



When food means something special . . .

Short Order #15 . . . The End of Summer, Almost Fall

Some of you may recall a series of posts we published back in 2020 through 2021, during the time we were all sequestered due to the pandemic. A time we want to put behind us, but certainly not lose sight of lessons learned.

Those posts were titled Short Order, of which there were 14 in total.

Essentially, they featured quick, easy-to-prepare-and-assemble recipes, using ingredients mainly on hand, and emphasizing recently harvested or sourced.

Those recipes would then serve as examples of dishes that could either be served alone or included as part of a larger meal being served.

Many of the recipes featured in the Short Order posts could be served to start off a meal. I believe that every meal should have a great *beginning*. Those *beginnings*, when family and friends gather round the table, should be something small, intensely flavorful, and delicious. Some of those *beginnings* are presented as a way to introduce what follows. Flavors intense but in harmony . . . Each bite should make you want to take the next!

In that spirit and with this post, Short Order #15, I am sharing several dishes using four ingredients that are generally harvested or sourced at the close of the Summer season, moving into Fall.

The ingredients—beets, figs, grapes, and olives—will be prepared so that they can then be made into one of those small, intensely flavored “beginnings” noted above, and provide a bridge to the main meal which follows.

One final point of introduction which should please all you cheese lovers, is that all of the recipes featured in this post will pair beautifully with many of your favorite cheese varieties.

For example, I have learned that Fontina, Gorgonzola, most any goat, sheep, or mixed milk triple cream cheese variety, that wonderful Smoky Blue produced by

““ Those *beginnings*, when family and friends gather round the table, should be something small, intensely flavorful, and delicious. ””

Oregon's Rogue Creamery, and Taleggio all work quite well—but I'll leave that for you to choose.

So let's get to work. Here is how I put all of these ingredients and recipes together.

Short Order #15

BEETS

Generally speaking, beets are a cool weather crop, gathered in the late Summer into Fall. They become even sweeter when exposed to a first frost.

They are not eaten very often in our home, although there is one recipe I have been preparing since I discovered it back in 1998.

Jean-Georges Vongerichten, chef, mega-restaurateur, cookbook author, and well-regarded culinary influencer, included a recipe for Beet Tartare in his first cookbook offering: *Jean-Georges Cooking at Home with a Four-Star Chef*.

I was intrigued by the recipe since at that time my only experience with a tartare preparation was based on using lean beef filet, raw bluefin, or ahi tuna. An all-vegetable tartare was a "why not" for me, so I have been making and refining the recipe for the past 27 years. The result follows.

First the main ingredient preparation. With Vongerichten's approach the beets are either roasted or boiled. Initially I explored both methods but in the end I was looking for more depth of flavor.

I chose to poach the beets in a brine made of red wine and other components, which yielded an aromatic, tangy, and a lightly sweet pickled beet, which I then assembled into the tartare I still serve today.

Wine-Poached Beets

Ingredients

5 medium beets

2 cups robust red wine or more as needed (many options)

3/4 cup red wine vinegar

1/2 cup fresh orange juice

1/4 cup sugar

4 whole allspice berries, lightly crushed

1 whole clove, lightly crushed

1 teaspoon sea salt

Method

In a large stockpot add the beets whole, unpeeled, with stems/leaves removed. Cover the beets with the wine, add the remaining ingredients, and bring the pot to a boil, allowing the sugar to dissolve. Lower the temperature and simmer the beets for 30 minutes or until tender enough when pierced through with the point of a paring knife.

Drain the beets and allow them to cool, while saving 1/4 cup of the poaching liquid.

Once cool enough to handle, peel the beets while wearing rubber gloves so as not to stain your hands.

Cut the beets into bite-size pieces and set aside for the assembly of the tartare. The recipe follows.

Wine-Poached Beet Tartare

Ingredients

- 1 batch of the wine-poached beets
- 2 garlic cloves, finely minced
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- 1 tablespoon mayonnaise
- 1 to 2 tablespoons of the poaching liquid
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- 1 teaspoon of a Louisiana-style hot sauce, or to your taste
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped parsley and mint
- 1/4 cup finely chopped capers and cornichons
- Salt and pepper to your taste

Method

Place the cut beets into the work bowl of a food processor.

Pulse several times, and use a rubber spatula to scrape down the sides as needed. Continue to pulse until a small, textured consistency is reached. Do not puree the beets.

Scrape down the sides of the work bowl again and add all the remaining ingredients.

Continue to pulse until all of the ingredients are thoroughly combined. Taste and adjust the seasoning if required.



Tartare assembled

Place the tartare in a serving bowl, and top with finely minced scallion greens.



Tartare assembled

Serve the tartare alongside one or more of the cheeses mentioned in the introduction, accompanied by toasted bread or baguette slices, and/or your favorite crackers.



Tartare crostini with soft cheese



GRAPES

Regionally speaking, grapes are harvested from August through October. Primarily for wine production, as well as for eating, either as fresh fruit or dried, as with raisins, for example. With the recipe to follow, we will be working with fresh grapes.

The recipe came to mind after I ate fresh grapes roasted with Italian sausage.

Roasted grapes react in a similar manner as do cherry tomatoes when roasted. They blister and char, and while some burst, others shrivel. Their personality and sweetness are intensified, making them an ideal component to pair with cheese and cured meat preceding the meal's main course. Or, another tasty way to enjoy the roasted grapes is layered atop a crostini spread with freshly whipped ricotta crema.

The following is my take on roasting grapes in a savory manner which I then served atop a crostini covered with a ricotta crema flavored with fresh thyme and a drizzle of honey.

Oven-Roasted Grapes

Ingredients

1 to 1-1/2 pounds of large, seedless grapes, single variety or a mix

2 tablespoons olive oil

1-1/2 tablespoons sherry or balsamic vinegar or a red wine of choice

2 to 3 sprigs of fresh thyme

1 sprig fresh rosemary

A pinch of salt and pepper to your taste

Method

Preheat the oven to 425 degrees.

Line a sheet pan with parchment or foil.

Wash and then remove the grapes from their stems.

In a large glass or stainless work bowl place the grapes with the oil, vinegar or wine, fresh herbs, and the seasoning, gently folding and mixing with your hands to coat and thoroughly combine.

Place the sheet pan in the preheated oven and roast for 20 to 25 minutes until the grapes begin to blister, char, shrivel, with some bursting.



Grapes ready for roasting



Roasted grapes

Remove the pan from the oven and allow to cool briefly. Place on a serving platter along with a couple of cheeses and slices of prosciutto or another cured meat to accompany.



Grape crostini atop ricotta crema

OLIVES

Keeping regional considerations in mind, primarily the nations that border the Mediterranean rim, and domestically in California, olives are harvested during the months of September and October, with some varieties as late as January. Green, mainly for olive oil production, while others for curing or brining and eating.

With this recipe I will initially introduce an olive preparation using cured black olives cultivated in Morocco.



Bowl of oil-cured olives

This olive preparation can easily be served on its own as a component of an antipasti, however I will show how the olives paired with figs, can be repurposed to assemble the last of the featured “beginnings” recipes.

Aromatic-Cured Black Olives . . . A Variation

Ingredients

2 cups black dry-cured olives, not pitted

Finely grated zest of 1 orange

1/2 teaspoon brown sugar

1/2 teaspoon dried oregano, preferably Sicilian

Generous pinch of red chili flakes, or to your taste

1/4 cup olive oil

Method

In a glass or stainless work bowl thoroughly combine all the ingredients until the olives are evenly coated.



Olives topped with seasoning mix

Allow the olive mix to macerate at room temperature for 1 hour before serving.

Note: This olive mixture benefits from being served warm since warming further punctuates all of the flavors.

Moving to our final recipe offering, figs will play a co-star role to the olives we just prepared. Figs are another of those ingredients that make an appearance in late Summer through the early Fall season.

Either fresh figs, or rehydrated dried figs can be used, although I prefer using the dried figs in this preparation because I like the intensity of the figs' sweetness and the final texture of the dish. Your call!

The dish we are sharing here is a fig and olive tapenade, which somehow always finds a way to our table whenever we are hosting a meal with family and friends. It has become a pantry staple.

Just a quick note about tapenade. For those of you who appreciate the foods of Provence, you know that a classic tapenade is a robust, briny, salty, spreadable mixture with olives as the main ingredient. It is most often served as an aperitif on toasted or grilled bread as a way to enliven the palate in anticipation of the meal to follow.

While logging some hours in my kitchen as I often do, I discovered the combined taste of figs and cured olives to be quite appealing to me, and fashioned what became my version of a fig and olive tapenade, modeled on the classic spread served in Provence. Over the years, substituting ingredients every so often, the following recipe is my evolved version.

Fig and Olive Tapenade

Ingredients (yields about 2 cups, can be scaled up easily)

1/4 pound dried figs, rehydrated in warm water (or wine), chopped

1 cup of the cured black olives from recipe above, pitted

1 large garlic clove, finely minced

1 sprig fresh rosemary + 2 to 3 sprigs fresh thyme + 2 to 3 sprigs of fresh parsley, all finely minced together

1 to 2 tablespoons aged balsamic vinegar, or to your taste

Olive oil as needed

Method

Prepare all of the ingredients as noted above. It is important to make certain that all the olives are pitted.

Place all the ingredients into the work bowl of a food processor, except the olive oil, and first pulse several times to bring the ingredients together. Using a rubber spatula, scrape down the sides of the work bowl as needed.

Run the processor on the slowest speed, and gradually increase the speed while slowly adding olive oil through the feed tube until a thick, textured, spreadable mixture is achieved. Taste and adjust the flavor to your liking.



Fig and olive tapenade mise en place

This tapenade is best served at room temperature, and makes a great partner for any one of the cheeses I mentioned in the opening of this post.



Fig and olive tapenade crostini atop Gorgonzola with prosciutto

Stored in the refrigerator in a glass jar topped with a film of olive oil, this tapenade recipe will keep almost indefinitely. It freezes beautifully in small batches as well.

Well I'm hopeful that in Short Order, I have given you some ideas about how you might want to approach ways to begin your next gathering round your table.

Let's get started, the Fall season has begun and there are some good meals ahead.

Happy cooking.



Eat well • Drink well • Be well

To know how to eat is to know enough . . .