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HOLIDAY FOOD ISSUE

Snazzy starters



Smart advice from chef Jennifer Jasinski, 37, of Rioja in Denver

TIP: Use underappreciated seasonal foods. Try chestnuts, pomegranates, kabocha squash, pears and wild mushrooms.

TIP: Polish your presentation. "At Rioja, we serve this soup in baby pumpkins," Jasinski says. "At home, hollow out a large pumpkin, fill it with the soup, and serve."

■ Chestnut Soup

¼ cup olive oil or duck fat
1½ cups onions, sliced
¼ cup garlic cloves, whole
1½ cups mushrooms, sliced
10 fresh sage leaves, no stems
1 tsp. whole black peppercorns
1 bay leaf

12-14 ounces whole peeled chestnuts (about 2 pounds unpeeled)

TIP: Buy quick-frozen, pre-peeled chestnuts at specialty food stores or Earthy Delights (earthy.com) Or learn how to roast chestnuts at usaweekend.com.

1¼ cups white wine
5 cups chicken stock
½ cinnamon stick
½ tsp. cardamom powder
1¼ cups heavy cream
½-1 Tb. kosher salt, to taste
½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
2 Tbs. sugar

In a large pot over medium heat, warm oil or fat. Add onions and garlic; sauté until translucent. Add mushrooms, sage, peppercorns and bay leaf, and sauté until mushrooms have softened. Add chestnuts and wine. Cook until the wine has evaporated, then add chicken stock.

Bring soup to a boil, reduce heat, then simmer on very low for 45 minutes. Stir in cinnamon, cardamom and cream; simmer for 10 minutes until chestnuts are very soft.

Remove from heat; blend until smooth. Add salt, pepper and sugar. Strain through a sieve. Serve immediately, or refrigerate and reheat to serve. Yield: 8 cups.

■ Pomegranate Salad

1 lemon, juiced
¼ cup water
2 heads Belgian endive, leaves separated
2 heads radicchio lettuce, such as treviso, leaves separated
2 bunches watercress, large stems removed
2 medium apples, preferably Granny Smith or Fuji, sliced in very thin slivers
1 cup gorgonzola cheese, crumbled
Salt and pepper to taste
2 fresh pomegranates, seeded (Tip: Cut each pomegranate in quarters, then knock the back of the fruit with the back of a heavy spoon. To avoid staining, wear gloves and cover work surface.)

In a small bowl, combine lemon juice and water. Toss endive leaves in lemon water to prevent browning.

Reserve 24 endive leaves and 24 radicchio leaves, then chop the rest in 1-inch slices on the diagonal.

In a large bowl, toss the chopped endive and radicchio with watercress, apple, gorgonzola, salt, pepper and 1½ cups of the pomegranate vinaigrette (recipe follows). Set aside.

To serve, alternate reserved endive and radicchio leaves around 8 salad plates; drizzle with reserved dressing. Mound a portion of salad in the center of each plate. Garnish with pomegranate seeds.

Pomegranate Vinaigrette

1 quart pomegranate juice, such as Pom brand
2 cups apple juice
¼ cup red wine vinegar
¼ cup finely chopped shallots
1 Tb. chopped thyme
½ tsp. black pepper
½ cup olive oil
½ cup canola oil
Salt to taste

In a wide sauté pan over high heat, reduce pomegranate and apple juices to ½ to ¾ cup, about the thickness of pancake syrup. Remove from heat, transfer to a stainless-steel mixing bowl and cool to room temperature. When cool, slowly whisk in remaining ingredients. Yield: 2 cups.

Our annual Holiday Food Issue

Top chefs offer smart gourmet solutions to your common culinary dilemmas. You'll eat up their advice.

INSIDE: A Thanksgiving menu, including

- Creamy soup
- Succulent turkey with lump-free gravy
- Desserts to surprise and delight

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