



When food means something special . . .

A Covered-Dish Supper Reimagined

Over the years, for those of you who have gotten to know me well, you may have noticed that whenever possible, I appreciate order and balance with most things in my life. I attempt to dot as many I's, and cross as many T's as make sense.

Getting the facts straight, and the details correct, have been important to me.

That is true with my approach to cooking:

- Begin with a mise en place.
- Read the ingredients list and the recipe instructions completely before beginning to prepare a dish or assemble a meal.
- Taste your work throughout the cooking process and before the dish is plated to make sure the flavor meets your expectations and the seasoning is just right.
- Keep in mind there is the right kitchen tool or appliance for every job as you will discover if you have been cooking for as many years as I have, and in some cases grandma's old-school methods may still be the best approach.

And finally, if you make a dish often enough following a recipe you discovered along your culinary journey, then at some point consider that dish your own. There is nothing complicated here, just a commonsense perspective for those who love to cook.

That brings us back to my approach to getting the facts straight and the details right.

For those of you who have been to our home, one of the first things you see on the wall in the entryway is a large contemporary painting of the silhouette of a crouching woman all done in white over a solid black background.

Now you might be thinking to yourself, what does that painting have to do with cooking perspectives on a culinary-focused blog post? Well, my effort to recount the facts and details about how I came to purchase the painting has led to the recipes and dishes I am sharing with you in this post.

First the back story.

I discovered the painting while reading an article that was featured in an issue of *Food & Wine* magazine back in 2007. The painting itself wasn't important to the theme of the article, but nonetheless it appealed to me and I was curious to learn if the painting was available and, if so, would the artist be open to selling it.

I was unable to initially connect with the artist. However, at that time *Food & Wine* magazine was owned by the publishing division of American Express. Having an AMEX account since the early '70s, I called their customer service department to engage *Food & Wine* and see what they could come up with. As it turned out, AMEX was able to provide me with the contact information for the artist and his studio in Alabama, to which I placed a call, leaving a message about my interest in the painting. About a week later he called me back, confirming that the painting was in fact unsold. We then proceeded to arrange for me to receive the painting and work out the details of the sale. That painting has been in our home since 2007.

Switching back to the article in that issue of *Food & Wine* magazine, the story featured four creative couples who gathered once a month to share a collaborative home-cooked meal. The menu for that gathering was detailed in the article, including recipes for each dish served. The image below is a link to a digital version of the article so that you can learn what was prepared and how it was served. You will also see the photo of said painting on the opening page of the article that piqued my interest in the first place.



Meanwhile, since my style of cooking leans solidly toward Italian and Mediterranean preparations and couldn't be more different than the traditional Southern-style dishes presented in the article, I thought with this post it might be fun to list each dish that was prepared at that gathering and then offer an alternative dish in the manner I would prepare it today.

Some of my alternatives have already been published on this blog, so for those, I am including the title as a link to the previous post in red.

All the other recipes will be new interpretations complete with ingredient listings and preparation instructions.

So let's get started on this culinary journey beginning with dishes featuring the traditional Southern-style recipes and then how I reinterpret them.

The Southern Potluck menu was as follows:

Starters

Pimento Cheese
Cheddar-and-Cayenne Crackers
Spiced Pecans

Mains

Supercrispy Pan-Fried Chicken
Slow-Roasted Pork
Broccoli and Wild Mushroom Casserole
Sweet Potato Casserole
Cheesy Grits Casserole
Buttery Buttermilk Biscuits

Desserts

Pecan Sandies
Lane Cake
Lemon Chess Pie

My interpretations and recipe offerings are as follows:

Starters

For the Pimento Cheese I substituted Nduja Cheese—which can be found in the post [Nduja Cheese, a Nod to the South—Southern Italy, That Is!](#)

For the Crackers I substituted Fontina and Peperoncino Crackers; a recipe follows.

For the Spiced Pecans I substituted Spiced California Red Walnuts. The walnuts were featured in the post [The Color Red](#), while the spice I often use to flavor them can be found by scrolling through the post, [Making a Cameo Appearance](#) for the Spiced Salt Mix recipe.

Mains

For the Supercrispy Pan-Fried Chicken I substituted “Stretch’s” Savory Chicken (Belmont Tavern) featured in the post [Local Favorite—“If I tell you, then we’d have to kill you . . .”](#)

For the Slow-Roasted Pork I substituted the Mini-Porchetta Roast which can be found by scrolling through the post [Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner #3—You!](#)

For the Broccoli and Wild Mushroom Casserole I substituted a Cold Broccoli Rabe salad; a recipe follows.

For the Sweet Potato Casserole I substituted Oregano Potatoes Sicilian-style; a recipe follows.

For the Cheesy Grits Casserole I substituted a Mixed Mushroom Stew or Ragout which could be served over Polenta di Riso or Corn Polenta. The mushroom stew recipe can be found by scrolling through the post [Easy as A - B - C . . . and a Little Savory!](#)

For the Buttery Buttermilk Biscuits I substituted Garlic Bread a Modo Mio which can be found by scrolling through the post [Stop and Smell the Garlic](#), which also features the Garlic Jam recipe that you will need for the bread.

Desserts

For the Pecan Sandies I substituted Mixed Spiced Nut Biscotti which can be found in the post [Biscotti—A Perspective](#), which features my master recipe to which you add the mixed spiced nuts by again referencing the post [Making a Cameo Appearance](#) for both the spice salt and the nut mix.

For the Lane Cake I offer an Almond - Polenta - Honey - Orange Cake; a recipe follows.

For the Lemon Chess Pie I offer a Torta di Ricotta al Limone; a recipe follows.

That introduces the original menu presented in the article and what my take on those dishes turned out to be.

What follows are the five new recipes that were not covered by the others previously included in the blog posts listed.

These new recipes were prepared with 2 to 4 diners in mind, although they can be easily scaled up to accommodate more.

Fontina and Peperoncino Crackers

Ingredients (yields 35 to 40 two-inch round crackers)

1-1/2 cups all-purpose flour

1/3 pound of Fontina cheese, grated

1 teaspoon sea salt

1/2 teaspoon peperoncino flakes or to your taste (Calabrian and Aleppo chili mix was used)

6 tablespoons olive oil

1/3 cup water



Mise en place

Method

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees.

In a large stainless or glass bowl, whisk together all the dry ingredients until well combined.

Gather the mix in a circle as though you were making dough for pasta, with a well in the center for the liquids. Pour both the olive oil and the water into the well and using a fork, gently move the dry mix into the liquid until it is thoroughly combined and a dough begins to form.



Well with dry and wet ingredients

Turn out the mix onto a floured board or countertop and knead it forty or fifty times until a smooth ball of dough is achieved. Allow the dough to rest for 15 minutes.

Lightly flour the dough and flatten it using your hands, forming a large disk. Using a floured rolling pin, roll out the dough, making a quarter turn periodically to allow for an even thickness of approximately 1/8-inch.

Using a 2-inch diameter cutter, punch out as many circles from the rolled sheet of dough as possible. Once the first round of cutting is complete, re-roll the dough and complete the steps again until all of the rolled dough is used.



Dough ready for rolling



Cutting out crackers

Place the cut crackers onto a parchment-lined baking sheet and bake for 15 to 17 minutes, repeating the process until all the crackers are baked.

Place the baked crackers on a board or rack to cool, completely allowing them to lightly crisp.



Baked and cooling

If not serving right away, the baked crackers can be stored in a tin for 1 to 2 days, or in an airtight plastic bag which should be refrigerated.

The crackers, if they have been stored, should be warmed at a very low temperature in the oven for a few minutes before serving them.

They can be presented either topped with your choice of a soft cheese, a tapenade, or your favorite dip. A good addition to pre-dinner, one-bite snacking!



Topped with fig and olive tapenade; creamy chèvre and spice; Nduja cheese

Cold Broccoli Rabe Salad

This is a good vegetable side dish to have on hand any time, especially during the warmer months. It is inexpensive and assembles quickly.

While living in my family's home, anytime a cold broccoli salad was served, it was prepared using a large, domed shaped, head of broccoli, sometimes called Calabrese broccoli. I didn't know any other option.

However, many years later it occurred to me, why not prepare a cold broccoli salad variation using broccoli rabe, a vegetable I often sauté with olive oil, garlic, and chili flakes, served warm as a side or even better with pasta.

Once I prepared that first cold salad variation, I've never looked back. Here is how I get that done.

Ingredients

1 to 2 brunches of broccoli rabe

2 or 3 garlic cloves

Olive oil, fresh squeezed lemon juice, chili flakes, salt and pepper



Mise en place

Method

Separate and thoroughly wash the broccoli rabe. Cut or break off the tough or damaged ends of each stalk. Separate any loose leaves, and remove most all of the larger leaves from each stalk. These will be set aside for another use, while the remaining florets and tender stalks are used for the salad.

In a saucepan of mildly salted water, poach the florets until the stalks are tender to your liking, not al dente but just fork tender.

Drain the broccoli rabe and allow the florets to dry as much as possible.

Arrange the poached broccoli rabe on a serving platter.

Using a rasp, shave the garlic over and around the broccoli, or alternately, finely mince the garlic and sprinkle it over the arranged platter.

Place the serving platter in the refrigerator to chill for a couple of hours.



Assembled and ready to chill

When ready to serve, simply dress the salad with olive oil and fresh lemon juice, while seasoning with salt, pepper, and chili flakes to your taste. Don't dress the salad until just before serving as the lemon juice has a tendency to "cook" or unpleasantly darken the broccoli rabe.

Serve directly from the platter at the table.



Ready for the table

Oregano Potatoes Sicilian-Style

This is another inexpensive and easy-to-prepare vegetable side which pairs well with roasted or grilled main dishes.

Ingredients

2 to 3 small potatoes per person (unpeeled yellow flesh potatoes were used in this dish)

2 or 3 whole garlic cloves (crushed)

1 tablespoon dried oregano (Sicilian oregano was used, naturally!)

Olive oil

Salt and pepper



Mise en place

Method

Thoroughly wash the potatoes, remove any bruised or dark areas, and do not peel.

Cut the potatoes into smaller bite-size pieces as this will allow them to cook in less time.

Cook the potatoes in a large stockpot of salted water until they are fork tender.

Heat 3 or 4 tablespoons of olive oil in a large skillet over medium-high temperature.

Add the crushed garlic and allow it to just begin to color which will flavor the oil.

Remove the garlic and add the potatoes to the pan.

Sprinkle with the oregano and season with salt and pepper to your liking.

Shake the skillet occasionally to move the potatoes around so as not to burn them.

Cook for approximately 15 minutes until the potatoes are golden brown and the skin is lightly crisp. Serve them straightaway.



Sizzling in the pan



Ready for the table

The two desserts featured in the magazine article are both Southern classics, with the Lane Cake noted as being an Alabama specialty.

My approach was not to reinvent these desserts, because quite frankly I couldn't and I thought it would be a disservice to those classics.

Instead I prepared two desserts that would pair with the dishes I was featuring in this post in a similar manner as the two Southern classics complemented their covered-dish menu. Here is how I put them together.

Almond - Polenta - Honey - Orange Cake

Ingredients

For the Cake:

Dry

2 cups almond flour

1/2 cup fine cornmeal polenta

1 teaspoon baking powder

Pinch of sea salt

Wet

3 eggs

2/3 cup honey, many options

3/4 cup olive oil

Zest and juice of 1 large orange



Dry ingredients



Wet ingredients

Glaze

1/3 cup orange juice

1/4 cup honey, many options

Method

Preheat the oven to 325 degrees.

Lightly olive oil an 8-inch springform pan, line the bottom with a round of parchment paper, lightly oil the paper, dust the oiled pan with confectioner sugar, tapping out any excess. Set the pan aside.

In separate stainless or glass bowls, whisk the dry ingredients until completely combined, then vigorously whisk together the wet ingredients. Fold the dry ingredients into the wet ingredients using a rubber spatula until a batter is formed.

Turn out the batter into the prepared pan and place in the oven, baking for 40 minutes until set when tested with a toothpick. If additional time is needed in the oven, tent the cake with foil to avoid burning.



Batter ready for oven

While the cake is baking, place the glaze ingredients in a small saucepan over medium temperature. Simmer for 3 to 4 minutes, stirring until the glaze slightly thickens.

Remove the cake from the oven and allow it to cool enough to handle. Remove the cake from the baking pan, turn it over using two plates so that the parchment can be removed from the bottom, then turn it over again and place it on a serving plate.



Baked

Spoon the glaze over and around the cake, allowing it to flow over the sides and be absorbed as the cake completely cools. Slice and serve this cake at room temperature. Slices of this cake, with its caramel top and moist golden crumb interior, can be garnished with whipped cream, an orange marmalade, or simply served plain.



Served with Sicilian orange marmalade

Torta Di Ricotta Al Limone (Lemon Ricotta Cake)

Ingredients

Dry

1-1/2 cups all purpose flour

1/2 teaspoon baking soda

Pinch of fine sea salt



Wet ingredients



Dry ingredients

Wet

15 ounces whole milk ricotta

3 eggs

3/4 cups of butter, softened (1-1/2 sticks)

1-1/2 cups sugar

1 teaspoon vanilla

Zest and juice of 1 large lemon

Confectioner sugar for garnish

A mixed berry and rhubarb compote was served as an accompaniment. Alternately blueberries and orange slices could be used (both of these are optional).

Method

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Generously butter a 9-inch springform pan and dust the pan with confectioner sugar, tapping out the excess.

In separate stainless or glass bowls, whisk together the dry ingredients until thoroughly combined, and vigorously whisk together the wet ingredients.

Fold the dry ingredients into the wet ingredients using a rubber spatula, until a batter is formed.

Turn out the batter into the prepared pan and place in the oven. Bake for 50 minutes until set when tested with a toothpick.



Batter ready for the oven

Remove the cake from the oven and allow it to cool in the pan for 15 minutes, or cool enough to handle. Remove the cake from the pan and place it on a serving platter. Dust the cake with confectioner sugar and allow it to cool to room temperature before serving.



Baked

Garnish as described or serve simple plain slices. It makes a fine partner to a cup of espresso at the end of a meal or an equally good pairing with your morning coffee.



Served

You now know the back story about how I acquired the large painting watching over the entryway to our home. Additionally, you might consider test driving some of the previously published dishes on the blog site if you haven't already, or try your hand at one or more of the new recipes featured.

I would enjoy hearing about what you did. Whatever you decide to do, please enjoy the ride!

Best . . .

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, looped 'R' followed by a series of smaller, connected loops.

Eat well • Drink well • Be welll

Though eating is one of life's unavoidable necessities, dining has always been one of my greatest pleasures.

The article referenced in this post was published in *Food & Wine* magazine, 2007 Issue. At that time *Food & Wine* magazine was a publication of the American Express Publishing Corporation.

American Express Publishing Corporation stopped doing business as a division of American Express on October 1, 2013, when it sold its lifestyle and luxury magazine portfolio (including Travel + Leisure and *Food & Wine*).

Today, *Food & Wine* magazine is owned and published by People Inc. (formerly known as Dotdash Meredith).