



Holiday Feasting & Braised Lamb with Artichokes & Mushrooms

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No, a hurricane is not tearing up the coast. A nor'easter is not bearing down. The current whirlwind of frenzied activity is nothing more (and nothing less) than our final preparations for Christmas. Not only is the big guy coming to town but friends and family will be dropping by as well. Our halls are decked, the stocking are hung and you can't find a double-A battery or heavy-duty extension cord for miles. What's more, the larder is filled to overflowing.

What wonderful dishes will be on your holiday table? Will you do your best to keep it simple or put on an extravagant Christmas spread? One that puts Martha to shame. How about traditions? Is your great-grandmother's famous goose on the menu? What about that infamous green bean casserole? If you're like me you like to switch it up every so often.

Long before I was born, long before my parents were born, the Nye's served turkey for Christmas dinner. It was Tradition with a capital T. Maybe that's why I can still remember my mother announcing that she would no longer cook turkey for Christmas. We were just finishing up Thanksgiving dinner. She'd anticipated dissent and waited until everyone was full and happy. The room got quiet, forks full of apple pie stopped in mid-air but Mom plunged ahead. She was brilliant. With great enthusiasm, she shared her plan to cook the biggest, most beautiful rib roast she could find for Christmas. She cheerfully mentioned Mr. McIntyre, the local butcher extraordinaire. She touted the joys of a traditional English feast. Her pitch was so good I began to wonder if she was going to invite Tiny Tim and the rest of the Cratchit family to join us. With her inimitable charm and beautiful smile, she made it clear that this was no proposal and not up for debate.



Pop Nye, Nana Westland, Mom, Grandpa Westland & Nana Nye

Even if her decision was unilateral, that Christmas dinner was delicious and enjoyed by all. It also ushered in a new era for our family's feast. Since then the only constant to our Christmas dinners is that they continue to change. Not necessarily every year but just often enough to keep us from getting set in our ways.



Don't get me wrong. I'm all for tradition. My tree is decorated. My stocking is hung. However, a surprise or two is a great way to liven up your holiday table. Nervous? Don't be. You may face a short-term insurrection when you announce that (after countless decades) you're not getting up at 4 a.m. to put a turkey in the oven. Don't worry; any grumbling will stop as soon as everyone takes their first bite of your delicious feast.

Whatever you serve, your holiday meals should be as easy as they are delicious. As far as I'm concerned, Mom was right. (Isn't she always!?) Turkey with all the trimmings seems more than a bit nuts with so much going on. Instead try a simple beef tenderloin or roasted salmon filet. It will be as delicious as it is easy. Then again, maybe you've got lots of people coming and going, a cousin who's always late and no idea when everyone will sit down to dinner. If that's the case, slow cook stews and braises are a great solution.

Whether you stick to the tried and true or experiment with new dishes,

I wish you a warm and wonderful holiday and Bon appétit!

Braised Lamb with Artichokes and Mushrooms and Creamy Polenta

Everyone coming to your house for the holidays? No need to stress and worry over dinner. Let the lamb bubble in the oven while you enjoy a relaxing evening and each other's company!

Serves 6

About 3 pounds boneless leg of lamb, trimmed
 Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper
 Olive oil
 2 medium carrots, diced
 2 stalks celery, diced
 1 medium onion, diced
 4 cloves garlic, minced
 1 cup dry red wine
 1 cup canned crushed tomatoes
 3 cups chicken stock
 2 teaspoons fresh thyme
 2 teaspoons chopped, fresh rosemary
 1 bay leaf
 12 ounces mushrooms, sliced
 12 frozen artichoke hearts
 Chopped parsley
 Creamy Polenta (recipe follows)



Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.

Season the lamb with salt and pepper. Heat a little olive oil in a large casserole or Dutch-oven over medium-high heat. Brown the lamb on both sides, about 5 minutes per side. Remove and reserve.

Add a little more olive oil to the pot if necessary; add the carrots, celery and onion and sauté until the onions start to become translucent, about 10 minutes. Add the garlic and sauté 1-2 minutes more. Add the red wine, tomatoes, chicken stock and herbs and bring to a simmer.

Return the lamb to the pot, bring to a simmer, cover and transfer to the oven. Cook, turning the lamb 2 or 3 times, for 1 hour.

Sauté the mushrooms in a little olive oil over medium-high heat until lightly browned, about 5 minutes. Add the mushrooms and artichoke hearts to the lamb. Continue cooking until the lamb is very tender; an additional 30-45 minutes. If dinner is delayed for any reason, it's okay to turn down the heat and let it simmer a little longer.

Remove the lamb from the casserole and cut across the grain in thick slices. Serve with a dollop of Creamy Polenta, a spoonful of vegetables and sauce and a sprinkle of parsley.

The lamb can be made a few days ahead. Cook for 1 hour, add the mushrooms but not the artichokes and cook for 15-20 minutes more. Cool to room temperature and then refrigerate. To reheat, bring to a simmer on top of the stove, add the artichokes and transfer to a 350 degree oven. Cook for about 30 minutes or until piping hot.

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Another recipe from Susan Nye: Winter 2011/Volume 275

Creamy Polenta

6 Servings

1 cup instant polenta or grits
2 tablespoons unsalted butter
1/4 cup cream
1 ounce grated Pecorino Romano
1 ounce grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese
Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper

Make the polenta according to package directions. When the polenta is smooth and creamy, add the butter, cream, grated cheeses and salt and pepper to taste. Stir until the butter and cheeses are melted and well combined. Serve immediately.

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