

Fall & Winter Comforts Cookbook



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Introduction:

Hi, Moms & Friends! Welcome to my *Fall & Winter Comforts Cookbook!*

I love to cook, usually. But sometimes I can't be bothered with it. When the beautiful season of autumn arrives, that is when I start to crave warm, tasty comfort foods. Cheesy lasagnas. Hearty stews. Tasty soups. Roasted veggies. *Yum.*

Normally, I strive to put healthy foods on my table. I'm a firm believer in "goodness in; goodness out" – especially in the forms of health, energy and focus. However, I don't mind cheating once in a while. Sometimes, we all just need some old-fashioned *COMFORT*, and my family is no exception. I believe in strengthening families -- and one of the ways I do that is through good food and gathering for meals.

This is a collection of some wonderful and tasty comfort foods – perfect for seeing you and your family through fall and winter.

On my blog, I have taken (or soon will take) some of the recipes one by one, and shown ways that I have lightened them up a bit and made them even a little healthier. Be sure to check it out!

www.healthimomcoaching.com/blog

About the Author:

Coach Leica (aka, *Healthimom*) is a Success & Wellness Coach, Author, and Entrepreneur. She is the founder and CEO of Healthimom Coaching, which offers success coaching for mothers and families. She is a stay-at-home mother of six – committed to helping others enjoy the stay-at-home lifestyle, as well. She is also a *rockstar* entrepreneur, teaching balance in the areas of health, relationships, and finances. She loves natural solutions, organizational systems and great recipes. She's great at helping moms find an extra hour in their day, and extra money in their pockets.

"I didn't invent Motherhood. I just made it better"

~Coach Leica 

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☞ TABLE of CONTENTS ☞

<u>TYPE OF DISH:</u>	<u>PAGE #</u>
Main Courses	4
Soups	17
Salads	24
Side Dishes	29
Appetizers	38
Desserts	44
Breakfasts	51
Beverages	54

☞ MAIN COURSES ☞

Five-Cheese Meaty Lasagna



It's hard to imagine a classic lasagna recipe without lots of luscious cheese. Three of the most common types of cheese found in traditional lasagna recipes are mozzarella, ricotta and Parmesan. This recipe builds on this delicious cheesy foundation with the addition of freshly-grated Asiago and shredded Gruyere.

This recipe is easier to prepare if you have the meat sauce prepared ahead of time. If you don't have time or the inclination to do so, use your favorite prepared pasta sauce instead.

Fortunately, the meat sauce recipe referred to below (my "magic" meat sauce) can be made in large batches that freeze beautifully for future use. For best results in this recipe, pulse 4 cups of the chunky meat sauce in a food processor prior to using.

TIP: The key to keeping lasagna from getting soupy is to make sure your noodles are thoroughly dried before assembling your lasagna.

After preparing noodles according to package instructions, arrange them in a single layer on large cookie sheets sprayed with non-stick cooking spray. Gently pat noodles dry with a paper towel. Turn noodles over and repeat. Allow to air dry until all excess moisture is gone.

Another option is to purchase a lasagna noodle that is “oven ready.” This style of noodle does not need to be pre-cooked, and can be a great timesaver. 😊 It costs a little more, though. ☹️

Ingredients:

4 c. Magic Italian Meat Sauce (separate recipe included below) –or your favorite sauce w/ meat	2 t. kosher salt
12 whole lasagna noodles, cooked according to package instructions (“Oven ready,” if desired)	1 t. black pepper
1 24 oz. container ricotta cheese	1 8 oz. package shredded mozzarella cheese, divided
1 egg, beaten	1 8 oz. package shredded Gruyere cheese, divided
4 T. Italian seasoning, divided	¾ c. Parmesan cheese, freshly grated
½ c. fresh parsley, chopped, plus extra for garnish	¾ c. Asiago cheese, freshly grated

Directions:

Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

In a large glass bowl, combine ricotta cheese, beaten egg, 3 tablespoons Italian seasoning, and fresh parsley. Stir to combine.

Spray a 13 x 9” glass baking dish with non-stick cooking spray. Add enough meat sauce to cover the bottom of the pan and then cover with 3-4 lasagna noodles. Top with an even layer of the ricotta cheese mixture, followed by a layer of shredded mozzarella and Gruyere cheese, using equal amounts of each. Finish with a layer of grated Parmesan and Asiago cheese, also in equal amounts.

Repeat this process two more times: meat, noodles, ricotta mixture, shredded cheeses, and grated cheeses. Sprinkle the remaining Italian seasoning across the final layer.

Loosely tent dish with aluminum foil and bake for 30 minutes. Remove foil and continue baking for another 20-25 minutes. Remove from oven and allow to rest for 20 minutes before serving.

Magic Italian Meat Sauce

This hearty, chunky meat sauce takes a little while to come together, but it is worth the extra effort. This recipe makes a *large* amount of sauce, so be sure to use a 6-quart or larger Dutch oven or pot when making it.



This sauce can be enjoyed immediately after cooking, but it tastes even better a day or two later when the flavors have had a chance to mingle. This recipe also freezes up nicely for later use – that’s what’s so “Magic” about it! You can use it for *so many* other meals. (See “Note” at the end of the recipe.)

Save time by crumbling up the beef and sausage with your fingers prior to browning. This will give you more consistently-sized chunks of meat and is easier than breaking up the meat while browning.

Ingredients:

3 T. olive oil	2 (28 oz) cans tomato puree
2 medium yellow onion, finely chopped	1 (28 oz) can petite-cut tomatoes, undrained
3 cloves garlic, peeled and finely minced	2 (6 oz) cans tomato paste
2 c. white mushrooms, cleaned and roughly chopped	1 T. oregano, dried
2 stalks celery, cleaned and finely chopped	2 t. thyme, dried
1 large carrot, peeled and finely chopped	2 t. rosemary, dried
2 c. dry red cooking wine, divided	2 T. sugar
1 ¼ pound ground beef, 85% lean	3-4" Parmesan rind (optional)
1 pound bulk sweet pork sausage	2 bay leaves
1 pound bulk spicy pork sausage	Salt and pepper, to taste

Directions:

In a large (6-Qt.) Dutch oven, heat olive oil over medium heat. Add onion, garlic and mushrooms to pan and cook until onions become soft and mushrooms begin to release liquids, about 4 or 5 minutes. Add celery, carrots and ½ cup cooking wine and continue cooking for 3-4 minutes.

Add crumbled beef and pork to pot and cook over medium heat until no longer pink inside. Remove from heat and carefully drain excess fat from pan.

Return to burner and add tomato puree, petite-cut tomatoes, tomato paste, and remaining red wine to Dutch oven, along with oregano, thyme, rosemary, and sugar. Stir to combine. Drop in bay leaves and Parmesan rind (if using) and give a quick stir. Cover and simmer on low heat for 3-4 hours, stirring occasionally. (You can also do this in the crock pot.) If sauce is too thick, add a little water; if it's too thin, continue cooking until it reaches the thickness you prefer.

Remove bay leaves and Parmesan rind. Season with salt and pepper, to taste. Serve immediately with your favorite cooked pasta and some cheesy garlic bread. Refrigerate or freeze unused portion within 2 hours. **[NOTE: This makes A LOT, so you will have plenty left over to use in the 5-Cheese Meaty Lasagna recipe (above), or to turn into Spicy Slow Cooker Chili, below. You will use this sauce so often, it's like magic!]**

Spicy Slow Cooker Chili

This slow cooker chili gets a nice boost of flavor by using a combination of spicy and sweet pork sausage, rather than plain ground beef. To turn up the heat even more, use all spicy sausage instead.

Tip #1: Crumble the bulk sausage with your fingers prior to browning. This gives you better control over the size of each piece and is easier than breaking up the chunks of sausage with a

wooden spoon while cooking. Another good alternative is to use a potato masher, if you have one.



Tip #2: You will notice that this chili has many similar ingredients to the Magic Italian Meat Sauce recipe, above. For a fun shortcut -- if you've already made the Sauce, then just take out the amount you need for a meal (depending on how many you are serving) and add the beans, the chili powder and the cumin. Add some beef stock or water, if more liquid is needed, and heat through. *Voilà!* (~ Remember I said that the sauce was "magic?!?")

Ingredients:

1 pound spicy bulk pork sausage, crumbled
1 pound sweet bulk pork sausage, crumbled
½ c. chicken or vegetable stock, plus additional, if needed
4 cloves garlic, finely chopped
1 medium white onion, finely chopped
2 stalks celery, toughed ends removed and chopped into small pieces

2 carrots, peeled and chopped into small pieces
1-2 cans (15 oz.) white beans, drained and rinsed (depending on how well you like beans)
1-2 cans (15.5 oz.) red kidney beans, drained and rinsed (depending on how well you like beans)
2 cans (28 oz.) tomato puree

1 can (6 oz.) tomato paste
1 can (28 oz.) petite-cut tomatoes,
undrained
3 T. chili powder
1 T. ground cumin

2 t. oregano, dried
1 t. cayenne pepper
1 c. beef stock or water, if needed
Salt, to taste

Garnishes (optional – use the ones you like)

8 oz. shredded cheddar cheese	Chopped avocado	Crumbled tortilla chips
¾ c. chopped red onion	Minced cilantro	
2 fresh jalapeno peppers, sliced	Dollop of sour cream	

Directions:

In a large skillet, brown pork sausage over medium heat until no longer pink. Remove from heat and drain excess fat from pan. Transfer browned sausage to slow cooker.

Return skillet to burner over medium-high heat. Deglaze pan with chicken or vegetable stock, scraping up browned bits from bottom of pan with a wooden spoon.

Add olive oil, garlic, and onion to pan and cook, stirring frequently, about 3-4 minutes or until softened. Add celery and carrot and continue cooking another 2-3 minutes. Remove from heat and pour skillet contents into slow cooker.

Add white beans, red beans, tomato puree, tomato paste, petite-cut tomatoes, chili powder, cumin, oregano, and cayenne pepper to slow cooker. Stir to combine all ingredients thoroughly. If desired, add water or beef stock to thin mixture before cooking.

Cook on high for 4 hours, or low for 8 hours. When finished, stir and add salt to taste. Adjust other seasonings, as desired.

Spoon into bowls and top with shredded cheese, chopped onions, sliced jalapeno peppers and any other toppings you choose. Serve immediately.

Freeze or refrigerate leftovers within 2 hours.

One-Skillet Lemon Chicken Orzo



This dish is perfect for those busy weeknights when you want something quick and satisfying that won't dirty every dish in your kitchen. This recipe pairs bone-in chicken thighs with lemony orzo for a hearty meal you can have on the table in just over half an hour.

For this recipe, the chicken thighs are cooked with skin on to impart extra flavor, but removed for serving to save a few calories. 😊

Ingredients:

4 bone-in chicken thighs
Salt and pepper, to taste
3 T. olive oil
3 cloves garlic, peeled and chopped
1 c. orzo pasta
3 c. chicken broth

1 T. lemon zest
½ organic lemon, thinly sliced and seeds removed
½ c. fresh parsley, chopped, plus some whole sprigs for garnish
Freshly-grated Parmesan cheese, to serve

Directions:

Pat chicken thighs with a paper towel to remove excess moisture, then season with salt and pepper.

In a large skillet with deep sides, heat olive oil and garlic over medium-high heat. When garlic turns brown, remove chunks from pan and discard.

Place chicken, skin side down, in the heated pan and cook for approximately 4 to 5 minutes, or until nicely browned. Turn and repeat on the other side. Cook for an additional 5 minutes. Remove the chicken from the pan and keep warm.

Pour off excess fat in pan, while reserving approximately 2 tablespoons. Reduce heat to medium and add the orzo to pan. Stir until orzo is coated and slightly toasted. Add chicken broth to skillet and stir to scrape up browned bits from bottom of pan.

Increase heat to medium-high and bring broth to a boil, then reduce heat to low. Return chicken thighs to skillet along with lemon zest and slices. Simmer, covered, for approximately 10 minutes or until the orzo is tender. Keep an eye on it during this time to make sure there is enough liquid in skillet to keep orzo from sticking to the bottom. Stir occasionally.

Uncover and continue simmering until most of the excess liquid has been absorbed, approximately 2-3 minutes. Stir in chopped parsley and season with additional salt and pepper, if desired.

Serve immediately with freshly-grated Parmesan cheese, if desired.

Seared Sesame Tuna with Mixed Greens

Mixed salad greens don't *love* the extreme heat of summer. Instead, they thrive in the cooler temperatures of spring and fall. Fortunately, they are extremely easy to grow from seed in your own garden and they are readily available at local markets this time of year.

This healthy salad makes the most of this late (or early) season bounty by pairing these tasty greens with a hearty portion of seared sesame tuna steaks. This salad is substantial enough to serve as a light main dish or it can be paired with blackened broccoli or a seasonal soup for a more substantial meal.



Ingredients:

Asian Dressing:

2 T. sesame oil
¼ c. grapeseed oil
2 T. soy sauce
3 T. Rice wine vinegar
1 T. fresh lime juice

1½ T. Dijon mustard
1 medium shallot, finely minced
1 T. fresh ginger, very finely minced
Salt and pepper, to taste

Seared Tuna:

2 8-oz. 2" thick tuna steaks, cut into 2" cubes
2 T. black sesame seeds
2 T. white sesame seeds

2 T. ground ginger
3 T. olive oil
Salt and pepper to taste

Serve with:

Soy sauce
Wasabi paste (optional)

4 cups mixed salad greens

Directions:

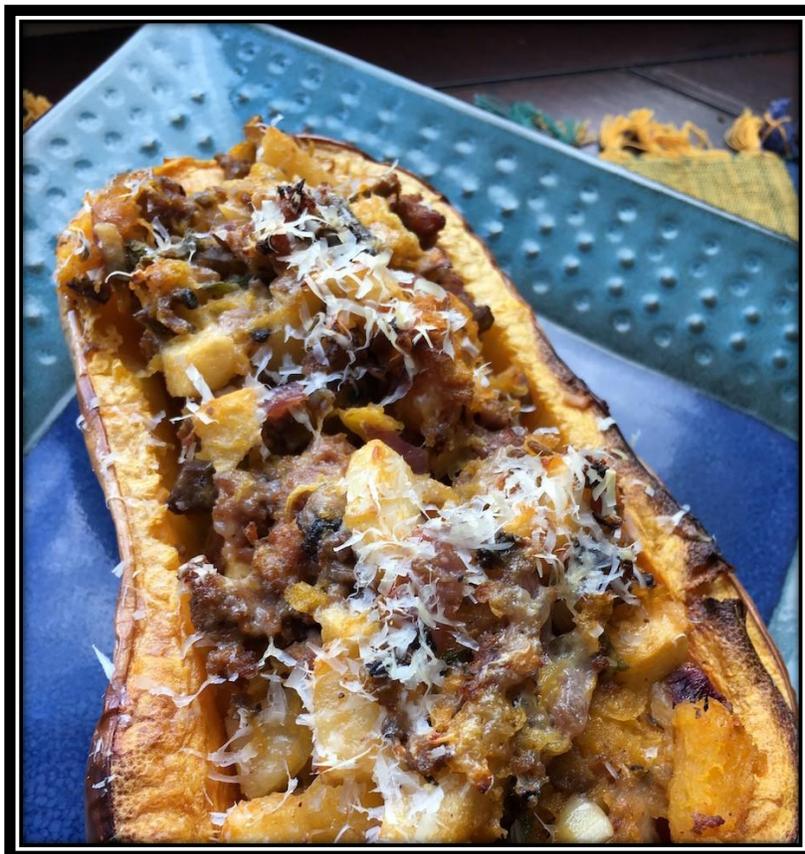
To make dressing, add all ingredients to a glass bowl and whisk until thoroughly blended. Taste and add more lime juice to brighten the flavors, if necessary. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Set aside.

Add sesame seeds and ground ginger to a large bowl and stir to combine. Add chunks of tuna to bowl and toss to coat. Press to make sure seeds adhere to tuna.

Heat olive oil in a skillet over high heat. When hot, add coated tuna to pan and flash sear on all sides, approximately 30 seconds per side. Remove from heat and season with salt and pepper, if desired. (Cook a little longer if you prefer tuna to be cooked all the way through.)

To serve, add mixed greens to serving plates and top each plate with an equal portion of the seared tuna. Drizzle with dressing. (You can also toss mixed salad greens with dressing before plating, if you prefer.) Serve with additional soy sauce and wasabi paste, if desired.

Apple and Sausage-Stuffed Butternut Squash



Unlike many stuffed winter squash recipes, this one is more savory than sweet, thanks to the spicy sausage and fresh sage. The combination of sausage, meaty Portobello mushrooms, sweet apples and crunchy walnuts rounds out the flavor of this satisfying main course.

Variations:

For less heat, use ½ pound spicy and ½ pound mild Italian sausage. If you prefer a sweeter dish, simply add more brown sugar prior to baking.

Ingredients:

2 butternut squash, cut in half, seeds and pulp removed	2 medium apples, peeled, cored, and chopped into small chunks
2 T. olive oil	2 t. ground cinnamon
1 lb. spicy Italian pork sausage	4 oz. chopped walnuts
3-4 cloves fresh garlic, peeled and finely minced	3 T. cold butter, cut into small chunks
½ red onion, chopped	2 T. brown sugar (optional)
1 ½ cups baby Portobello mushrooms, cleaned and sliced	Parmesan cheese, freshly grated
2 T. fresh sage leaves, julienned	Fresh parsley, chopped for garnish (optional)
	Salt and pepper, to taste

Directions:

Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

Spray two 13 x 9" glass baking dishes with non-stick cooking spray. Place butternut squash halves in glass dishes, cut side up. Brush exposed edges lightly with olive oil.

Place both dishes in oven on middle rack at 375 degrees. Bake until soft enough to scoop out interior with a spoon, approximately 45 – 50 minutes. (Actual baking time will vary depending on individual oven temperature, size of squash and how ripe it is).

While the squash halves are baking, add sausage to a large skillet and cook over medium-high heat. While the sausage is cooking, break it into small pieces with a spatula or wooden spoon.

After sausage is mostly browned, add garlic, red onion and chopped mushrooms to the skillet and cook over medium heat for several minutes until the mushrooms are soft, stirring occasionally.

Add fresh sage, chopped apples, and cinnamon to pan. Continue cooking over medium heat for 2 to 3 minutes or until apples become soft, stirring occasionally.

Remove from heat and if necessary, drain excess liquid from skillet. Stir in chopped walnuts and season mixture with salt and pepper to taste.

When ready, remove squash from oven and allow to cool slightly. Reduce oven temperature to 350 degrees.

Remove squash one at a time from hot glass baking dish and place on a cutting board. With a sharp knife, trace a ½" inch border around the perimeter of each squash. Scoop out all of the squash inside the border and reserve the cooked flesh in a large bowl. Be careful not to puncture the exterior of the squash skin during this process.

When finished, return each empty squash shell to the baking dish.

Cut the cooked squash into bite-sized chunks and add to sausage mixture. Gently fold mixture together until all ingredients are thoroughly combined.

Spoon sausage mixture into empty squash cavities and top each with chunks of butter, brown sugar (if desired) and freshly-grated Parmesan cheese.

Place in 350-degree oven and bake for 25-30 minutes or until filling is nicely browned. Remove from oven and top with additional Parmesan cheese and chopped fresh parsley, if desired. Serve immediately while hot.

Creamy Chicken and Broccoli Alfredo

The enduring appeal of classic Alfredo sauce lies in its simplicity. Featuring a luxurious blend of heavy cream, real butter and freshly-grated Parmesan cheese, traditional Alfredo sauce delivers incredibly rich flavor without a lot of fuss.

This version builds upon the classic ingredients with the addition of rich cream cheese and fresh garlic. In addition, the heavy cream is replaced with a lighter blend of half & half and chicken broth. The results? A creamy, delicious and easy sauce that appears much more complicated than it actually is. This one is sure to become a new family favorite!



Ingredients:

1 lb. fettuccine noodles, cooked according to package directions
1 rotisserie chicken, meat removed and torn into bite-sized pieces

1 head fresh broccoli florets (reserve stalk and stems for another use) - or 1 12 oz. bag frozen broccoli florets
2 T. water

Sauce Ingredients:

1 c. butter
4 cloves fresh garlic, peeled and finely minced
8 oz. cream cheese, softened
1¼ c. half & half (not low fat),
½ c. chicken broth

Salt and pepper to taste,
1 c. Parmesan cheese, freshly grated
1 small bunch fresh parsley, chopped
additional freshly-grated Parmesan cheese, to serve

Directions:

Tip: To prevent curdling, remove half and half from refrigerator when starting this recipe so it is less cold when added to the hot ingredients.

Cook the fettuccine while preparing the sauce so the noodles are still warm when ready to toss with the other ingredients.

Prepare broccoli by placing florets in a microwave-safe bowl with 2 tablespoons water. Microwave on high until crisp-tender. Cooking time will vary depending on individual microwave ovens, so test after 2 minutes and adjust cooking times accordingly. When finished, drain to remove excess water. Set aside.

Add garlic and butter to a saucepan and turn heat to medium. Sauté garlic for 1-2 minutes before adding cream cheese, half & half, and chicken broth. Continue cooking while stirring constantly until cream cheese is completely melted.

Reduce heat to low and continue stirring for about 15 minutes or until sauce thickens. Remove from heat and stir in freshly grated Parmesan cheese. Season with salt and pepper, to taste.

Add chicken, broccoli and cooked fettuccine noodles to a large serving bowl. Add the sauce to the bowl and gently toss until thoroughly combined. Top with chopped parsley and more freshly-grated Parmesan cheese and serve immediately.

SOUPS

One-Skillet White Bean and Spicy Sausage Soup

This soup is really delicious and it can be made in a single skillet for easy clean up. It freezes well so you can make larger batches for even easier weekday meals in the future. 😊

Ingredients:

3 T. olive oil	1 t. crushed red pepper flakes
2 stalks celery, cleaned and finely chopped	2 cans (15 oz.) cannellini beans, drained and rinsed
2 large carrots, peeled and finely chopped	1 can (15 oz.) cannellini beans, pureed with liquid from can
1 small white onion, finely chopped	3 large kale leaves, tough stems removed and cut into bite-sized pieces
3 cloves garlic, peeled and finely chopped	Salt and pepper, to taste
1 pound bulk spicy pork sausage, crumbled	
3 c. chicken or vegetable stock	
2 t. oregano, dried	
2 t. rosemary, dried	



Garnish

¼ c. fresh parsley, chopped
Parmesan cheese, shaved

Directions:

In a heavy-bottomed pan, heat olive oil over medium-high heat. Add celery, carrots, onions, and garlic to pan and sauté until tender.

Add crumbled bulk pork sausage to skillet and cook until no longer pink inside. Carefully drain excess fat from the pan before adding chicken or vegetable stock. Bring to a boil, and then reduce heat to medium-low. Add oregano, rosemary and crushed red pepper flakes.

Add whole and pureed white beans to skillet. Cover and simmer for 20-25 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add kale and simmer another 15-20 minutes. If soup is too thick, add more stock to thin. If it is too thin, continue cooking until desired consistency is reached.

Garnish with chopped fresh parsley and shaved Parmesan cheese and serve with crusty Italian bread.

One-Pot Near-Beer Cheese Soup



Beer cheese soup makes for a warm and satisfying meal on cold, blustery days. Unfortunately, it has a reputation for being a bit tricky to make because it can turn into a gloppy mess if you aren't careful. However, you can achieve picture-perfect (and palate-worthy) results at home with this easy recipe.

Tip: Take a “low and slow” approach while preparing this recipe. Most importantly, don't allow the soup to boil after adding the cheese because it will cause it to separate. *Yikes!* ☹️

Ingredients:

6 T. unsalted butter	4 oz. goat cheese, cut into chunks and softened
1 carrot, peeled and finely chopped	16 oz. sharp yellow cheddar cheese, grated, plus extra for serving
1 stalk celery, finely chopped	2 t. Dijon mustard
1 small yellow onion, finely chopped	2 t. Worcestershire sauce
3 cloves garlic, minced	8 oz. mild-flavored near-beer or apple beer
¼ c. all-purpose flour	¼ c. chopped red onion, soaked in water (optional)
3 c. chicken or vegetable stock	
Salt and pepper, to taste	
1 c. heavy cream	

Directions:

Add unsalted butter to a Dutch oven over medium heat. Once melted, add carrot, celery, onion and garlic and sauté until soft, about 8-10 minutes.

Add flour and stir until completely incorporated. Cook for approximately 2-3 minutes.

Stir in chicken stock and increase heat to medium-high. Bring to a boil, and then reduce heat to medium-low. Simmer uncovered for approximately 30-35 minutes, stirring occasionally. Season with salt and pepper, to taste.

Remove from heat and blend mixture with an immersion blender until smooth, if you have one. If not, transfer the liquid to a blender and blend until completely smooth. Work in batches if necessary. (Be careful – hot liquids have the tendency to “explode” in the blender.)

Once smooth, return mixture to Dutch oven over medium-low heat. Add the heavy cream, goat cheese, and half the cheddar cheese. Stir continually until cheese is completely melted. Add the remaining cheddar cheese and stir until melted.

Add the mustard, Worcestershire sauce and near-beer and stir until blended. If soup is too thick at this point, add a little additional chicken or vegetable stock. Continuing simmering on medium-low heat another 5-10 minutes, or until heated through.

Serve immediately with soft pretzel rolls or crusty bread of your choice. Garnish with shredded cheddar cheese, red onion, and/or popcorn.

Roasted Pear, Acorn Squash and Ginger Soup

Nothing says “fall” like a warm bowl of soup brimming with the classic seasonal flavors of oven-roasted squash and ripe pears. Add the spicy warmth of cinnamon, nutmeg and ginger and you’ve got the perfect combination for a cool evening.



Ingredients:

3 T. olive oil, divided
2 acorn squash, skins removed and cut into 1" chunks
4 medium pears, peeled, cored, and cut into chunks
3 – 4 large cloves fresh garlic, unpeeled

1 32-oz. container chicken broth
1 3" piece of fresh ginger, peeled and grated
2 t. ground cinnamon
1 t. nutmeg
1 T. fresh thyme leaves, stems removed
Salt and pepper, to taste

Optional Garnishes:

Parsley sprigs

Roasted pumpkin seeds

Directions:

Preheat oven to 400 degrees.

In a large glass bowl, toss squash and pears in two tablespoons olive oil and spread out in a single layer on a rimmed baking sheet lined with parchment paper. Add garlic cloves to baking sheet and place in oven. Roast for approximately one hour or until squash is tender, turning ingredients once or twice during this time.

Remove from heat and cool slightly. Squeeze roasted garlic cloves to remove skins, while reserving the roasted garlic inside.

Working in batches, add roasted squash, pears, and garlic to blender with broth and puree until smooth. Repeat with remaining batches until finished.

Transfer each batch of pureed ingredients to a large pot and add any remaining broth, along with the ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, and fresh thyme leaves.

Simmer until heated through, stirring occasionally. Season with salt and pepper, to taste. Garnish, if desired. Serve immediately with crusty bread.

Potato Leek Soup with Crispy Shallots



This satisfying soup is something to look forward to when cooler weather returns. The potato gives it substance, while the leeks, garlic and thyme add additional layers of flavor. The addition of heavy cream adds a touch of decadence to this rich, creamy combination. Before serving, top each bowl off with crispy shallots for an attractive (and delicious!) presentation.

This soup tastes even better the next day, so make a nice big batch so you can enjoy leftovers with a crisp salad for lunch.

Ingredients:

Crispy Shallots:

3 T. olive oil
3 T. unsalted butter

3 medium shallots, outer skin removed and cut into thin slices
Kosher salt, to taste

Soup:

3 T. olive oil	2 pounds russet potatoes, peeled and cut into small chunks
4 leeks, white and light green portion, chopped	1 bay leaf
4 cloves fresh garlic, peeled	3 sprigs fresh thyme
8 c. vegetable or chicken broth	¾ c. heavy cream (or Half and Half)
	Salt and pepper, to taste

Optional Garnishes:

6 strips bacon, cooked crispy and crumbled	¼ cup shredded white cheddar cheese
3 green onion tops, sliced thin	Sprigs of parsley

Directions:

Add olive oil and butter to a small pan and heat over medium-high until the butter melts. Reduce heat to medium and add sliced shallots to the pan. Cook shallots for approximately 12 -15 minutes, or until they are golden brown, stirring occasionally.

Remove shallots from pan with a fork or slotted spoon and place on paper towels. Gently blot with additional paper towels to absorb excess oil. Set aside.

In a Dutch oven or large pot, add the olive oil, leeks and garlic. Sauté over medium heat for approximately 8-10 minutes, or until the leeks are soft, but not browned.

Add broth, potatoes, bay leaf, and thyme to the pot and bring to a boil. Boil mixture for about 15 minutes or until potatoes are soft.

Remove bay leaf and thyme stems before blending the remaining ingredients with an immersion blender until smooth. If you don't have an immersion blender, you can carefully transfer the potato leek mixture in batches to a blender. (Use caution when blending hot ingredients: Don't fill blender container more than halfway and be sure to vent the lid so air can escape).

Once potato mixture is blended smooth, stir in heavy cream. If you prefer a thicker soup, return to low heat to cook off excess liquid. If too thick, add additional cream or broth to achieve the desired consistency. Season with salt and pepper, to taste.

To serve, ladle into bowls and garnish with crispy shallots. Other garnish options include crumbled bacon, green onions, chives, shredded cheese and/or sprigs of parsley.

☞ SALADS ☞

Apple Walnut Salad with Maple Balsamic Vinaigrette



This substantial salad packs a lot of flavor into each bite with its winning combination of peppery arugula, seasoned walnuts, tart apples, sharp blue cheese, and slightly sweet maple vinaigrette. To keep the flavors in balance, the strong bite of the red onion is tamed by soaking in cold water for a few minutes.

Arugula is extremely easy to grow from seed in containers or your garden. Plus, it grows best in the cooler “shoulder” seasons of spring or fall. For this reason, it is a great salad green to enjoy in hearty fall-themed salads like this one.

Ingredients:

4 c. arugula, rinsed and patted dry	1 T. fresh lemon juice
6 oz. chopped walnuts	4 oz. blue cheese crumbles
2 T. white sugar (or brown sugar)	½ small red onion, cut into thin rings
1 T. cinnamon	Salt and pepper, to taste
2 tart apples, cut in half, core removed, and cut into thin slices	

Vinaigrette:

¼ c. balsamic vinegar	1 clove garlic, finely minced
1 T. fresh lemon juice	2/3 c. extra virgin olive oil
¼ c. maple syrup	Salt and pepper, to taste
2 t. Dijon mustard	

Directions:

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

To remove sharp taste from red onion, place the slices in a small glass bowl filled with cold water. Soak for 10-15 minutes. Remove from water and place on folded paper towels to dry.

In a small bowl, toss walnuts with sugar and cinnamon. Arrange walnuts in a single layer on a rimmed baking sheet lined with parchment paper. Place in pre-heated oven and bake for 8-10 minutes. Remove from oven and allow to cool.

To make the vinaigrette, combine the balsamic vinegar, lemon juice, maple syrup, Dijon mustard, and garlic in a small glass bowl. Slowly whisk in the olive oil until well combined. Season with salt and pepper, to taste. Adjust other flavors, as desired.

Add sliced apples to large glass salad bowl and sprinkle with lemon juice. Toss with your hands until well coated. Add arugula, seasoned walnuts, and blue cheese to bowl and gently toss to combine all ingredients.

Drizzle salad with a little vinaigrette right before serving and toss to combine.

Arrange salad on individual plates and top each with 2 – 3 red onion slices. Serve with additional dressing on the side.

Marinated Strip Steak Salad with Creamy Blue Cheese Dressing

This salad is so pretty to look at with its beautiful rich hues floating atop a bed of vibrant lime green. What makes it even better is that it tastes every bit as wonderful as it looks! The homemade blue cheese dressing offers a nice complement to the flavorful steak and roasted root vegetables.

There are several steps involved in pulling this all together, but the end result is definitely worth the extra effort!

Ingredients:



Strip Steak:

2 10-oz. strip steaks
1 T. kosher salt
3 T. olive oil, divided

3 T. Worcestershire sauce
3 large garlic cloves, peeled, smashed, and roughly chopped
4 sprigs fresh rosemary, leaves removed and crushed

Salad:

2 small heads Bibb lettuce, base removed, leaves washed and dried
12 oz. roasted golden beets and purple potatoes, cut into equal-sized small chunks
<< Full recipe for these roasted veggies included in Side Dishes section >>
4 oz. good quality blue cheese

Creamy Blue Cheese Dressing:

¼ c. full fat sour cream
¼ c. The Ojai Cook Lemonaise*
2 t. Worcestershire sauce
½ medium shallot, outer skin removed and

very finely minced
2 oz. chunky blue cheese
2-3 T. half & half
Sea salt and freshly cracked pepper, to taste

*Can substitute an equal amount of mayonnaise and 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice if you can't find this ingredient. [\[See my blog for a link to this yummy condiment.\]](#)

Directions:

For best results, sprinkle the steaks with kosher salt on both sides and place in the refrigerator overnight.

The next day, combine 1 tablespoon olive oil, Worcestershire sauce, garlic and rosemary in a non-reactive bowl large enough to hold both steaks. Add salted steaks to the bowl and turn to coat. Place in refrigerator for at least 2 hours, turning occasionally.

Remove steaks from the refrigerator at least 30 minutes before cooking to allow them to reach room temperature. This will ensure they cook more evenly.

Preheat oven to 400 degrees.

Add remaining olive oil to a cast iron skillet and set burner temperature to high. Allow skillet to heat thoroughly, approximately 5 or 6 minutes, before adding steaks. Sear steaks in hot skillet on all sides, approximately 2 or 3 minutes per side.

When steaks are evenly seared on all sides, place skillet in oven. Roast for 8-10 minutes or until an instant-read meat thermometer reads 125 degrees for medium rare. (Actual cook time will vary by individual oven and what level of 'doneness' you prefer, so adjust your cooking time accordingly).

When done, remove steaks from oven and transfer to a platter. Cover with aluminum foil and allow to rest for at least 5 minutes. Remove cover and allow to cool slightly before slicing. Set aside.

To make the blue cheese dressing, add the first 4 ingredients to a medium glass or non-reactive bowl and stir to combine. Add the blue cheese and use a fork to break up the chunks and incorporate the cheese into the mixture. (If you prefer a chunkier dressing, leave some of the chunks intact).

Add the half & half one tablespoon at a time to the bowl until you reach the desired consistency. Add more half & half if you prefer a less-thick dressing. Season with salt and pepper, to taste. Set aside.

To assemble the salad, place Bibb lettuce on 4 plates and add 1/4 of the roasted beets, potatoes, and blue cheese chunks to each plate. Divide sliced steak and add to each plate before drizzling with creamy blue cheese dressing. Serve immediately with sea salt and freshly-cracked black pepper.

Note: [See my Blog for information on an instant-read meat thermometer.](#)

Grilled Peach Salad with Champagne Vinaigrette



As the warm summer months fade into memory, your opportunities to enjoy grilled meals outside start to dwindle. But don't despair! There is still plenty of time to enjoy your favorite grilled foods before the chilly bite of winter forces you back inside.

Quick and *delicious* are the hallmark buzzwords surrounding this healthy fall salad. The addition of rotisserie chicken sets the stage for an easy and filling weeknight meal, while the warmth of the grilled peaches complements the crunch of the pecans and the rich creaminess of the goat cheese. A light champagne vinaigrette balances out the flavors with a hint of tangy sweetness.

Ingredients:

2 heads Romaine lettuce, base removed,
washed and patted dry
3 medium ripe peaches, pits removed and
cut into wedges

16 oz. rotisserie chicken, preferably breast
meat
4 oz. pecans, chopped
4 oz. goat cheese

Champagne Vinaigrette:

3 T. champagne vinegar
1 T. fresh lemon juice
½ cup extra virgin olive oil
2 t. shallot, very finely minced

1 T. Dijon mustard
1 T. honey
Salt and pepper, to taste

Directions:

To prepare the vinaigrette, combine the first 6 ingredients in a non-reactive glass bowl and whisk to combine thoroughly. Season with salt and pepper to taste and set aside.

Clean grill grates with a wire brush and then spray with a non-stick cooking spray. Grill peach wedges over medium direct heat for approximately 3 minutes per side. For best results, flip wedges only once while grilling. Remove from heat and set aside.

Tear Romaine leaves into bite-sized chunks and place on 4 serving plates. Divide grilled peaches, chicken, pecans, and goat cheese evenly among the plates. Drizzle each plate with champagne vinaigrette and serve. (If you prefer more evenly-distributed dressing, toss the salad ingredients with the dressing in a large bowl prior to arranging on plates).

❧ SIDE DISHES ❧

Roasted Golden Beets and Purple Potatoes



If you haven't tried purple potatoes, you are in for a real treat. These gorgeous culinary treasures are native to South America where they have long been cherished for their delicious flavor, disease resistance, and ability to survive in harsh environments. Unlike most white-fleshed varieties, purple potatoes also pack a powerful nutritional punch due to their significant concentration of antioxidants and higher fiber content.

For this recipe, dark purple potatoes and rich golden beets are combined for a truly regal effect. It should be noted, however, that the exposed potato flesh turns brown while roasting. For best visual results, slice the vegetables at least ½" thick and carefully remove the browned outer skins before serving. (Don't discard! The crispy browned layer tastes delicious).

This extra step takes a little more time, but you will be rewarded with a vibrant purple hue that will elevate your salads or side dishes from basic to extraordinary!

Ingredients:

2 T. olive oil	1 T. citrus salt*
3 purple potatoes, peeled and cut into ½" slices	8-10 sprigs fresh thyme, leaves removed and stems discarded (optional)
2 large golden beets, peeled and cut into ½" slices	

Directions:

Pre-heat oven to 400 degrees.

Line a rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper. In a glass bowl, toss the sliced potatoes and beets with the olive oil.

Arrange coated vegetable slices in a single layer, leaving space between them. Sprinkle with citrus salt* and thyme leaves. Place baking sheet in pre-heated oven and roast about 15 minutes before turning. Continue baking another 10-15 minutes or until beets and potatoes are fork tender. [*Note: [See recipe on my website for a link to this citrus salt](#). Substitute kosher salt, if necessary.]

Remove from oven and allow to cool before handling. Remove browned potato skins before serving to reveal the gorgeous color underneath.

Serve as a side dish or add to your favorite mixed green salad for a bold splash of color. (I suggest the Marinated Strip Steak Salad, featured above.)

Roasted Red Beets & Brussels Sprouts



This easy, yet elegant, side dish can elevate a basic weeknight meal into something truly extraordinary. This eye-catching creation features rich, beautiful jewel tones that add a vibrant pop of color, along with plenty of great flavor.

Ingredients:

3 large red beets, cleaned, peeled, and cut into uniformly thick slices
1 pound fresh Brussels sprouts, ends removed and cut in half
3 T. olive oil, divided
1 T. garlic powder, divided

1 red onion, outer skin removed and cut into uniformly thick slices and then quartered
6 sprigs fresh thyme
1 T. pink Himalayan sea salt
1 t. freshly-cracked black pepper

Directions:

Preheat oven to 400 degrees.

Add sliced red beets and Brussels sprouts and toss with 2 tablespoons olive oil and 2 teaspoons garlic powder.

Arrange beets and Brussels sprouts on a rimmed baking sheet lined with parchment paper in a single layer. Add red onion quarters and brush with remaining olive oil and sprinkle with 1 teaspoon garlic powder.

Add fresh thyme sprigs to baking sheet. Sprinkle vegetables with pink Himalayan sea salt, and fresh-cracked black pepper. Bake in pre-heated oven for 25 minutes or until Brussels sprouts are golden brown and other vegetables are tender.

Remove from oven and cool slightly before serving.

Rustic Mushroom Risotto



This mushroom risotto recipe goes “old school” with its traditional “stand and stir” technique. This approach may take a bit more time, but the results are well worth the effort.

When making this recipe, don't be tempted to substitute other forms of rice because they won't deliver the coveted rich, creamy texture you're after. Most groceries stores carry Arborio rice, or you can easily find it online.

Ingredients:

4 cups chicken or vegetable broth, heated	8 oz. white mushrooms, cleaned and sliced
1 T. olive oil	1 cup Arborio rice
3 T. unsalted butter, divided	½ c. dry white wine
3 cloves garlic, peeled and finely minced	½ c. Parmesan cheese, freshly grated
½ medium onion, finely chopped	2 sprigs fresh rosemary, stems removed, leaves very finely chopped
8 oz. baby Portobello mushrooms, cleaned and sliced	Salt and pepper, to taste

Directions:

In a small saucepan, heat chicken or vegetable broth until hot.

Add olive oil, one tablespoon butter, and garlic to a cold saucepan. Turn heat to medium and sauté for approximately one minute, or until garlic becomes softened.

Add onion and sauté for 2 minutes before adding the sliced mushrooms. Cook mushrooms until they soften and release liquid, approximately 4 or 5 minutes. Remove from heat and season with salt and pepper, to taste. Transfer to a bowl and keep warm.

Return pan to heat and add remaining butter. Add Arborio rice and sauté until thoroughly coated, approximately 1-2 minutes. Add white wine and stir constantly until wine is completely absorbed.

Add one cup warm broth to pan and stir constantly until it is completely absorbed. Repeat with remaining broth, one cup at a time, until it is all incorporated and the rice has achieved a rich, creamy consistency. This process should take approximately 25 – 30 minutes. (If you want a creamier texture, add more broth until you achieve the results you desire).

Remove from heat and stir in the freshly-grated Parmesan cheese and fresh rosemary. Add mushroom mixture and stir until thoroughly combined. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Transfer to serving dish and sprinkle with additional fresh rosemary, if desired. Serve immediately.

Easy, Cheesy Garlic Bread

This easy, cheesy garlic bread is the perfect accompaniment to hearty pasta dishes, such as lasagna, spaghetti and meatballs, or rigatoni with chunky meat sauce. It is also a great appetizer on its own when served with a spicy marinara sauce for dipping. 😊



If you can't find shredded Gruyere, you can use the more traditional (and easier to find) shredded mozzarella instead.

Ingredients:

1 loaf ciabatta bread, or 4 ciabatta rolls,
halved
¼ c. butter, unsalted
4 gloves garlic, finely minced
3 T. extra virgin olive oil

2 T. oregano, dried
Parmesan cheese, freshly grated
6 oz. shredded Gruyere cheese
Salt and pepper, to taste

Directions:

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Cut ciabatta loaf in half lengthwise and arrange on a rimmed baking sheet lined with parchment paper.

In a small saucepan, melt the unsalted butter over medium heat. Add the garlic and cook for 2-3 minutes, until the garlic is soft. Remove from heat.

In a small glass bowl, combine melted butter, garlic, olive oil, and oregano. Stir to combine thoroughly. Brush each half of the ciabatta bread with the olive oil mixture; making sure the entire surface is covered.

Grate Parmesan cheese over the surface of both bread halves and top with shredded Gruyere cheese. Sprinkle each half with salt and pepper, to taste.

Place in oven and bake for approximately 8-10 minutes or until cheese is completely melted and starting to brown on top. Remove from oven and allow to cool slightly before serving.

Maple-Roasted Acorn Squash Rings



These squash rings can be served straight from the oven as a simple, yet delicious side dish or they can be dressed up for a much more elegant presentation.

For example, you could fill the center area of each ring with wild rice and sausage or a rustic rosemary risotto. You could also fill them with a mixture of dried cranberries and toasted pecans or a blend of pomegranate arils and goat cheese. Because acorn squash lends itself so well to whatever flavors you pair it with, the options are nearly endless.

Note: Even though I have featured this recipe under “Side Dishes,” you could easily turn it into a Main Course by using a filling that contains meat. When I made this for my family, I served it with the suggested wild rice and sausage, as listed above. It was delicious!

Ingredients:

2 whole acorn squash, washed and cut into 1” rings	2 T. unsalted butter, melted
2 T. olive oil	3 T. real maple syrup
	Salt and pepper, to taste

Directions:

Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

To cut the squash in rings, start by cutting the bottom end (opposite the stem) off with a sharp, sturdy knife. Using that bottom edge as your guide, continue cutting up from that point in 1” sections toward the stem.

Cutting through the squash can be challenging, so go slow and make sure you are working on a stable cutting surface. The goal is to end up with uniformly thick rings (and all of your fingers!).

Once cut, remove the seeds and pulp from the center section of each ring using a round cookie cutter, if you have one. If not, use a round cup or glass as a template and cut around it with a small, sharp knife.

Place the acorn squash rings onto rimmed baking sheet lined with parchment paper. Brush each ring with olive oil and melted butter. Turn over and brush the opposite side. Drizzle maple syrup over each ring and season with salt and pepper, to taste.

Place in the oven and bake for 20-25 minutes or until the squash is tender. Remove from oven and serve immediately.

TIP: I chose to serve the squash rings with a large scoop of long grain and wild rice (from a mix) combined with browned sausage. This made it a main course, meal-in-one. It was delicious!

Blackened Broccoli Side Dish



This simple, yet delicious, side dish comes together quickly so it is perfect for mid-week meals. When lightly tossed with sesame oil, it pairs perfectly with Asian-inspired dishes like the Seared Sesame Tuna with Mixed Greens. <<Recipe found in Main Courses section, above.>> In addition, this flavorful dish goes well with everything from roasted chicken breasts to pan-seared pork chops.

Ingredients:

2 heads fresh broccoli, washed and florets removed (stalks and stems reserved for another use)
or
2 12 oz. bags of frozen broccoli florets
2 T. water

3 cloves garlic, peeled and finely minced
2 T. olive oil, divided
1 t. crushed red pepper flakes (optional)
2 T. unsalted butter, divided
2 T. sesame oil
Salt and pepper, to taste

Directions:

Place fresh or frozen broccoli florets in a microwave-safe bowl with 2 tablespoons water. Microwave on high until crisp-tender. Cooking time will vary depending on individual microwaves, so test after 2 minutes and adjust cooking time accordingly. Do not overcook. Florets should be firm when finished.

Add one half of the chopped garlic to cold skillet with one tablespoon olive oil. Set heat to medium and add ½ teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes (if desired) and one tablespoon of butter.

Cook garlic over medium heat for approximately 1-2 minutes, stirring constantly. Increase heat to medium-high and add ½ broccoli florets to pan. Stir broccoli constantly while searing the florets.

Once blackened, remove the broccoli from the skillet and place in a large glass bowl. Cover and keep warm.

Repeat process with remaining garlic, olive oil, red pepper, butter and broccoli.

When second batch of broccoli is finished, add it to the bowl with the original batch. Drizzle with sesame oil and toss to coat. Season with salt and pepper, to taste. Serve immediately. *Yum!* 😊

🌀 APPETIZERS 🌀

Sausage-Stuffed Mushroom Caps

This versatile appetizer recipe is sure to be a big hit at your next party or casual gathering. When selecting mushrooms for this recipe, choose ones with small- to medium-sized caps for best results. Using a mixture of baby Portobello and white mushrooms makes for an attractive presentation. However, it should be noted that the more delicately-flavored white mushrooms do not compete with the filling the way the more distinctive-tasting Portobello caps do.



Ingredients:

2 T. olive oil
½ c. Marsala (or dry white) cooking wine, divided
8 oz. package of baby Portobello mushrooms, cleaned
8 oz. package of white mushrooms, cleaned
12 oz. bulk spicy Italian sausage
3 cloves garlic, peeled and finely minced
4 fresh sage leaves, washed and julienned
8 oz. cream cheese, softened
1/3 cup Parmesan cheese, freshly grated
Salt and pepper, to taste

Toppings:

3 T. Panko bread crumbs (optional)
3 T. Freshly grated Parmesan cheese (optional)
6 sprigs fresh parsley, chopped (optional)

Directions:

Position rack in middle position and preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Remove stems from cleaned mushrooms by grabbing them as close to the cap as possible and gently twisting. Roughly chop removed stems and reserve in a separate bowl, while placing intact caps in a larger non-reactive bowl.

Add olive oil and 3 tablespoons cooking wine to bowl containing mushroom caps and toss gently to evenly coat. Set aside.

In a large skillet, cook sausage over medium-high heat until thoroughly browned. Break apart all chunks with a spatula or wooden spoon as it cooks. Once browned, drain excess fat before proceeding.

Add chopped mushroom stems and garlic to the pan and cook until mushrooms are soft and start to release liquid. Add fresh sage and remaining wine and scrape up any browned bits of sausage from the bottom of the pan. Simmer for a couple minutes until excess liquid evaporates.

Remove from heat and add softened cream cheese and freshly-grated Parmesan cheese. Stir until thoroughly combined and cheese is completely melted. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Cool slightly.

Add one rounded spoonful of sausage mixture to each marinated mushroom cap and arrange stuffing-side-up in a 13 x 9" glass baking dish. If desired, sprinkle each stuffed mushroom cap with Panko breadcrumbs, freshly grated Parmesan cheese or a combination of both before baking.

Place glass dish in pre-heated oven on center rack and bake for 30 minutes or until mushrooms are soft and filling is browned on top. For a crispier topping, place baking dish under the broiler for a couple minutes when done cooking. (Watch closely!) If desired, garnish with chopped fresh parsley before serving.

Salted-Caramel Apple Dip Appetizer

This easy appetizer recipe can be ready in about 5 minutes, if you purchase the salted caramel sauce. However, many ready-made varieties contain artificial preservatives, flavorings, and high-fructose corn syrup. Making your own homemade caramel sauce may take a little extra time, but the results are well worth the effort. [Note: Kids LOVE this appetizer!]

TIP: When making caramel sauce, pay careful attention as the color deepens from clear to amber. If you allow it to cook too long, the sauce can become too dark and will have an unpleasant, almost "burnt" taste to it. At that point, the only thing you can do is start over. :-/



Ingredients:

Crisp green and red apples, cut into wedges to serve
1 T. fresh lemon juice
1 8 oz. block cream cheese, softened

Salted caramel sauce* (recipe below or use your favorite prepared caramel sauce)
2/3 c. pecans, chopped (or favorite nut)

Salted Caramel Sauce:

½ c. heavy cream
1 c. white sugar
2 T. water

4 T. unsalted butter
1 t. fleur de sea salt (or your favorite sea salt)

Directions:

Preheat oven to lowest setting.

In a glass bowl, toss sliced apple wedges with fresh lemon juice to prevent browning. Set aside.

To prepare the salted caramel sauce, warm the heavy cream in a small saucepan over low heat. (The goal is to slightly warm the cream because cold dairy products can curdle when added to hot liquids).

Add the sugar and water to a heavy-bottomed, oven-safe saucepan and stir to combine. Set spoon aside and do not stir the sugar mixture again.

Bring mixture to a boil over medium-high heat. If sugar crystals remain on the sides of the pan, gently brush them back down with a moistened silicon baking brush.

Continue boiling until the mixture turns a nice amber color. If a dark spot forms on one side due to uneven heating, lift the pan and gently swirl until the color is even again. Return pan to the burner and reduce heat.

Slowly whisk in the warmed cream until thoroughly incorporated. Be very careful while doing so because the extremely-hot sugar mixture will bubble up when the cooler cream is added.

Remove from heat and add butter and salt. Stir with a CLEAN spoon until butter is totally incorporated into the mixture. (Do NOT reuse the same spoon from earlier because reintroducing sugar crystals to the pan can cause your caramel sauce to crystalize as it cools.)

Place saucepan into pre-heated oven until ready to use.

To assemble the dip, place block of softened cream cheese on a serving plate. Drizzle with caramel sauce and top with chopped pecans. Serve with crispy sliced apples and additional caramel sauce for dipping.

For a more decorative presentation, shape the block of cream cheese into a circle before topping with a liberal amount of caramel sauce. Cover caramel-coated cream cheese circle entirely with chopped pecans, then arrange apple wedges around the cheese to form an edible "flower." The excess caramel sauce on the plate will help hold the apple slices in place.

Savory Brie and Pear Puff Pastry

Frozen puff pastry may be one of the most versatile convenience items on the market. When you have a package in your freezer, you can whip up rich savory appetizers, elegant main dishes, or delicious buttery desserts in no time.



This recipe combines the best of both worlds with its combination of sweet and savory ingredients. As a result, it can be served as either a rich appetizer or a decadent dessert by playing up either the savory or sweet elements.

Ingredients:

1/2 package frozen puff pastry	2 t. ground cinnamon
1 medium pear, ripe but firm, cut into thin slices	1 t. nutmeg
2 oz. Brie cheese, cut into thin slices with rind removed	2 T. maple syrup
2 sprigs fresh thyme, stems removed	1 egg
	1 T. water

Directions:

Thaw puff pastry in refrigerator for 2-3 hours or overnight.

Position rack in the middle position and preheat oven to 375 degrees.

Open thawed puff pastry and carefully unfold, being careful not to crack it. Place puff pastry on a lightly floured surface. Gently roll pastry with a floured rolling pin into a large rectangle. Cut in

half with a sharp knife and carefully wrap one portion in plastic before returning to the refrigerator. (Use the remaining portion within a day for another recipe or to double this one).

Place the remaining rectangle on a rimmed baking sheet lined with parchment paper. To create a picture frame effect, cut around the perimeter of the sheet with a sharp knife about 1/2" from the outside edge, but do not cut all the way through.

Dock (pierce) the pastry *inside* the cut you just made with a fork, just like you would a pie crust. Add the Brie in a single layer on top of the interior portion. Top with pear slices, then sprinkle with thyme leaves, cinnamon, and nutmeg. Brush top with maple syrup to evenly coat.

Create an egg wash by whisking one tablespoon of water with one egg yolk. Brush mixture over the outside exposed portion of the puff pastry before placing in oven.

Bake for approximately 15- 18 minutes, or until the pastry "picture frame" puffs up and turns golden brown.

Remove from oven and allow to cool slightly before serving.

DESSERTS

Easy Individual Cinnamon Apple Tarts with Maple Whipped Cream



Ingredients:

1 pack frozen puff pastry, thawed	2 T. brown sugar
1 egg yolk	2 t. ground cinnamon
1 T. water	1 t. nutmeg
3 T. unsalted butter	1 t. ground cloves
3 medium apples, peeled, cored and cut into thin slices	

Whipped Cream Ingredients:

1 pint heavy whipped cream	2 T. maple syrup
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Directions:

Defrost puff pastry in the refrigerator for several hours or overnight.

In a large glass bowl, blend 1 pint of heavy whipping cream with a hand or immersion blender until it doubles in size and changes texture. Then, drizzle maple syrup into the bowl and continue blending until the mixture is light and fluffy. Set aside.

Adjust baking rack to middle position and preheat oven to 400 degrees.

Prepare an egg wash by beating one egg yolk with water until thoroughly combined. Set aside.

Remove thawed puff pastry from refrigerator. Place pastry on a lightly floured surface. Roll dough into a uniform square shape and cut into 4 equal-sized squares. Place squares on a large rimmed baking sheet lined with parchment paper. Dock (pierce with a fork) the center of each pastry square and place in the freezer while preparing the apple mixture.

Melt butter in a saucepan over medium heat. Add apple slices to pan and cook for several minutes until soft, stirring occasionally. Add brown sugar, cinnamon, nutmeg and ground cloves to pan. Stir to combine, then remove from heat and set aside.

Remove prepared puff pastry from freezer and spoon $\frac{1}{4}$ of the apple mixture into the center of each square. Fold each corner toward the middle of the square to “close” the pastry, but leave a couple openings to vent.

Brush puff pastry with egg wash and sprinkle with additional cinnamon, if desired.

Place the baking sheet in the pre-heated oven on the middle rack. Bake until pastry is light and puffy, approximately 25–30 minutes. When ready, the tart should be a rich golden brown. Actual

cooking time will vary by individual oven, so keep a close eye on the pastries to avoid over-browning.

Remove from oven and allow to cool slightly before serving. To serve, top with maple whipped cream or your favorite ice cream.

Creamy Pumpkin Mousse with Maple Whipped Cream



Note: This recipe is gluten- and refined-sugar-free. However, this photograph features ginger snap cookies, as well, which are not necessarily gluten-free.

Prep time: 10 minutes + time to chill

Serves: 4-6

Ingredients:

- 1 pint heavy whipping cream
- 6 T. real maple syrup, divided
- 1 15-oz. can pumpkin purée (not pumpkin pie filling)
- 8 oz. cream cheese, softened, cubed
- 2 T. pumpkin pie spice
- 1 t. real vanilla extract
- 1/3 c. half & half

Optional:

Pecan halves

Ground cinnamon, for dusting

Ginger Snap cookies, for serving, if desired

Directions:

1. Beat the heavy whipping cream in a large bowl with a hand mixer until it doubles in size. Add 2 tablespoons of maple syrup and continue beating until light and fluffy. Cover and place in the refrigerator until ready to use.
2. Beat the pumpkin purée, cream cheese, pumpkin pie spice, vanilla extract, half & half, and remaining maple syrup in a large mixing bowl with a hand mixer until thoroughly blended.
3. Taste and adjust seasonings, as desired, and transfer to individual dessert bowls. Cover and place in the refrigerator to chill for at least 1 hour.
4. To serve, remove from refrigerator and top with maple whipped cream, pecans, and a sprinkle of ground cinnamon, if desired. Enjoy!

Homemade Peach Cobbler



Prep time: 15 minutes

Bake time: 20-25 minutes

Serves: 4-6

Filling Ingredients:

8 large, ripe peaches, pitted and chopped
1/3 c. white sugar
2 T. fresh lemon juice
2 t. all-purpose flour

1 t. kosher salt or REAL salt
1 t. nutmeg
1 t. cinnamon
1 t. real vanilla extract
¼ c. packed brown sugar

Topping Ingredients:

1 c. all-purpose flour
¾ c. sugar, divided
1 t. kosher salt or REAL salt
1 t. baking powder
¼ cup heavy cream

¼ cup water
8 T. unsalted butter, very well chilled
1 egg white, beaten with water added

Optional, to serve: Whipped cream or ice cream, of choice

Directions:

1. Place the top oven rack in the center position and pre-heat oven to 400°F.
2. Add peaches, sugar, lemon juice, flour, salt, nutmeg, cinnamon and vanilla extract to a large bowl and toss to combine.
3. Transfer to a greased 8" x 8" baking pan and spread into an even layer. Sprinkle brown sugar on top of peach mixture before placing pan in pre-heated oven. Bake for 10 minutes.
4. Add flour, ½ cup sugar, salt, and baking powder to a different bowl and stir to combine. Chop chilled butter into very small pieces with a sharp knife. Add to bowl and combine with dry ingredients with your fingers until small pebble-sized pieces are formed.
5. Add heavy cream and water to the flour mixture and stir with a fork until all the dry ingredients are moist and somewhat sticky. Do not overwork dough.
6. Remove baking pan from oven and carefully spoon dough over the top, making sure the dough is the same thickness throughout. Leave spaces in between, as pictured, for a more rustic look.

7. Return to oven and bake for another 10-15 minutes, or until the topping begins to brown. Remove from oven and brush the top with the egg white wash and sprinkle remaining sugar on top. Return to oven to finish baking, another 10-15 minutes. Remove from oven when the top is golden brown.
8. Allow pan to cool slightly before serving on its own or topped with whipped cream or ice cream. *Enjoy! :-p*

Baked Cinnamon Apple Crisp



One taste of this delicious dessert and you've won't believe it is both gluten- and refined-sugar-free. The addition of fresh thyme adds a subtle savory note to the otherwise sweet flavor profile of this classic recipe.

Tip: Choose firm apples, such as Granny Smith or Pink Lady (pictured), for this recipe. These varieties will hold up well to the heat of baking without turning to mush.

Prep time: 20 minutes

Cook time: 45-50 minutes

Serves: 4-6

Ingredients:

6 large apples, cored, peeled, and sliced	1 t. ground cinnamon
1 T. fresh lemon juice	½ t. ground allspice
1/3 c. real maple syrup	1½ t. fresh thyme leaves
2 T. 100% apple juice (sugar free)	¼ t. salt

Topping Ingredients:

1 c. old-fashioned rolled oats	1/3 c. honey, preferably local
1/3 c. almond flour	3 T. unsalted butter, melted
1/3 c. almonds, sliced	

To Serve: (Optional) - Vanilla bean ice cream or freshly-whipped cream

Directions:

1. Place top oven rack in the center position and pre-heat oven to 350°F. Grease an 8" x 8" baking dish and set aside.
2. Place apples in a large non-reactive bowl and toss with fresh lemon juice. Add maple syrup, apple juice, cinnamon, allspice, thyme leaves, and salt. Toss to combine and set aside.
3. Combine topping ingredients in a separate bowl and stir until oats are thoroughly coated and all ingredients are well combined. Set aside.
4. Pour apple mixture into prepared baking dish and spread into an even layer. Spread the topping evenly across the top of the apples in a uniform layer, as well.
5. Place into pre-heated oven and bake for 30 minutes. If the top layer is nicely browned, cover dish loosely with aluminum foil to prevent over-browning. Continue baking for another 15-20 minutes or until the apple crisp is nice and bubbling. Remove from oven and set aside to cool for 5-10 minutes.

6. Serve warm with some vanilla bean iced cream or freshly-whipped cream, if desired.
Enjoy!

☪ BREAKFASTS ☪

Pumpkin Spice Muffins



Although pumpkin muffins are traditionally a fall favorite, there is no reason you can't enjoy these delicious, lightly-spiced muffins all year round. This version is topped with coarse sugar for a decorative touch, but they are just as wonderful plain or with a cream cheese frosting.

Tip: Make sure you choose 100% pure pumpkin vs. pumpkin pie filling for this recipe because you are already adding sugar and spices as part of the ingredients.

Ingredients:

2 1/2 c. sugar	2 t. baking soda
1 c. safflower oil or other light oil	1 t. salt
2/3 c. water	1½ t. cinnamon
4 eggs	1 t. nutmeg
15 oz. can pure pumpkin	½ t. cloves
3½ c. all-purpose flour	½ t. ginger

½ c. coarse decorating sugar

Directions:

Preheat oven to 350 degrees

Line muffin pan with 12 regular-sized cupcake liners.

Combine sugar, oil, water, eggs, and pumpkin in a large mixing bowl and beat on low for 1 minute. Do not over mix.

Add flour, baking soda, salt, cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, and ginger to a small bowl and stir to combine. Add dry mixture to pumpkin batter and beat on low just until all ingredients are moist.

Fill cupcake liners with batter until they are $\frac{3}{4}$ full. Bake for 12-15 minutes, then remove from oven and sprinkle each muffin with coarse decorating sugar and return to oven to finish baking another 13-15 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean. (Total cooking time should be 25-30 minutes).

Remove from oven and cool 5-10 minutes before moving muffins to wire baking rack to cool completely.

Easy Slow Cooker Pumpkin Butter

There are so many ways to enjoy this delicious and easy-to-make fall favorite. For starters, it is perfect for spreading on toast, bagels, English muffins, and croissants. You can also pair it with Greek yogurt and homemade granola for a seasonal breakfast treat. Use it to top pancakes or as a sandwich spread for an interesting mix of sweet and savory flavors.

As an added bonus, your whole house will smell *wonderful* while this is cooking away in your slow cooker!



Ingredients:

1 can (29 ounces) pumpkin puree
3/4 c. apple juice
1 T. fresh lemon juice

2 T. pumpkin pie spice*
1/2 c. real maple syrup
¼ t. kosher salt

Note: If you don't have pumpkin pie spice, you can make your own by combining 3 T. cinnamon, 1 T. ground ginger, 1 T. ground nutmeg, 2 t. ground allspice, and 2 t. ground cloves. Store excess in an airtight container.

Directions:

Add all ingredients to slow cooker and stir until thoroughly combined. Cook on low heat for 4 -5 hours. (You may need to adjust cooking time to achieve the thickness you want). For best results, stir occasionally while cooking.

Cool slightly before transferring to airtight glass containers. Store in refrigerator for up to a week.

BEVERAGES

Slow Cooker Caramel-Spiced Apple Cider



Talk about comfort in a cup! This warm, spiced apple cider is packed with some of the best flavors of fall... apple cider, pumpkin pie spice, and delicious, silky caramel. What's even better is your slow cooker does most of the work for you while it fills your house with wonderful aromas.

Note: you can simplify this recipe quite a bit with the use of pre-made caramel sauce and whipped cream. However, for a truly decadent experience without all the artificial ingredients, give the homemade versions a try at least once.

Ingredients:

½ gallon apple cider	2 t. real vanilla extract
1/3 c. brown sugar, packed	3 cinnamon sticks
2 T. pumpkin pie spice*	

¾ c. homemade caramel sauce, divided** (recipe included below)
Maple-whipped cream*** (recipe included below)

If you don't have pumpkin pie spice, you can make your own by combining 3 T. cinnamon, 1 T. ground ginger, 1 T. ground nutmeg, 2 t. ground allspice, and 2 t. ground cloves. Store in an airtight container.

****Caramel Sauce:**

½ c. heavy cream
1 c. white sugar
2 T. water
4 T. unsalted butter

*****Maple Whipped Cream:**

1 pint heavy whipped cream
1-2 T. real maple syrup

Directions:

For the Caramel Sauce:

Pre-heat oven to lowest setting.

Warm the heavy cream in a small saucepan over low heat. (You'll want to slightly warm the cream to prevent curdling when it is added to the hot liquid).

Add the sugar and water to a heavy-bottomed oven-safe saucepan and stir to combine. Set spoon aside and do not stir the sugar mixture again. Bring mixture to a boil over medium-high heat. If sugar crystals remain on the sides of the pan, gently brush them back down with a moistened silicon baking brush.

Continue boiling until the mixture turns a nice amber color. Do not overcook. If mixture gets too dark at this stage, you will need to start over. If a dark spot forms on one side due to uneven heating, lift the pan and gently swirl until the color is even again. Return pan to the burner and reduce heat when the desired color is achieved.

Slowly whisk in the warmed cream until thoroughly incorporated. Be very careful while doing so because the sugar mixture will be extremely hot and will bubble up when the cooler cream is added.

Remove from heat and add butter. Stir with a clean spoon until butter is totally incorporated into the mixture. Cool and store in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 5 days.

For the Maple Whipped Cream:

In a large glass bowl, beat 1 pint of heavy whipping cream with a hand beater or immersion blender until it doubles in size and changes texture. Then, drizzle maple syrup into the bowl and continue blending until the mixture is light and fluffy.

For the Apple Cider:

Add the apple cider, brown sugar, pumpkin pie spice, vanilla, and cinnamon sticks to your slow cooker. Cover and cook on low for 3 hours.

After 2.5 hours, stir in ½ cup caramel sauce. Cover and allow the flavors to mingle for remaining 30 minutes.

Remove and discard cinnamon sticks. To serve, ladle the hot cider into mugs and top with maple whipped cream and drizzle with additional caramel sauce.

Classic (Virgin) Moscow Mule with Fresh Ginger Simple Syrup



Although Moscow Mules are meant to be enjoyed ice cold, there is something inherently comforting about the warm, spicy notes of ginger found in this classic, non-alcoholic cocktail.

Traditionally, Moscow Mules are served in beautiful copper mugs that are both appealing and functional. Unfortunately, this popular metal may be unhealthy if ingested in significant amounts. As a result, most copper mugs sold today are lined with a non-reactive metal.

However, if you have the more traditional, unlined versions, avoid serving hot or acidic liquids in them to avoid any health issues.

Ingredients:

2 oz. Cream soda*	2 t. Ginger simple syrup**, or to taste
2 T. fresh or bottled lime juice	Fresh mint sprigs, to garnish
Ginger ale (enough to top off mug)	Lime wedges, to garnish

**Ginger Simple Syrup

½ c. water	3" fresh ginger, peeled and cut into small pieces
½ c. white sugar	

Directions:

To make the ginger simple syrup, add water and sugar to a medium saucepan. Peel a 3" piece of fresh ginger and chop into small pieces and add to the pan.

Note: The smaller you cut each piece of ginger, the more surface area you will expose to the boiling sugar mixture. This will give your simple syrup a stronger ginger flavor.

Bring mixture to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer for 20 minutes. Remove from heat and let cool.

Fill copper mugs with ice cubes and add ginger ale and lime juice. Top with cream soda and a drizzle of simple syrup. Stir to combine. Garnish with a sprig of fresh mint and a wedge of lime and serve immediately.

*If desired, you could switch the amounts of ginger ale and cream soda in this recipe. I thought I would prefer more cream soda, but after testing it both ways, I found that adding a greater amount of ginger ale gave the drink more *zing!*

Pumpkin Spice Irish Hot Chocolate

Pumpkin pie spice is one of the quintessential flavors of fall. Although you can buy containers of this popular spice, it only takes a couple of minutes to whip up your own using ingredients you probably already have on hand. Use what you need and store the rest in an airtight container for several weeks - if it lasts that long! 😊



If you can't get enough of this classic spice combo, this recipe combines it with hot chocolate, Irish Crème creamer and delicious whipped cream for a cozy and satisfying family-friendly treat. *Enjoy!*

Ingredients:

Pumpkin Pie Spice:

3 T. cinnamon
1 T. ground ginger
1 T. ground nutmeg

2 t. ground allspice
2 t. ground cloves

Homemade Whipped Cream ingredients:*

1 pint heavy whipping cream

2 T. real maple syrup

1 T. pumpkin pie spice

2 cup freshly-made hot chocolate (your favorite mix)

1 cup Irish Crème-flavored coffee creamer
1 T. Pero powder, optional

Additional pumpkin pie spice, for garnish

* Can substitute pre-made whipped cream, if preferred.

Directions:

In a large glass bowl, blend 1 pint of heavy whipping cream with a hand beater or immersion blender until it doubles in size and changes texture. Then, drizzle maple syrup into the bowl and continue blending until the mixture is light and fluffy. Set aside.

Before making your hot chocolate, sprinkle the cocoa with pumpkin pie spice (and Pero powder, if using) and gently stir to evenly combine the mixture. Now make hot chocolate, as usual. Note: the Pero gives the beverage a more "mocha" flavor.

Pour 2-4 Tbsp. Irish Crème creamer into each cup and top with ~4 oz. of freshly-made hot chocolate. Top with whipped cream and sprinkle with additional pumpkin pie spice before serving.

Spicy Mulled Apple Cider



This warm, spicy concoction is a delicious treat on a crisp autumn day. It only takes a couple minutes to add the ingredients to your slow cooker - and before you know it, you'll be serving up

a special treat that everyone will enjoy. As an added bonus, the welcoming aroma of warm spices will soon fill your kitchen, as well.

Ingredients:

1 gallon apple cider	3-4 cinnamon sticks
1 orange, washed thoroughly and sliced	1 t. ground allspice
1 small handful whole cloves	3 T. maple syrup

Directions:

Combine all ingredients in a slow cooker and stir to combine. Cook on lowest setting for 3-4 hours. Strain and serve hot.