

[The Washington Post]

FOOD

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PHOTOS BY TERRY ALLEN / STYLED BY VIRGINIA WILLIS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

T H A N K S G I V I N G

The Blended, Bountiful Table

By BONNIE S. BENWICK | Washington Post Staff Writer

Leaves swirl, ovens warm the kitchens and jewel-toned produce swells the farmers markets. Home cooks take it all in each fall . . . and start to fret. ■ Angst creeps into Food section readers' calls and queries weeks before Thanksgiving. We understand, mostly. The holiday table can be too beige, brown and bland. It is an unwieldy roster of family favorites that don't quite fit together or an overwhelming ode to carbohydrates. Vegetarians go on the defensive.

Even when turkey and trimmings are welcome, their simultaneous preparation is not.

And so we say: Take a deep breath. We have a plan. It starts with the grace and bounty of a menu inspired by Southern and French sensibilities, which is a surprisingly happy union. Much of it can be made in advance.

Chef Virginia Willis demonstrates the synthesis in her first cookbook, "Bon Appetit, Y'all," published this year. The Atlanta resident grew up cooking at her mother's and grandmother's elbows, and she was trained in classical French culinary techniques.

"We think turkey is all-American, but it's not," she says with a soft, husky drawl. "When I lived in France, I'd go to the butch-

er and find turkey breasts and turkey paupiettes, thin slices wrapped around forcemeat.

"Of course, they don't go for the 25-pound behemoths that we get," she adds.

Willis, 41, has returned to France several times since she studied at the Ecole de Cuisine La Varenne in the mid-1990s (and at L'Academie de Cuisine in Gaithersburg before that, and as an intern to Southern food doyenne Nathalie Dupree before that). She'll never forget how low it felt to spend Thanksgiving abroad.

"It wasn't just the food I missed. I opted not to go to an expat restaurant in Paris and had roast chicken at a bistro instead," she says. "It made me tragically homesick."

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Coming Sunday

How green is your Thanksgiving table? Plus: Chef on Call goes game hunting for the holiday.

Mama's Pecan Pie
Makes two 9-inch pies (16 servings)

Chef Virginia Willis says too many pecan pies are mostly goo without enough pecans, making them far too sweet. The secret to the success of this pie is that its pecan-to-goo ratio is just right.

As a child, Willis helped her mother make the pie by running the nuts through a hand-held grinder, which her mother still uses. It has a crank that forces the nuts through two opposing forklife blades and a glass jar to catch the nut pieces. The metal top that screws into the glass jar is bent and dinged, but the tool still cuts the nuts just right.

MAKE AHEAD: The pie crust dough can be assembled and refrigerated up to 3 days in advance. The pie can be baked up to 2 days ahead. Store in an airtight container at room temperature.

Adapted from Willis's "Bon Appetit, Y'all" (Ten Speed Press, 2008).



PHOTO BY TERRY ALLEN / STYLED BY VIRGINIA WILLIS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

INGREDIENTS

For the crusts

- 2 1/2 cups flour, plus more for the work surface
- 1 teaspoon fine sea salt
- 1/2 cup chilled solid vegetable shortening, such as Crisco brand, cut into small pieces
- 8 tablespoons (1 stick) chilled unsalted butter, cut into small pieces
- 6 tablespoons ice water, plus more as needed

For the filling

- 3 large eggs, slightly beaten
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 cup light corn syrup
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1/4 teaspoon fine sea salt
- 3 cups (two 6-ounce packages) pecan halves, coarsely chopped (see headnote)

DIRECTIONS

- For the crusts: Combine the flour, salt, shortening and butter in the bowl of a food processor; pulse for up to 10 seconds, until the mixture resembles a coarse meal.
- Add the ice water one tablespoon at a time, pulsing to combine just until the dough comes together without being sticky or crumbly. Shape the dough into 2 flat disks and wrap separately in plastic wrap. Refrigerate for at least 30 minutes and up to overnight.
- Have ready two 9-inch pie plates. Lightly flour a work surface.
- Working with one disk of dough at a time (keeping the remaining disk chilled), place the dough in the center of the floured surface and roll close to, but not over, the edge of the dough farthest from you. Lift the dough and give it a quarter-turn; repeat the rolling and turning until the dough is 1/8-inch thick and about 2 inches wider than the diameter of the 9-inch pie plates.
- Ease the pie dough into the pie plate; trim to a 1-inch overhang, then fold the overhang under itself along the rim of the plate. Use a fork or your fingers to crimp the edge as desired. Refrigerate for 30 minutes; repeat the process with the remaining disk of dough.
- When ready to bake, preheat the oven to 350 degrees.
- For the filling: Combine the eggs, sugar, corn syrup, butter, vanilla and salt in a medium bowl, stirring until mixed well. Add the pecans, stirring to incorporate. Divide the filling evenly between the 2 chilled pie shells.
- Place the pies on a large baking sheet and bake, rotating once, for about 55 minutes, until a knife inserted into the center comes out clean. Transfer the pies to a wire rack to cool before serving or storing.

NUTRITION | Per serving: 440 calories, 5 g protein, 46 g carbohydrates, 27 g fat, 8 g saturated fat, 58 mg cholesterol, 193 mg sodium, 2 g dietary fiber

Recipe tested by Bonnie S. Benwick; e-mail questions to food@washpost.com.

The Bounty of a Blended Menu

SOUTHERN-FRENCH, From F1

The menu Willis devised for The Post this year is the same one she'll be sharing with her partner of 20 years and their families, save for the addition of a mandatory corn bread dressing. Preserved figs, blackberry jelly and pickles are their standard condiments. She knows the math of a thoughtful Thanksgiving cook: Add, but never take away. "I'm excited about it," she says. "The flavors all work together."

At the heart of the meal is a butter-basted turkey that can serve as a cornucopia for a rich mixture of chestnuts and mushrooms. That combination is very French, Willis says. Her complementary celeriac puree, featuring a root vegetable beloved by French cooks, adds dimension to what might otherwise be an ordinary bowl of mashed potatoes.

The chef's kale-and-squash side dish evolved more from her employ as kitchen director for Martha Stewart television shows in the late '90s than from her Southern roots. She tries a theory out loud: "Maybe it's New Southern." Yet its gratee-need preparation, with cream and a crumb topping, speaks to her French approach.

That approach, Willis explains, might mean something as simple as the skill or patience it takes to cut everything to the same size, so it all cooks at the same rate of speed. And the concept of *mise en place*, of having ingredients assembled and prepped before making a dish, is part of her classical training that would benefit all Thanksgiving cooks.

The yeast roll and blackberry cobbler recipes have truly Southern roots, from the grandmother she called Meme. The rolls are a bountiful, old-school recipe that her grandfather also had a hand in. "Meme didn't have a mixer. She had him," Willis explains, recalling the way her grandfather would be called into service, using a bread-beating spoon to tame great amounts of yeast dough.

The rolls are a two-step production that might seem burdensome to an already-busy holiday cook, and the recipe makes a hefty amount. "The effort involved in making a half-dozen seems hardly worth it, though," Willis says. "So go ahead and make them all. They freeze well."

Her mother's pecan pie is "one of



BY ANDREA BURNS

Virginia Willis's holiday menu combines Southern and French sensibilities.

those recipes that was being made before I was born," Willis says; at some point, it probably involved the back of a bottle of Karo syrup. Her mother, also named Virginia, creates a dessert that is not too sweet and not too thick, with the right proportion of goo to pecans. In her book, the chef describes the way a hand grinder was used to chop the pie's pecans just so: not a French technique, just Willis's usual careful treatment.

The fact that the recipe yields two pies is no accident: Leftovers are in mind. "I prefer that pie after a

couple of days," Willis says. "The sugars and nuts get chevy."

There's no question that Willis's menu requires cooks who are prepared to spend time in the kitchen. But their efforts will be rewarded with a beautiful and gracious array of food that beckons family and friends to the table, and that's just what Thanksgiving is about.

Join Virginia Willis for our Free Range chat online at 1 p.m. today; go to www.washingtonpost.com/food.

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Tool Test

The Case of Fry vs. Fry

By BONNIE S. BENWICK
Washington Post Staff Writer

A bird in hot oil still beats two in the oven, or so goes America's passion for deep-fried turkey at holiday time. Cookbook author John Martin Taylor, a man deeply committed to frying, says "no kind of roasting can make the bird more delicious, especially if that bird's been brined first."

In dozens of cooking classes and demonstrations on television shows, Taylor has measured, then poured gallons of oil into large, drum-shaped turkey fryers, produced perfectly done specimens and poured out even more oil (as the bird's fat has been rendered) to prove that the technique is not as unhealthful as it seems.

Using the contraptions can lighten an oven's to-do list on Thanksgiving, giving cooks a hand for less than the cost of a stand mixer. And turkey is not the fryers' only purpose. Depending on the power source and design, the drums can handle several smaller birds at once, or big meats, or they can be used for boiling and steaming as well as frying up to three pounds of French fries at a time.

For those without back yards or access to cooking outdoors, the practice got an upgrade in 2007 with the introduction of an electric big-drum oil fryer specifically for kitchen use. (Features such as a maximum-fill line that is halfway up the inner pot and a spout for releasing used oil or liquid make it safe and non-intimidating.) Last year we also saw the release of a device that uses infrared or thermal heat to "fry" without oil; the unit is for outdoor use only. (Does anyone besides us find it ironic that the no-oil approach is used outdoors and the hot-oil approach is for indoors?)

So we pitted indoor unit against outdoor unit: **Masterbuilt's Electric Fryer, Boiler and Steamer vs. Char-Broil's Big Easy Oil-less Turkey Fryer** (1600 series). Both are available at big-box stores and online, with pre-holiday price tags of \$130 to \$140. There are helpful instructional videos online:

■ www.bbqguys.com/video_list_132-133.html?item=12354



BY DARYN SMITH FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Masterbuilt's Electric Fryer, Boiler and Steamer, left, and Char-Broil Big Easy Oil-less Turkey Fryer.

■ www.charbroil.com/Consumer/viewKnowledge.aspx?KnowledgeID=1889

Each unit has its pluses and minuses, yet both produced nicely cooked birds. Cooking time per pound is about three minutes for the electric fryer vs. 10 minutes for the oil-less fryer, but that time advantage can be offset by the fact that it takes close to an hour for the oil to reach the proper temperature.

If a cook had the means to operate either fryer, we'd recommend the Big Easy oil-less model because of its ease of use and because aromatics can be employed in the turkey cavity. If that same cook had cause to boil, steam and fry in large amounts, then we'd recommend the Masterbuilt Electric Fryer because of its multi-tasking ability.

In that vein, we submit the following cooks' profiles that best match the units:

- AN INDOOR-FRYER COOK:**
- Has enough counter or heat-safe floor space to accommodate the unit, which is about 18 inches high and 21 inches wide.
 - Doesn't mind spending more on the cooking oil than on the turkey (about \$45 for three gallons).
 - Doesn't care that there will be no drippings for gravy.
 - Doesn't mind having a kitchen that smells for a few days like a beach boardwalk fries stand.
 - Doesn't want to cook a bird

- larger than 14 pounds.
- Has good marinade or brining recipes (spice rubs tend to burn off in the hot oil).
- Has the wherewithal and storage space to deal with the used oil.

AN OIL-LESS FRYER COOK:

- Owns basic hand tools and is patient enough to put the unit together, which takes about an hour (or is fortunate enough to have a designated engineer on hand).
- Already owns a full-size propane tank (which costs about \$48 empty and \$18 to \$28 to fill) and isn't afraid to use it (or has a designated propane engineer on hand).
- Is prepared to sit outdoors and monitor the cooking, which, for example, can take 1 1/2 to 2 hours for a 14-pound turkey (or has a designated sitter).

Can accommodate the cleaning (by hand) of the 12.5-inch-wide-by-17-inch-high interior pot.

■ Isn't squeamish about using the drippings, which the fryer directions recommend reheating "in order to kill bacteria" (from juices released during cooking).

■ Doesn't mind neighborhood dogs and cats stalking the perimeter of the back yard as the wafting aromas of hot turkey fill the air.

Share your fryer experiences or ask questions on our Free Range chat online at 1 p.m. today at www.washingtonpost.com/food.

Recipes

Have recipe questions?
E-mail food@washpost.com

Southern-French Thanksgiving

Meme's Blackberry Cobbler

6 to 8 servings

This is a batter cobbler; when it is poured into a hot cast-iron skillet, the batter immediately crisps and swells.

Serve warm with whipped cream, creme fraiche or ice cream.

MAKE AHEAD: Because this is served in the skillet in which it was made, it's better to make the cobbler the same day it will be served.

Adapted from chef Virginia Willis's "Bon Appetit, Y'all" (Ten Speed Press, 2008).

INGREDIENTS

- 4 tablespoons (½ stick) unsalted butter
- 4 cups fresh or defrosted fruit, such as blackberries, peaches, raspberries, blueberries, plums, cherries or apricots
- 1 cup sugar, plus more for (optional) sprinkling
- 1 cup flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- Pinch fine sea salt
- 1 cup whole milk
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract

DIRECTIONS

- Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.
- Place the butter in a large (10- to 12-inch) cast-iron skillet (may substitute a large ovenproof baking dish) and place in the oven so the butter melts; this should take 5 to 7 minutes.
- Meanwhile, place the fruit in a large mixing bowl. Use a potato masher to mash the fruit just enough so that it releases some of its juices. If the fruit is tart, sprinkle a little sugar on top.
- Whisk together the flour, baking powder and salt in a separate medium bowl. Add the cup of sugar, milk and vanilla extract, stirring until well incorporated.
- Remove the skillet from the oven. Carefully pour the melted butter from the skillet into the batter, stirring to combine, then pour the batter all at once into the skillet. Add the fruit and juices to the center of the batter. Bake for 50 to 60 minutes, until the top is golden brown and a toothpick inserted into the batter comes out mostly clean. Serve warm, straight from the skillet.

NUTRITION | Per serving (based on 8): 249 calories, 3 g protein, 46 g carbohydrates, 7 g fat, 5 g saturated fat, 19 mg cholesterol, 156 mg sodium, 1 g dietary fiber

Recipe tested by Jane Touzalin; e-mail questions to food@washpost.com.



Celeriac Puree

4 to 6 servings

French-style potato purees are very finely processed and often incorporate copious amounts of butter, so the resulting mixture is silky smooth. In this recipe, the addition of celeriac to the potatoes creates an extra layer of flavor.

MAKE AHEAD: This may be prepared up to 2 days in advance and reheated on the stove top or in the microwave. If the consistency is too thick, add milk, butter or chicken broth to thin it.

Adapted from "Bon Appetit, Y'all," by Virginia Willis (Ten Speed Press, 2008).

INGREDIENTS

- 2 pounds Yukon gold potatoes, peeled and cut crosswise into ½-inch slices

- 2 pounds (1 large bulb) celeriac (celery root), peeled and cut in half and then cut into ½-inch slices
- 2 cups low-fat or whole milk
- Kosher salt

- 4 tablespoons (½ stick) unsalted butter
- White pepper, preferably freshly ground

DIRECTIONS

- Combine the potatoes, celeriac and milk in a large saucepan, then fill with enough cool water so the liquid covers the vegetables by about 2 inches. Bring to a boil over high heat; season generously with salt. Reduce the heat to low and cook for 20 to 25 minutes, until the potatoes and celeriac are tender when pierced with a knife.
- Drain the vegetables in a colander, discarding the liquid, and return them to the saucepan over

medium heat. Cook for 1 to 2 minutes, stirring constantly, until a floury film forms on the bottom of the saucepan.

- Use a ricer, food mill or potato masher to mash the vegetables in the saucepan until smooth. Add the butter, stirring vigorously until well combined. Taste and adjust the seasoning with salt and pepper as needed. Serve immediately or cool to room temperature, cover and refrigerate for up to 2 days.

NUTRITION | Per serving (based on 6, using low-fat milk): 285 calories, 8 g protein, 44 g carbohydrates, 8 g fat, 6 g saturated fat, 25 mg cholesterol, 203 mg sodium, 5 g dietary fiber

Recipe tested by Belle Elving; e-mail questions to food@washpost.com.



PHOTOS BY TERRY ALLEN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST; STYLED BY VIRGINIA WILLIS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Roast Turkey With Mushrooms, Chestnuts and Gravy

12 servings

The slow-roasted turkey looks beautiful when delivered to the table, with herbs just under the skin. No one will miss a traditional breadly stuffing when presented with this rich-tasting mushroom-and-chestnut side dish. The mushrooms and chestnuts are cooked separately but can be combined in the turkey cavity just before serving.

The recipe calls for fresh chestnuts, but peeled chestnuts are available at several food stores.

MAKE AHEAD: The chestnuts can be peeled then refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 3 days. The mushrooms can be prepared 2 days in advance and reheated on the stovetop or in the microwave. From chef Virginia Willis.

INGREDIENTS

For the turkey and chestnuts

- 8 tablespoons (1 stick) unsalted butter, melted, plus more for the pan
- 1 12- to 14-pound turkey, neck and giblets removed from the cavity
- 6 fresh bay leaves
- 7 1- to 2-inch rosemary sprigs
- 1 stalk celery, cut in half
- 1 medium onion, cut in half
- Coarse salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 2 pounds fresh chestnuts, peeled (see NOTE)

For the mushrooms

- 1 tablespoon canola oil
- 1 medium shallot, minced (1 to 2 teaspoons)
- 2 pounds mushrooms, such as chanterelles, creminis, shiitakes or morels; cleaned and cut into halves or quarters
- Coarse salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped flat-leaf parsley

For the gravy

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 tablespoons flour
- 4 cups homemade turkey stock or store-bought low-sodium chicken broth, to supplement the defatted turkey drippings
- Coarse salt
- Freshly ground black pepper

DIRECTIONS

- Preheat the oven to 325 degrees. Have ready a large roasting pan with a rack insert.

- Use a little of the melted butter to lightly grease the roasting rack and pan. Use paper towels to pat the turkey dry. Place the bird on the rack in the pan, tucking the wingtips under.
- Without completely detaching the skin, use your fingers to carefully loosen it from the turkey breast. Slip 5 of the bay leaves and 6 of the rosemary sprigs between the skin and the breast meat. Place the celery, onion and remaining bay leaf and rosemary sprig in the cavity of the turkey.
- Brush the bird with at least half of the melted butter, then season the turkey lightly with salt and pepper. Cover loosely with heavy-duty aluminum foil. Slow-roast, basting frequently during cooking with the remaining melted butter and drippings from the pan, for 3 to 4 hours, until an instant-read thermometer registers 165 to 170 degrees when inserted into the meaty part of thigh. (The juices should be clear, not reddish-pink, when the thigh muscle is pierced with a knife.) Begin checking for doneness after 3 hours.
- Uncover the turkey during its last hour in the oven and add the prepared chestnuts to the bottom of the pan. They should take about 45 minutes to become tender; stir them occasionally. The turkey should be nicely browned.
- Transfer the turkey to a cutting board, preferably one with a moat to catch any juices. Cover the turkey loosely with foil. Let stand for 20 minutes. Pour the pan drippings into a fat separator measuring cup.
- Use a slotted spoon to transfer the chestnuts to a serving bowl; set aside and keep warm.
- For the mushrooms: Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Add the shallot and mushrooms, stirring to combine and coat. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Cook, stirring occasionally, for about 10 minutes, until tender. Remove from the heat. Add the parsley and stir to combine. Set aside and keep warm.
- For the gravy: Melt the butter in a large saucepan over medium heat. When the butter begins to foam, whisk in the flour; cook, whisking constantly, for about 3 minutes.
- Whisk in the reserved drippings and the turkey stock or broth (a total of 4 cups' worth). Increase the heat to high just to bring to a boil, then reduce the heat to medium. Cook, stirring, for about 15 minutes, until the gravy is thick enough to coat the back of a wooden spoon. Taste and adjust the seasoning with salt and pepper.
- To serve, carve the turkey and serve with the mushrooms, chestnuts and gravy.
- **NOTE:** To peel chestnuts, use a paring knife to score around the middle of each chestnut, being careful not to cut the flesh. Spread on a rimmed baking sheet. Roast in 400-degree oven for 20 minutes; the peel will have separated where the cut was made. Peel and discard the skin and the thin membrane of the chestnuts. Keep at room temperature until ready to add to the turkey roasting pan, or cover in an airtight container and store for up to 3 days.

NUTRITION | Per serving (using low-sodium chicken broth): 708 calories, 62 g protein, 37 g carbohydrates, 33 g fat, 13 g saturated fat, 243 mg cholesterol, 387 mg sodium, 1 g dietary fiber

Recipe tested by Bonnie S. Benwick; e-mail questions to food@washpost.com.

Meme's Yeast Rolls

Makes 28 rolls

Virginia Willis's grandmother was called Meme. This is her recipe, but the kneading was usually done by Willis's grandfather (called Dede). He beat the dough with a special wooden spoon that had a small ledge on the end for gripping. He'd cradle the big bowl in his arm and beat the wet dough so it slapped "wap, wap, wap" against the side. All that "muscle" developed the dough's structure, causing the rolls to rise in the oven light as air, slightly sweet and richly sour with the scent of yeast.

MAKE AHEAD: These can be made up to 2 days ahead and stored at room temperature in an airtight container. Alternatively, make them a week in advance, wrap tightly in aluminum foil and freeze. When ready to serve, without defrosting, heat them in the foil in a 350-degree oven until warm. Loosen the foil to warm through completely.

Adapted from Willis's "Bon Appetit, Y'all" (Ten Speed Press, 2008).

INGREDIENTS

- 3 packets (6¾ teaspoons total) active dry yeast
- ½ cup warm water (100 to 110 degrees)
- 2 cups hot water (120 degrees)
- 1 cup nonfat powdered milk
- 1 cup sugar
- ½ cup corn oil, plus more for brushing
- 4 large eggs, lightly beaten
- 4 teaspoons fine sea salt
- 9 to 10 cups flour, plus more for the work surface

DIRECTIONS

- Combine the yeast and warm water in a large bowl, stirring to mix well. The mixture should become creamy and foamy after about 5 minutes.
- Combine the hot water and powdered milk in a liquid measuring cup; let cool slightly, then add to the yeast mixture, stirring to combine. Add the sugar, oil, eggs, salt and 4 cups of the flour. Use a wooden spoon, hand-held electric mixer or large heavy-duty stand mixer fitted with the dough hook at medium speed; beat very hard for 3 to 5 minutes, until smooth. Gradually add the flour one cup at a time, beating hard after each addition.
- When the dough is too firm to stir, use your hands to work enough of the remaining flour into the dough by kneading and turning the dough until it becomes smooth and elastic.

- Turn out the dough onto a lightly floured surface. Use the heel of your hand to compress and push the dough away from you, then fold it back over itself. Give the dough a small turn and repeat. (The dough is ready if it bounces back when pressed with your fingers.) Return the dough to the bowl.
- Cover with plastic wrap or a clean, dry kitchen towel; place in a warm, draft-free spot to rise for about 2 hours, or until doubled in size.
- Lightly grease a large baking sheet with nonstick cooking oil spray. Punch down the dough with your hands, then turn out onto a lightly floured work surface. Flour your hands and pull off equal pieces of dough about the size of apricots and shape into balls. (If you are using a scale, 3-ounce portions will make 28 large rolls.) Place them on the prepared baking sheet, spaced about ¼ inch apart. Brush off any excess flour from the rolls and brush their surfaces with oil. Cover and let rise again in a warm place for 1 to 1½ hours, until the rolls have doubled in bulk.
- When ready to bake, preheat the oven to 375 degrees. Bake for 12 to 15 minutes, until browned. Transfer the baking sheet to a wire rack to cool slightly, then invert the rolls onto the rack to keep them from getting soggy bottoms.

NUTRITION | Per roll: 232 calories, 6 g protein, 40 g carbohydrates, 5 g fat, 1 g saturated fat, 31 mg cholesterol, 300 mg sodium, 1 g dietary fiber

Recipe tested by Bonnie S. Benwick; e-mail questions to food@washpost.com.

Kale and Butternut Squash Gratin

8 to 10 servings

This is a creamy and rich way to treat fall's deeply colored vegetables.

MAKE AHEAD: This dish may be assembled up to 2 days ahead. On serving day, remove it from the refrigerator and let it come to room temperature. Bake as directed.

From chef Virginia Willis.

INGREDIENTS

- 2 medium butternut squash (about 3 pounds), cut in half and seeded
- 2 tablespoons canola oil
- 8 ounces kale (stems trimmed and large ribs removed), rinsed and cut into thin slices
- 4 medium cloves garlic, minced
- Coarse salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- ½ teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
- Pinch allspice
- Leaves from 4 sprigs of thyme, coarsely chopped
- 1½ cups heavy cream
- 3 tablespoons panko (Japanese) bread crumbs
- ¾ cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese

DIRECTIONS

- Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Use butter to lightly grease a large (2½-quart) gratin dish.
- Peel the squash, then cut it crosswise into ¼-inch-thick slices.
- Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Add the kale, still slightly damp, and cook, stirring occasionally, for about 3 minutes, until it has wilted. Add the garlic and cook, stirring, for 45 to 60 seconds, until it is fragrant.
- Place half of the sliced squash in the prepared gratin dish; season with salt and pepper to taste.
- Combine the nutmeg, allspice and thyme in a small bowl.

TIP » ABOUT KALE

It's best to buy kale just before you are going to use it, because it tends to get flabby and bitter after a few days' refrigeration. Store it in an open plastic bag in the coldest part of the fridge.

Source: "Uncommon Fruits & Vegetables," by Elizabeth Schneider (William Morrow, 1986).

- Place the kale over the squash and sprinkle with half of the nutmeg-thyme mixture. Top with the remaining squash and sprinkle with the remaining nutmeg-thyme mixture.
- Pour the cream over the vegetables; cover the gratin dish tightly with aluminum foil. Bake for about 45 minutes, until tender.
- While the vegetables are baking, combine the panko bread crumbs and Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese in a small bowl.
- Reduce the oven temperature to 375 degrees. Discard the foil from the gratin dish and use a spatula to press down on the mixture. Sprinkle the bread crumb-cheese mixture over the vegetables. Return to the oven and bake, uncovered, for about 10 minutes, until golden brown. Transfer to a wire rack to cool for at least 10 minutes before serving.

NUTRITION | Per serving (based on 10): 255 calories, 6 g protein, 21 g carbohydrates, 18 g fat, 10 g saturated fat, 55 mg cholesterol, 148 mg sodium, 3 g dietary fiber

Recipe tested by Bonnie S. Benwick; e-mail questions to food@washpost.com.



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