately, more often than not, we have a rainy Thaw not once but twice (even, heaven forbid, three times) before the end of February. Once we get into March, we stop calling it a Thaw and start calling it Mud Season.

Until then, for skiers all over New Hampshire, please, let it snow and,

Bon appétit!

Susan



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or just look like one!

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Tartiflette

I discovered tartiflette when I lived in Europe. This hearty French dish is great after a long day on the slopes battling the ice, wind and snow. If you can't find Reblochon, try substituting Fontina, Port Salut or Raclette cheese. Enjoy!

Serves at least 6

2 pounds Yukon Gold potatoes, cleaned, cut in quarters and then sliced about 1/2-inch thick

8 ounces lean thick-cut bacon, roughly chopped

2 good size leeks (white and pale green parts only), chopped

1 medium onion, chopped

2 cloves garlic, minced

8 ounces reblochon cheese, cut into 1/2-inch cubes

Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

1/2 teaspoon paprika

1/2 teaspoon thyme

Pinch ground nutmeg

3/4 cup sour cream

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Butter a large, oven proof casserole dish.

Sauté the bacon in a large skillet over medium heat until lightly browned. Remove the bacon from the pan and reserve. Pour off all but 1-2 tablespoons of the bacon fat. Add the leeks, onions and garlic; sauté for about 5 minutes.

Put the potatoes, bacon, leeks, onions, garlic and cheese in the casserole. Sprinkle with salt, pepper, paprika, thyme and nutmeg and toss. Add the sour cream and toss.

Cover and bake for 45 minutes. Remove the cover and continue baking until the potatoes are cooked through and top is brown, about 15 minutes more.