

SOME PEOPLE DREAM OF glory. I dream about a formal dining room. In a city where many folks cheerfully live in what much of the world considers closet space, even the most gracious hostess must, from time to time, require guests to dine on the sofa, eating from plates on their laps. In my home, this is any time there are more than four for dinner (six if they're lean and don't gesticulate too much). I can accommodate dieters, finicky eaters, the pathologically late or the terminally dull. What I cannot accommodate is all of their arms and legs at my table.

Once, before I had mastered the art of lap food, I served roast loin of pork braised with bourbon and dried fruits to a group of eight. The dish looked gorgeous as it sat on a platter, waiting to be carved. But most of the guests sat in my living room like baffled toddlers in charm school, valiantly trying to cut their meat into bite-size portions with the large unwieldy knives from my Great Aunt Florrie's silver plate collection. (Aunt Florrie's huge mahogany dining-room table figures prominently in my dreams.) One friend simply went into the kitchen and came back with a roll of paper towels, unabashedly making herself and her silk dress a thick batting of protection before she proceeded to eat. I noticed that another guest had disappeared. Not wanting to seem ungracious, he had slipped quietly into the bathroom, polished off his pork in privacy and returned, dabbing the corners of his mouth with a look of elegant satisfaction.

Sofa seating for dinner requires a serious balancing act, so it's only fair to give guests a sporting chance, that is, food that can travel delicately and safely from plate to mouth using only fork or fingers. The gold standard here would be Velcro chicken. Nothing must be cut, twirled, dipped, deboned or wrestled out of its shell. Everything must fit on one plate. The byword is: No knives. You do not want to serve red meat because you do not want to serve red wine, unless, like Woody Allen, you have been persuaded by your mother to keep your furniture swathed in plastic. And the kindest thing to say about lasagna is: It's been done.

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen, pursuing the perfect lap food. But let's not dwell on the failures. Here are the winners: Pot pie is a 1990's update on a classic, but there's not a potato or pea in sight, and the presentation in a paella pan would be downright weird if it weren't so appropriate. Warm white

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bean and tuna salad is another twist on a classic, updated by making it with fresh tuna. Chicken wings make easy finger food because the utterly useless and frustrating tips are removed, and the main joint is split into two chewable pieces. The recipe is something of a homage to international relations, with a slightly Chinese marinade and a crispy coating of grated Italian Parmesan.

And the bread of choice for almost any lap food is focaccia, with a topping of caramelized onions in lieu of butter. Bread and butter is the final proscriptio for plate balancing. I once watched a grown man try to liquefy a pat of butter by holding his dinner plate under a table lamp and then dipping his roll in the melting pool. It was not a pretty sight.

CHICKEN POT PAELLA

(From the Pan Handlers Catering Service, Manhattan)

- 1 pound frozen puff pastry
- 5 pounds whole boneless skinless chicken breasts
- 2 cups heavy cream
- 8 carrots, peeled and sliced diagonally
- 2 sticks unsalted butter
- 4 leeks (white part only), rinsed well and sliced
- 1 fennel bulb, sliced
- 2 large red onions, thinly sliced
- 4 unpeeled Granny Smith apples, cored and sliced
- ½ pound sugar snap peas, with tops and ends removed
- 4 zucchini, unpeeled and sliced diagonally
- ¾ cup flour
- 2 cups chicken broth
- 4 cups apple cider
- ½ cup Cognac
- 5 tablespoons chopped fresh tarragon
- 4 teaspoons ground coriander
- 1 tablespoon nutmeg
- 2 teaspoons allspice
- 5 cups cooked wild rice (1½ cups raw)
- Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
- 1 egg
- ¼ cup water.

1. Remove puff pastry from freezer. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Place the chicken breasts in a single layer in a baking pan. Pour the cream over them and bake for 20 to 25 minutes, until firm but still undercooked and pink at center. Reserve the cream and cooking juices; let the chicken cool and cut into 1-inch pieces.

2. Raise the oven temperature to 425 degrees.

3. Blanch the carrots in boiling salted water for 3 minutes. Rinse under cold running water. Drain well.

4. Melt 1 stick of butter in a large skillet or sauté pan (about 13 inches in diameter) over medium heat. Add the leeks, fennel and onions, and sauté, stirring occasionally, for about 10 minutes, or until softened. Stir in the apples, sugar snap peas, zucchini and blanched carrots. Cook, stirring, for 1 or 2 minutes. Remove from heat.

5. Melt the remaining stick of butter in large kettle over medium heat. Whisk in the flour. Cook, stirring constantly, for 5 minutes. Do not burn.

6. Add the broth and apple cider and cook, stirring constantly, until thickened, about 10 minutes. Stir in reserved cream, cooking juices and Cognac. Cook over low heat until the mixture thickens, about 10 minutes. Stir in spices. Add chicken, vegetables and rice to cream sauce, mixing gently. Add salt and pepper.

7. Pour the mixture into an 18-inch stainless-steel or enamel paella pan or other large shallow baking dish.

8. On a lightly floured surface, roll out pastry to fit the dish (if pastry comes in more than one sheet, overlap edges slightly). Place on top of dish, leaving a 1-inch overhang.

9. Mix the egg and water in a small bowl. Brush the edge of the pastry with the egg wash, and press the overhanging dough back onto the dish to form a lip around the edge of the dough. Cut a steam vent in the center and brush the entire surface with the egg wash. Place in the center of the oven and bake for 15 minutes. Reduce heat to 350 degrees and bake for an additional 35 to 45 minutes, or until crust is deep golden.

Yield: Ten to twelve servings.

SLIGHTLY CHINESE CHICKEN WINGS

- 4 dozen chicken wings
- 1 cup soy sauce
- 1 cup dry white wine
- ½ cup sherry
- ½ cup lemon juice
- 2 tablespoons light brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons minced garlic
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh ginger
- 2 cups flour
- 1 cup grated Parmesan
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil.

1. Cut off and discard wing tips. Make 2 smaller pieces out of each wing by cutting in half between the 2 main joints.

2. In a bowl or pan large enough to hold the wings, blend soy sauce, wine,

sherry, lemon juice, sugar, garlic and ginger. Toss wings in marinade and refrigerate, covered, for several hours or overnight.

3. Blend flour and cheese on a large plate. Drain wings and roll one at a time in flour mixture.

4. Brush several baking sheets with the vegetable oil and arrange wings in a single layer. Bake at 425 degrees for 15 minutes. Turn wings and bake 15 minutes, or until brown and crisp.

Yield: Ten to twelve servings.

FOCACCIA

(From the Pan Handlers)

For the dough:

- 1 package dry yeast
- ½ teaspoon sugar
- 1 cup warm water
- 3 cups all-purpose flour
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon fines herbes

For the topping:

- 5 tablespoons olive oil
- 1½ pounds Spanish onions, thinly sliced
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- ½ cup vermouth or dry white wine
- About 1 tablespoon oil for the pan
- About 1 tablespoon cornmeal for the pan
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh rosemary
- Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper to taste.

1. To make the dough, place the yeast, sugar and water in the bowl of a food processor. Let sit for 1 minute, or until bubbly. Add flour and process, pulsing two or three times to combine. Add the olive oil, salt and fines herbes and process until smooth and elastic. Transfer the dough to a lightly oiled bowl, cover with plastic wrap and let rise until doubled in size, about 1 hour.

2. To make the topping, sauté the onions in 3 tablespoons of the olive oil until soft, about 5 to 6 minutes. Add the sugar and cook over medium heat until caramel-colored, about 25 minutes. Add the vermouth or white wine and cook 2 minutes.

3. Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Lightly oil a 12-by-17-inch jellyroll pan and sprinkle with the cornmeal. Roll dough out on a lightly floured surface and press into the pan. Rub with remaining 2 tablespoons olive oil. Spread onion mixture over dough and sprinkle with rosemary, salt and pepper. Bake for 25 to 30 minutes, or until crisp and golden.

Yield: Ten to twelve servings.

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WARM WHITE BEAN AND TUNA SALAD

- 1 pound dried Great Northern beans
- ½ cup plus 6 tablespoons olive oil
- ½ cup soy sauce
- ½ cup water
- Juice of 2 large lemons
- 6 cloves garlic, minced
- 3 pounds fresh tuna steak, cut ¾-inch thick
- 1 large white onion, peeled and stuck with several cloves
- 2 carrots, peeled and quartered
- 2 stalks celery, quartered
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1 pound asparagus (peeled if thick), cut into 2-inch pieces
- 1 large red onion, chopped
- 6 scallions, chopped
- ¼ cup raspberry vinegar
- 1 tablespoon dried oregano
- ½ cup chopped fresh Italian parsley
- Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
- 6 ounces red or golden salmon roe.

1. Place the beans in a large saucepan or flameproof casserole. Cover with cold water by 2 inches and let soak overnight.

2. In a small bowl, combine the ½ cup olive oil, soy sauce, water, lemon juice and half of the garlic. Place the tuna in a shallow dish, cover with the mixture and let marinate about an hour at room temperature or several hours in the refrigerator.

3. Drain the beans and cover with fresh water. Add the onion, carrots, celery, bay leaves and thyme. Place on high heat and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to low and simmer until tender, about 1 to 1½ hours.

4. Drain and discard vegetables and bay leaves.

5. Preheat the broiler.

6. Cook asparagus in boiling water until crisp-tender, about 4 minutes for thin stalks, 6 minutes for thicker stalks. Drain and set aside.

7. Remove tuna from marinade and place under the broiler, about 6 inches away from the flame. Broil about 4 minutes on each side, or until cooked to desired degree of doneness.

8. While tuna is broiling, heat the 6 tablespoons olive oil in a flameproof casserole. Add the onions and garlic and cook until softened, about 5 minutes. Add the beans, asparagus, vinegar, oregano, parsley, salt and pepper. Stir gently over low heat for about 2 minutes; spoon onto serving platter.

9. Cut tuna into large chunks, and arrange over bean mixture. Sprinkle salmon roe over tuna.

Yield: Ten to twelve servings. ■



Sofa seating for dinner requires a serious balancing act, so it's only fair to give guests a sporting chance, i.e. food, like a tidy white bean and tuna salad, that can travel delicately and safely from plate to mouth using only fork or fingers.