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Shepherd's Pie with Caramelized Onions and Cheddar Smash

A true shepherd’s pie is always made with lamb; the similar dish made with beef is properly called cottage pie. It is one of the most comforting and homey dishes around. Traditionally, it was made with odds and ends from the Sunday roast, finely chopped. Grated cheddar melted on top is not traditional, of course, but with all that great Shelburne Farms cheddar around, it was a natural and delicious addition.

Serves 6-8

For the caramelized onions
3 tablespoons olive oil
2 pounds onions (about 6 medium), thinly sliced crosswise into rounds
1 teaspoon coarse kosher salt

For the potato smash
3 pounds all-purpose potatoes, such as Yukon gold, scrubbed but not peeled and cut into 2-inch chunks
4 garlic cloves, smashed with the flat side of a knife
1 teaspoon coarse kosher salt plus more to taste
¼ cup (½ stick) unsalted butter, cut into 4 pieces

For the lamb filling and to finish the pie
1 tablespoon olive oil
3 medium carrots, scrubbed, trimmed and finely diced (about 1½ cups)
2 pounds ground lamb
1½ teaspoons minced fresh thyme leaves
1 teaspoon coarse kosher salt
2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
1 tablespoon tomato paste (ketchup will do in a pinch)
2 cups chicken stock, preferably low sodium
1 cup (about 3-4 ounces) grated cheddar

1. Make the caramelized onions (up to one week ahead): In a large, heavy-bottomed sauté pan or skillet set over medium heat, heat the olive oil until hot. Add the onions to the pan and turn the heat down to medium-low.

2. Sprinkle the onions with the salt and cook, stirring frequently to make sure they brown evenly, for about 30-40 minutes or until they are completely golden brown and soft. You should have about 1½-2 cups of onions. Set aside.

3. Make the smashed potatoes (up to 24 hours ahead): Select a large pot that can accommodate a steamer insert or heatproof colander large enough to hold your potatoes. Fill it with water up to the bottom of the steamer insert, add the potatoes and garlic cloves, and sprinkle them with the salt. Cover the pot, set it over high heat, and bring the water to a boil.
4. Reduce the heat to maintain an active simmer and steam the potatoes for 25-30 minutes until they break apart easily when poked with a fork.

5. Remove the potatoes and garlic from the steamer, pour off the hot water, and return the potatoes and garlic to the pot. Cover the potatoes with a clean dish towel and let them dry out for about 5 minutes. (Do not allow the potatoes to cool before mashing or they will get disastrously gummy.) Add the butter to the pot and use a potato masher to smash the potatoes and garlic until blended but not completely smooth. Adjust seasoning to taste. Set aside.

6. **Make the meat filling and finish the pie**: Preheat the oven to 400°F. In a large sauté pan or skillet set over medium-high heat, heat the olive oil until hot. Add the diced carrots and cook, stirring occasionally, for 5-7 minutes until softened.

7. Add the lamb, thyme, and salt, and cook, stirring occasionally, for 8-10 minutes until the meat is no longer pink. Carefully pour off all the fat and discard.

8. Sprinkle the flour over the lamb and cook for 1 minute, stirring. Then stir in the tomato paste and cook, stirring, for 2 minutes longer. Pour in the stock, along with 1 cup of the caramelized onions. Increase the heat slightly and simmer, 2-3 minutes, until the gravy thickens slightly.

9. Spread the lamb into a shallow round or oval 3-quart casserole or a 9 by 13-inch baking dish. Spread the potatoes on top. Distribute the remaining caramelized onions over the mashed potatoes, and then sprinkle the cheddar evenly on top. Bake until the top is golden and crusty, about 20 minutes.

**Variation**: For a rich cheddar smash to serve at a different time, use the same ingredients for the mash but peel the potatoes. Follow steps 3 through 5 but mash 2-3 cups (8 ounces) of grated cheddar into the hot potatoes along with ¾ cup of warm milk or half-and-half, mixing until smooth.
Chocolate Orange Macaroons

When I tell people I own Sweet Melissa’s, they often say “Oh! I love your macaroons!” You want an easy recipe? These are easy. Really easy.

Makes 2 dozen cookies

6 ounces best-quality solid semisweet (58%) chocolate
One 14-oz. bag sweetened coconut
Zest of 1 orange
1 cup sugar
3 large egg whites

Before You Start: Position a rack in the center of your oven. Preheat the oven to 325 F. Line a cookie sheet with parchment paper or aluminum foil.

1. Using a serrated bread knife, finely chop the chocolate. Set aside.

2. In a large bowl, combine the coconut and zest, and rub together with your hands. (This will break up the coconut and release the orange oils.)

3. Stir in the sugar and chocolate to the coconut and mix to combine. Add the egg whites. Use your hands to mix until everything is coated and the egg whites are distributed evenly.

4. Using a 1-oz cookie scoop, firmly pack the dough into the scoop and unmold about 2 inches apart onto the prepared cookie sheet. Bake for 25-30 minutes, or until the cookies are golden brown. Remove to a wire rack to cool completely.

The cookies keep in an airtight container at room temperature for up to 3 days. For longer storage, wrap in plastic wrap and refrigerate for up to 5 days, or freeze well wrapped in plastic wrap and then aluminum foil for up to 3 weeks. Do not unwrap before defrosting.

PRO TIP:
If you want to, make the cookie base up to 1 week ahead! Just keep it in an airtight container in the refrigerator and bake the cookies when you have time. (These just keep getting easier.)
Masitas de Puerco

Masitas de puerco, fried pork chunks, is a typical Cuban dish, born in the island’s countryside. After the people made pork, they would leave chunks of the pork marinating overnight. When they went to reheat the pork the following day, it was already saturated with flavor. That’s how they made fried pork chunks. One of the great things about masitas de puerco is that they serve many purposes. Often enough, we’ll serve them as a main course, along with some tostones or platanos maduros and rice and beans. For parties you can cut them into bitesized pieces, stick toothpicks in them, and offer them as hors d’oeuvres. —Emilio

Yield: 4 to 6 servings

2 cups mojo (see recipe on page 159)
3 lbs of pork loin
pinch of cumin powder
2 bay leaves
1/3 cup vegetable oil
1 medium onion, peeled and thinly sliced

1. Prepare the mojo.

2. Cube pork into 1” x 1” x 1” cubes and place into a large roasting pan.

3. In a small bowl, whisk the cumin into the mojo, then pour the mixture over the pork chunks, and add the bay leaves and cover with plastic wrap. Place the pan in the refrigerator and let the pork marinate overnight.

4. Remove pork from refrigerator and heat oil to 350°F over medium-high heat. Then, using a slotted spoon and allowing excess marinade to drain into the pan, remove the pork from the mojo and fry for about 10 minutes, turning once about halfway through, until the pork is brown and crisped. Then add the onions and sauté for about 3 minutes, until the onions are translucent.

5. Transfer to a serving platter and serve hot.
Esther’s Orange Marmalade Cake

10-12 servings

For the cake
1 cup unsalted butter, softened, more for greasing the pans
3 ¼ cups cake flour, more for dusting the pans
1 tablespoon baking powder
1 teaspoon salt
2 2/3 cups granulated sugar
5 large eggs, at room temperature
4 large egg yolks, at room temperature
2/3 cup vegetable oil
1 tablespoon grated orange zest (see page 52)
2 teaspoons vanilla extract
1 cup buttermilk, at room temperature

For the orange syrup
1 cup freshly squeezed orange juice
1/4 cup granulated sugar

For the filling
1 (12-ounce) jar orange marmalade

For the frosting
1 cup heavy cream, chilled
4 tablespoons granulated sugar
1 cup sour cream, chilled

The cake: Preheat the oven to 350ºF. Lightly butter three 9-inch round cake pans, line them with parchment paper, then lightly butter and flour the paper, shaking out any excess.

Sift the flour, baking powder, and salt into a large bowl. Sift a second time into another bowl. In the bowl of an electric mixer, beat the butter on medium speed until light in color, about 4 minutes. Add the 2 2/3 cups sugar in a steady stream with the mixer running. Beat until light and fluffy, about 4 minutes. Add the eggs and yolks, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Be sure to stop at least once to scrape down the batter from the sides of the bowl. After all of the eggs have been added, continue to beat on medium speed for 2 more minutes. With the mixer on low speed, add the oil and beat for 1 minute. In a small bowl combine the orange zest, vanilla, and buttermilk. Using a rubber spatula, fold in half of the dry ingredients. Scrape down the sides of the bowl and add half of the buttermilk mixture. Fold in the remaining dry ingredients, scrape down the sides, and add the remaining buttermilk.

Pour the batter among the prepared pans, smooth the surface, rap each pan on the counter to expel any air pockets or bubbles, then place in the oven. Bake for 30 to 35 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted into the center comes out clean. Let the cakes cool in the pans on racks for 20 minutes.
The orange syrup
In a small bowl stir together the orange juice and ¼ cup sugar until the sugar is dissolved. While the cakes are still in the cake pans, use a toothpick or skewer to poke holes at ½-inch intervals in the cake layers. Spoon the syrup over each layer, allowing the syrup to be completely absorbed before adding the remainder. Let the layers cool completely in the pans.

**The filling:** Heat the marmalade in a small saucepan over medium heat until just melted. Let cool for 5 minutes.

**The frosting:** In a chilled mixing bowl using the wire whisk attachment, whip the heavy cream with the 4 tablespoons sugar until stiff peaks form. Add the sour cream, a little at a time, and whisk until the mixture is a spreadable consistency.

**To assemble the cake:** Invert one of the cake layers on a cake plate and carefully peel off the parchment. Spread one-third of the marmalade over the top, smoothing it into an even layer. Invert the second layer on top of the first, peel off the parchment, and spoon another third of the marmalade on top. Place the third cake layer on top, remove the parchment, and spoon the remaining marmalade onto the center of it, leaving a 1 ¼-inch border around the edges. Frost the sides and the top border with the frosting, leaving the marmalade on top of the cake exposed. Or, if you prefer, frost the entire cake first, adding the marmalade as a garnish on top. Chill for at least 2 hours before serving.
Fusilli Carbonara with Spring Vegetables

Hearty, delicious and oh so easy to prepare, if you want to keep making excuses for not cooking, then skip this recipe. But if you want to wow your family with your culinary skills, without killing yourself in the preparation, this dish is for you. Caution: You may get hooked on cooking.

Makes 4 to 6 servings.

10 ounces spiral pasta
2 cups baby carrots, halved lengthwise
1 bunch asparagus, tough ends snapped off and stalks cut into 1-inch lengths
1 large zucchini, cut into long matchstick pieces
2 cups plain soymilk
Sea salt
1 ½ tablespoons kuzu, dissolved in a small amount cold water
2/3 cup oil-packed sun-dried tomatoes, drained well, diced
3 to 4 sprigs fresh flat-leaf parsley, finely minced
Fruity olive oil, for drizzling

Bring a large pot of water to a boil. Add the pasta and cook for 4 minutes. Add the baby carrots to the pasta and cook for 2 to 3 minutes more. Add the asparagus and cook for 2 to 3 minutes more. Adjust the cooking of the vegetables to the texture of the pasta, which should be al dente. Just before draining the pasta, stir in the zucchini. Drain well, but do not rinse; return the pasta and vegetables to the pot over very low heat.

Warm the soymilk in a saucepan over low heat. Season lightly with salt. Stir in the dissolved kuzu, and cook, stirring constantly, until thickened, about 4 minutes.

Stir the sauce, sun-dried tomatoes and parsley into the pasta and vegetables, transfer to a serving bowl and serve with a drizzle of fruity olive oil.
Minute Steaks in Mushroom-Tomato Sauce

These little steaks are a great choice for a small household, so consider keeping these on hand. This sauce is easy yet elegant, and also tastes great on a grilled chicken breast if you’ve got leftovers.

Serves 2

2 (4-ounce) lean tenderized minute or cube steaks
1 ½ cups chopped fresh mushrooms
½ cup chopped onion
½ cup tomato juice
1 tablespoon all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
2 teaspoons I Can’t Believe It’s Not Butter! Light Margarine

In a medium skillet sprayed with butter-flavored cooking spray, brown steaks for 3 to 4 minutes on each side. Remove steaks and keep warm. In same skillet, sauté mushrooms and onion for 5 to 6 minutes. In a covered jar, combine tomato juice and flour. Shake well to blend. Stir tomato juice mixture into vegetable mixture. Add Worcestershire sauce and margarine. Mix well to combine. Place steaks back into skillet and spoon vegetable mixture over top. Lower heat, cover, and simmer for 10 minutes or until meat is tender and sauce thickens, stirring occasionally. When serving, evenly spoon sauce over steaks.
Beef Goulash with Carrots and Potatoes

Oma made a lot of stewed meat, reminiscent, I suspect, of the dishes she had made when she lived in Vienna. This goulash is a variation on her Brisket (page 69). It is both comforting and filling, a wonderful everyday dinner.

Makes 6 to 8 servings

2 pounds beef stew meat, preferably chuck, cut into 2-inch pieces
Coarse kosher salt and fresh pepper, to taste
3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
2 to 3 tablespoons flavorless vegetable oil
3 cups chopped onions (about 4)
1 tablespoon chopped garlic
3 tablespoons sweet Hungarian paprika
1 cup chopped tomatoes (2 medium)
1 tablespoon fresh marjoram, or 1 teaspoon dried
3 cups water
1 tablespoon tomato paste
4 medium red potatoes
5 medium carrots, peeled and cut into chunks

Season the meat with salt and pepper. Put the flour in a resealable plastic bag, add the seasoned beef, and toss to lightly coat. Remove to a plate.

Heat the oil in a large, heavy pot over medium-high heat until hot. Add the onions, and cook, stirring, until translucent. Add the garlic, and cook, stirring, until fragrant, about 1 minute. Sprinkle in the paprika, and cook, stirring, until the onions are completely coated. Add the beef, in batches, if necessary, and saute until lightly browned on all sides.

Add the tomato and marjoram and stir to combine. Pour in the water, add the tomato paste, and stir until the tomato paste dissolves. Increase the heat to high and bring the liquid to a boil. Cover the pot, reduce the heat to low, and simmer the stew gently for 1 1/2 hours, stirring occasionally, until the meat is fork-tender.

While the goulash cooks, parboil the potatoes in a medium saucepan in water to cover until just fork-tender, 10 to 15 minutes. Drain, let cool, and peel. Reserve.
Clam Chowder

It was then that he spotted the shop of The Three Weird Sisters, its window filled with a washbowl and pitcher sets, spittoons, and the inevitable spinning wheel . . . Three women wearing orange smocks stopped what they were doing and turned to regard the man with a bushy mustache. Qwilleran returned their gaze. For a moment he was speechless . . . Flashing her dimples, the brunette said to Qwilleran, "Would you have a bowl of chowder with us? And some cheese and crackers?" If they had offered hardtack and goose grease, he would have accepted.

Serves 6

2 slices bacon, cut into small pieces
1 stalk celery, chopped
1 medium onion, chopped
2 medium potatoes, peeled and diced
1 tablespoon butter
2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
1 8-ounce bottle or can clam juice
salt and pepper to taste
2 6 ½-ounce cans minced or chopped clams, drained; reserve liquid
1 ½ quarts half-and-half
¼ teaspoon dried thyme
2 teaspoons chopped fresh parsley

Fry the bacon until partially cooked. Add the celery and onion. Sauté until the vegetables are tender and the bacon is crisp. Add the potatoes and butter. Sprinkle the flour over the potatoes and mix well. Stir in the reserved liquid, clam juice, salt, and pepper. Cook over low heat until the potatoes are tender, stirring occasionally. Add the clams. Then stir in the half-and-half, thyme, and parsley. Heat until hot, but do not boil.
Filled Potato Dumplings

These dumplings make a wonderful meal by themselves, and can be served at any meal; they make excellent leftovers as well.

Makes 14 to 16 filled dumplings

Dumpling Filling
1 pound lean ground beef round or ½ pound lean ground beef and ½ pound lean ground pork
2 tablespoons butter or margarine
1 medium onion, minced
1 clove garlic, minced
1 teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
1 egg, lightly beaten
½ cup dry bread crumbs

Prepare filling: Place me at in large bowl; set aside. Melt butter in a medium skillet over medium heat. Add onion, garlic, salt and pepper; sauté until onion is tender; about 2 minutes. Remove from heat and let cool. Add onion mixture, egg, and bread crumbs to meat. Combine with your hands into a smooth filling.

Prepare dough: Pell baked potatoes. Mash a press peeled baked potatoes through a sieve in a small bowl. Grate raw potatoes into another bowl. Strain grated potatoes through a fine mesh cheesecloth, allowing potato juices, with potato starch, to collect in a medium bowl. Let potato juices and starch stand for 10 minutes so starch collects in the bottom of the bowl. Meanwhile, mix strained potatoes, mashed potatoes, and salt in another bowl. Carefully tip bowl with potato juice so liquid runs off, leaving starchy liquid in the bowl. Add remaining starch liquid to potato mixture. Mix flour with potato a little at a time until a smooth, pliable dough forms.

To form dumplings, wet your hands with cool water. Take ¼ cup dough and roll in a ball between your hands. Flatten the dough into a circular shape, then place 1 tablespoon filling in the center of the dough round, and evenly shape dough around the filling into a round dumpling about 3 inches in diameter by about 2 inches thick. Set completed dumpling aside. Repeat process, occasionally wetting your hands so dough will not stick to your skin.
Bring water to a boil in a large pot. Add dumplings, one at a time, to boiling water. Gently stir so they won’t stick to the pot or each other. Simmer until dumplings float, then cook for 15 minutes, stirring occasionally. Remove dumplings with a slotted spoon and arrange on a warmed serving dish. Melt butter in a medium skillet over medium heat. Add onion and sauté until tender; set aside. Remove partly frozen bacon from freezer; cut slices into 1/2–inch square pieces. Sauté bacon in a large skillet over medium heat until almost crisp. Drain well. Spoon onion and bacon over dumplings. Serve warm.

Variation: Slice dumplings into two halves or four quarters and sauté in 2 tablespoons vegetable oil until filling and dough are browned on one or more sides. Serve hot with sautéed onions and cooked bacon. This works especially well for leftover dumplings a day or two later.
Perfect Chocolate Mousse

Makes 4 cups

½ cup pitted soft dates
3-4 tablespoons maple syrup
1 tablespoon cold-pressed coconut butter (optional)
1 ½ tablespoons non-alcohol vanilla extract
½ cups mashed avocado (about 3 medium avocados)
¾ cup raw carob powder
4-6 tablespoons cocoa powder (or additional carob powder)

Soak the dates in ½ cup fresh water for 5-10 minutes to soften. Drain the soak water and set aside. In a food processor, blend dates, maple syrup, coconut butter (if desired), and vanilla until smooth. Spoon in avocado and blend until smooth. Add a few tablespoons of date soak water if necessary to aid in blending. Spoon in carob and cocoa powder and blend until smooth.

Spoon mousse into parfait or wineglasses. Keeps fresh for several days.

Variation: Try freezing for a decadent ice cream.
Red Velvet Pound Cake

This has been the contributor’s official family birthday cake for the past twenty years. Special church friends have been known to request it for their birthdays as well…with mixed results!

Makes 14-18 servings.

3 sticks butter or margarine  
3 cups sugar  
8 large eggs  
2 teaspoons vanilla extract  
1 ounce red food coloring  
3 cups cake flour

½ cup sifted unsweetened cocoa powder  
¼ teaspoon salt  
1 cup milk

Pineapple Cream Cheese Frosting (see recipe below)

Preheat the oven to 325°F. Cream the butter and sugar in a large bowl until light and fluffy. Add the eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Stir in the vanilla and food coloring. Combine the flour, cocoa, and salt in a large bowl. Stir into the creamed mixture, one cup at a time, alternating with 1/3 cup milk until all the dry ingredients and milk have been incorporated. Pour the batter into a greased and floured tube pan. Bake for about 65 to 75 minutes or until cake tests done when checked with a long wooden pick. Turn cake out onto a wire rack; let cool. Frost with Pineapple Cream Cheese Frosting.

Pineapple Cream Cheese Frosting

This is a very sweet, smooth frosting, best on a plain cake that’s not too sweet. You can substitute any fruit-flavored cream cheese.

Makes enough frosting for one bundt cake.

1 (8-ounce) container pineapple cream cheese  
2 cups powdered sugar  
1 teaspoon vanilla  
1-3 tablespoons cream or milk

Combine the cream cheese and powdered sugar in a medium bowl; beat well. Stir in the vanilla and enough cream to make the frosting spread easily; mix well.
Mararoni and Cheese

Serves 8

1 pound elbow macaroni
2 tablespoons butter
2 tablespoons whole-wheat or unbleached flour
1.5 pints skim milk
1 cup shredded cheddar cheese
1 cup shredded Monterey jack cheese
1 cup shredded mozzarella cheese
Nonstick cooking spray

1. Cook the macaroni according to the package directions, but subtract 3 or 4 minutes from the cooking time. The macaroni should be a bit underdone, since it will cook a second time. Drain and set aside.

2. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.

3. In a large saucepan, melt the butter. When it begins to brown, add the flour and whisk until combined. Cook until you can smell the butter/flour combination, 6 to 8 minutes.

4. While continuing to whisk, begin to add milk gradually until you have a cream sauce. You may need to add more if the sauce seems too thick.

5. Once the cream sauce is thin enough, begin to add the cheeses while continuing to whisk. Again you may need more milk to thin your sauce. Continue this process while whisking until all the cheese is melted in.

6. Remove from the heat and fold in the macaroni. Spray a casserole dish with nonstick cooking spray and pour the mixture into the dish.

7. Bake for 35 to 40 minutes, until the macaroni is heated through and brown on top.
Chorizo Mac

File Under: Oh So Good but Bad for You
This is like mac and cheese with hot dogs, but for adults. The garlic and chorizo add a ton of flavor. I like to use a really spicy chorizo, but the level of heat is up to you. The bread crumbs are mixed with butter and put on top to give the casserole a crispy topping, and they counteract the heat of the chorizo if you choose to use a spicy one.

Serves 4 to 5

1 pound medium elbow macaroni  
1 large white onion, diced  
2 gloves garlic, minced or diced  
1 tablespoon olive oil  
2 cups milk  
1 tablespoon flour  

½ pound white cheddar, shredded or cubed  
½ pound Parmesan cheese, shredded or grated  
1 pound cured chorizo, cut into ½-inch pieces  
Salt and pepper  
4 tablespoons bread crumbs  
1 tablespoon butter, softened

Preheat oven to 350F.

In a large pot of boiling water, parboil the macaroni, drain, and set aside.

In a large pot over high heat, sauté the onions and garlic in the olive oil. When the onions begin to brown, reduce the heat to low. Add the milk and flour, stirring constantly. When the flour and milk are mixed well, add the cheddar while continuing to stir. When the cheddar begins to melt, add the Parmesan and mix well. When the cheeses are melted, add the macaroni and stir until well coated. Add the chorizo, salt and pepper to taste, and mix well.

Transfer to a buttered 21/2 to 23/4-quart greased or buttered baking dish.

In a small bowl, mix the butter and bread crumbs. Put half of this mixture on top of the casserole, distributing evenly.

Bake, uncovered, for 35 to 40 minutes or until bubbly and golden on top. Remove and cover with the remaining bread crumb mixture and bake for an additional 10 minutes.

Let stand 10 minutes before serving
Blueberry Sauce

From Abby, my daughter.
Pour this sauce on your toast or fruit, mix with yogurt, or just eat it by the spoonful. It is divine.

Serves 5

¼ cup water
¼ cup light brown sugar
juice from freshly squeezed lemon
1 pt. of blueberries

Heat water with light brown sugar until dissolved. Add lemon juice.

Then the blueberries. Just keep cookin’ and stirrin’ until it breaks down and it’s all saucy.
Attila’s Stuffed Mushrooms

This is one of the absolute all-time North pole favorites, an appetizer created by Lars in honor of my longtime friend Attila the Hun. You may be amazed that such a ferocious warrior joined my gift-giving mission, but this only proves that anyone can be changed for the better by belief in the generosity of spirit that defines the Christmas season.

Serves 6 to 8

3 tbsp. butter
1 tbsp. vegetable oil
½ onion, diced
1 tomato, diced
2 cloves garlic, minced
salt and pepper

1. Preheat your oven to 375°F.

2. In a medium skillet, melt 1 tbsp. of the butter with the vegetable oil over medium heat. Add the onion, tomato, and garlic with some of the minced mushroom stem. Season with salt and pepper to taste, and cook, stirring occasionally, until the mixture is soft. Add the sausage and ground caraway seed. Cook over medium heat, breaking up the sausage with the side of a spoon, until the sausage is well done. Remove from the heat and cool slightly.

3. Place the mushroom caps stem side up on an ungreased cookie sheet. Fill the hollow created by removing the stems with enough of the sausage mixture to create a small mound.

4. Melt the remaining 2 tbsp. of butter and drizzle evenly over the mushrooms and filling. Place a thin slice of Muenster cheese big enough to fully cover the filling on top of each mushroom.

5. Place the cookie sheet in the oven, and cook the mushroom for 5 to 7 minutes, or until the cheese has fully melted. Remove from the oven and let cool for 2 minutes before serving. If Attila happens to be at your party, don’t let him eat all the stuffed mushrooms himself.
Newspaper Soup

This is my grandmother Cuca’s infamous recipe. I remember eating it nearly every day in Cuba, although my mother claims I refused it on many occasions. There is an interesting chemistry at work here: The water from the pumpkin thins the soup out while the starch from the malanga thickens it up in the second cooking. This vegetarian soup is certainly healthy, but it’s also quite tasty. The sunny color and hearty warmth make it perfect for lunch on a chilly day, but this comforting cure-all works its magic any time of year.

Makes 1 big pot of soup, 8 to 10 servings.

3 celery stalks
4 carrots, peeled
1 Spanish onion, peeled
1 green pepper, stem and seeds removed
2 pounds malanga*
3 to 4 pounds calabasa pumpkin**
2/3 cup olive oil
4 garlic cloves, peeled and smashed
½ cup Goya tomato sauce (from one 8-ounce can)
¼ gram of saffron (about 1 big pinch)
8 cups water
Up to 2 tablespoons salt
Up to ½ teaspoon ground black pepper

* Malanga is a starchy root vegetable with white flesh and a thick brown skin, related to the taro root. It can be found in most Latin supermarkets’ produce sections, although it is sometimes called yautia.

** Calabasa pumpkin is round, greenish-skinned tropical pumpkin. Its orange flesh is sweeter and faster cooking than a traditional pumpkin. They are very big, so they are usually sold in smaller pieces. Should you not find calabasas, butternut squash makes a fine substitute.

1. Prepare the vegetables: Cut the celery stalks into 1-inch pieces. Cut the carrots into 1-inch chunks. Slice the onion in half, then cut each half into chunks about 1-inch square. Slice the green pepper in half, then cut each half into chunks about 1-inch square. Peel each malanga with a vegetable peeler, then slice in half. Cut crosswise into chunks about 1-inch thick. Peel the tough skin from the calabasa pumpkin by slicing close to the flesh with a sharp knife. Remove any seeds with a spoon and cut the pumpkin into chunks about 1-inch square.

2. In an 8 quart soup pot, heat the olive oil over medium-high heat until hot but not smoking. Sauté the celery, carrots, onion, and green pepper, stirring occasionally until softened and lightly browned, 10 minutes.
3. Add the *malanga*, pumpkin, garlic, tomato sauce, saffron, and water. Season with 1 tablespoon of the salt. Bring to a boil. Cover and reduce the heat to medium. Cook at a gentle boil until soft enough to puree, about 1 hour. Turn off the heat and cool slightly, 15 minutes.

4. Puree the soup using an immersion blender. If you don’t have an immersion blender, puree in batches using a standing blender. Note: Make sure you don’t overfill the blender, and that the lid is slightly ajar so any steam can escape, otherwise you’ll end up with a hot mess all over the place.

5. Return the puree to the stove. Bring to boil over medium heat and simmer, covered, for 30 minutes, stirring occasionally. Taste and adjust the seasoning using no more than 1 tablespoon salt and 1/2 teaspoon black pepper. The salt needed will depend on how starchy the vegetables are, as well as personal preference. Serve with bread and butter, or a garnish of croutons, chopped ham, and sliced hard-boiled eggs.
Cinnamon-Dusted Sweet Potato Fries

Preparation time: 10 minutes
Inactive Preparation Time: At least 1 hour, or overnight
Cooking Time: 30 minutes
Serves 8 to 10

4 large sweet potatoes (about 4 pounds), peeled
Coarse sea salt
Organic, unrefined coconut cooking oil, for frying
3 tablespoons ground cinnamon

1. Cut the sweet potatoes into slices about 1 inch thick, then cut them lengthwise into the shape of slim fries.

2. In a large bowl, combine the sweet potatoes with 1 teaspoon salt and enough cold water to cover by a few inches. Cover and refrigerate for at least 1 hour, or overnight.

3. Thoroughly drain the sweet potatoes in a colander. Pat them well with paper towels until completely dry.

5. Heat the coconut oil in a large saucepan or deep-fryer over medium-high heat until it reaches a temperature of 325 degrees F, 6 to 8 minutes. Fry the potatoes, in batches, until lightly browned. Remove the fries from the oil with a slotted spoon or spider and place on a paper towel-lined plate. Increase the heat to high until it reaches 375 degrees F, then add the par-fried potatoes, in batches, back into the oil and fry until crisp, 2 to 4 minutes. Again, remove the fries from the oil with a slotted spoon or spider and place on a paper towel-lined plate. Dust with cinnamon and serve immediately.
Looking for a way to up your wine IQ in just a few sips? Courtney Cochran’s Hip Tastes is the only guide you’ll need.

Wine and Food Pairing

Quick Reference

Without belaboring the technical facts too much, I think it’s important to kick off any lesson in wine and food pairing with some fundamental guidelines that’ll help you avoid mistakes and make the most of the experience. Here are a few key rules that’ll help you make sound decisions every time you pair wine with food:

- Wines with high acidity (crisp whites and light reds) are the best all-around food wines.
- High-acid foods (for example, a salad with a citrusy vinaigrette) call for high-acid wines.
- High-tannin wines (big reds) are among the toughest to pair with food.
- Sweet foods always call for sweet wines.
- Heavy foods generally need similarly heavy, full-bodies wines.
- Heavy dishes also high in fat can work terrifically with light, sweet wines.

Starters

The beginning of any meal almost invariably involves foods containing lots of salt (think nuts, cheese, chips, and pastry-based starters like miniquiches). Because salt amplifies our perception of tannin in wine, your best bets here are crisp whites and low-tannin reds. The brisk acidity in good starter wines plays the same role as salt—both serve to make your mouth water, something that puts you in the perfect state to enjoy the rest of your meal.

Starter Wines. When getting started, reach for a Loire Valley Sauvignon Blanc or a superlight and crisply acidic Muscadet from the same region, an Alsatian Riesling, a trocken (“dry”) Riesling from Germany, a refreshing Italian white like Vermentino or Verdicchio, or a Spanish Albarino. Low-tannin reds, including food-friendly Pinot Noir, Barbera, Cabernet Franc, and Gamay are also good bets if going red is a must.

Quick Note on Substance and Body. Save the big guns—full bodied or complex wines—for later in the meal, opting instead for more simple, straightforward wines with your starters. Just as you wouldn’t devour a rich ossobuco concoction before a delicate seafood risotto, you’re best off starting things with the lightest wines and working your way up through the weight spectrum as your meal progresses. Besides, as with a good plot line in a movie, you want to build up to the climax rather than start with it!
Salads

Inherently difficult with wine, salads present a unique challenge to diners. Green—and pretty much all vegetables, for that matter—tend to make wines taste metallic, especially reds. In nine meals out of ten I’d stick to white wine when it comes to anything of the vegetable persuasion. Among whites, the best wines for salads and veggies are those with crisp acidity and—ideally—a hint of greenness to them. If the salad has nuts, like pine nuts or pecans, feel free to step up your wine selection to a white with a little more body, like Pinot Gris.

Salad Wines. Portuguese Vinho Verde (“green wine”) is a great and easy-to-remember choice for salads as is Austrian Grüner Veltliner, which has a peppery flavor that works terrifically with the bitterness found in greens. Sauvignon Blanc—especially from New Zealand—is a nobrainer here as well, with its grassy and vegetal notes (in fact, it’s often described as tasting of asparagus and green peas!).

Fish

There are many fish in the sea, as the popular saying goes, and as you might imagine, there’s a correspondingly numerous collection of fish dishes to go along with all of these swimmers. This has as much to do with what kind of fish you’ve got on your plate (e.g. shellfish versus sea bass) as with how it’s prepared: Even the most neutral fish butter reduction sauce, a piquant chile lime glaze, or whatever other sauce de jour a chef can cook up. Frying, another popular avenue for fish preparation, also calls for unique pairings. No matter what, if your fish is packing some serious influence thanks to its cooking method or sauce, you’ll need to consider that as well as the kind of fish when pairing it with wine.

Fish Wines. Fried fish, with its richness and oily texture, calls for a white wine with some sweetness (to counteract the richness) and high acidity (to cut through the fat); my favorites are German Rieslings of the Kabinett level as well as off-dry sparkling wines. Demi-sec Vouvray (Chenin Blanc) from the Loire Valley in France is another great choice, since Chenin packs some serious acid alongside its sweetness.

Simply prepared shellfish and most varieties of white fish work well with light-to medium-bodied whites of a not too assertive nature, so skip the New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc and reach instead of its more mellow French counterparts, Sancerre and Pouilly-Fumé. Crisp Chardonnays (generally speaking, those from the Old World and cooler new World locales) work here as well. For the richest fish, like lobster and scallops, feel free to step it up to full-bodied whites like new World Chardonnay, Viognier, and anything from Alsace.

Pasta

Like many a fish dish, pasta concoctions run the gamut of styles, weights, and flavors. This is because pasta, a somewhat neutral substance on its own, takes on the inherent nature of whatever sauce is put on it and runs with it. Simple pasta dishes prepared with little more than olive oil and dash of freshly shaved parmesan are the most neutrally flavored, while heartier renderings made with rich meats and stewlike sauces tip the scales in the other direction.
Beef and Game

Finally, the “big stuff”! These hearty dishes are the climax of the evening and what you’ve been building up to over your earlier courses. It makes sense, then, to serve a suitably climactic wine. But it bears noting that not all meats are made the same: Although everything in this category is rather rich, some—such as lighter meats, quail, and chicken—are a significant step down in strength from their most meaty peers, which include bug game like boar, moose, elk, and venison. And, as with everything else that graces the table, you need to take the dish’s cooking method into account here as well.

Generally, roasted meats are the most succulent and wine-friendly of the beef and game bunch. Slow cooking allows these meats to show their rich and savory flavors to best advantage while maintaining a delicacy of flavor ideally suited to wine. These meats work beautifully with classy reds with some age to them, as the delicate flavors of the meat won’t mask the complexity these beauties have developed over time.

Beef and Game Wines. Roast lamb is a classic match to old Bordeaux (for a hip substitute try an older Napa Cab or Italian Super-Tuscan), and roast quail is a gorgeous pairing with top pinot Noir, such as aged red Burgundy. Merlot works beautifully with a delicate filet mignon. And anything grilled or of a seriously concentrated nature (think about the big game items here) calls for a younger, more concentrated red. This is the time to pull out the big guns—Aussie Shiraz, young Bordeaux reds, Argentinian Malbec, Chilean Carmenere, California Zinfandel, hearty reds from the south of France...you get the idea. The bigger the better!

Dessert

As you know after reading chapter 5, there are lots of sweet wines out there to choose from. For the most concentrated sweet desserts, such as flourless chocolate cake and ice cream, you’ll want to reach for the most powerful dessert wines, including but certainly not limited to port and Muscats from Australia and France. Desserts of moderate sweetness and intensity, such as crême brûlée, call for a similarly medium-bodied sticky; Sauternes and ice wine work great here. The lightest sweet things, which include pastry-and fruit-based desserts, partner terrifically with the lightest sweet wines; my favorite, Moscato d’Asti, is a dynamite choice, although sweet German Riesling (especially Spätlese) also works swimmingly.
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