



ISSUE # 11

From the Kitchen of Marybeth Gregg February 2006

In This Issue:

- ◆ February Party Themes ◆ Brighten- up-the-Table Ideas
 - ◆ Romantic Valentine's Day Tips and Sexy Foods ◆ 'Ask The Cook' Column
 - ◆ National Women's Heart Health Month ◆ Recipes
 - ◆ Visiting Author ◆ Upcoming News
-

FEBRUARY PARTY THEMES

In the middle of the winter doldrums, unless you are lucky enough to be in Australia, it is fun to think about warm weather. This is a great time to host a Caribbean Party, Hawaiian Party, Southwestern Party – you get the idea. These are two themes for you to enjoy:

Tropical:

For a tropical party, go all out and have your guests wear flip-flops and Hawaiian shirts. Turn up the heat and if you are brave or have an enclosed porch, fill up a small blow-up pool with sand and seashells. If you really have cabin fever, go crazy, get some fake palm trees from the party store, and hang tropical flowers from the fronds. Get large seashells and paint your guests names on them, or let them.

Mardi Gras:

The end of February is time for Mardi Gras. Just go to any party store and gather up those cheap, shiny beads, hats and feathers. Get some bright colored flowers for the table and scatter beads and confetti all over - a very inexpensive and colorful way to decorate.

SOUNDS AND AROMAS

For Tropical, play your favorite island music. Burn candles fragrant with coconut.

For Mardi Gras, find some great jazz from New Orleans.

DRINKS:

Make your favorite boat drink for a tropical theme, or try your hand at a Sazarac for Mardi Gras. Many people think that New Orleans is the home of the cocktail, and that this may have been the first cocktail invented. This is one of many traditional recipes:

Sazarac:

1 sugar cube or 1 teaspoon of granulated sugar
3 - 4 dashes bitters
2 ounces rye whiskey (most New Orleans bars use Old Overholt)
1/4 teaspoon Herbsaint, a New Orleans brand of anise liqueur (You may use Pernod, or some other pastis or absinthe substitute)
Strip of lemon peel

Fill a 3-1/2 ounce old-fashioned glass with ice. In a cocktail shaker, moisten the sugar cube with just enough water to saturate it, and then crush. Blend with the whiskey and bitters. Add a few cubes of ice and stir to chill. Discard the ice from the first glass and pour in the Herbsaint. Coat the inside of the entire glass, pouring out the excess. Strain the whiskey into the Herbsaint coated glass. Twist the lemon peel over the glass so that the lemon oil cascades into the drink, then rub the peel over the rim of the glass; do not put the twist in the drink.

So these are just a few ideas. Pick something that makes you happy and go from there. Be creative and have fun...

Marybeth Gregg

BRIGHTEN UP THE HOUSE

Spring Flowers

Start bringing spring flowers indoors. This is the time for primroses and forcing bulbs. If you want to lift your spirits and soothe your soul, stop into your local greenhouse or florist for lots of ideas and an instantaneous pick-me-up. The bright colors and fragrant scents of spring blossoms will do wonders.

Get a few pots of primroses or cyclamen to scatter all over your kitchen or hallway or living room. Try to place them in rooms where you spend a lot of time so that the colors cheer you.

Mix colors and inter-space these with pots of variegated ivy in a large shallow basket. This is also the time that fresh cut tulips are in - buy bunches – they are very reasonably priced.

Valentine's Day and 'Ask the Cook'

Red, Red, Red - What a great color for February. From red candles to red tulips, use this color lavishly throughout the house. **Wear red.**

Also, remember it is the time to think of others, and to be a bit romantic in the midst of our crazy lives. These are a few questions, and my answers, which were recently asked of me for an article on Valentine's Day:

Q: What is your idea of a romantic repast -- particularly at home?

A: My ideal romantic meal would be a surprise and entirely arranged by my husband. The table would be set with linens, candles and flowers, with my favorite music playing. As for the food, it wouldn't matter if he made dinner or if he went to a local, really good restaurant and got take-out. The surprise factor and the time that he would take to organize and present this dinner would be very romantic for me.

Q: At home -Do you set the mood? (candles, flowers, etc...)

A: Yes, I must say especially when entertaining or when there is a special occasion, I always set the mood. I usually pick a color theme first, and then select the china and glassware or crystal. Cloth tablecloths and napkins, flowers and candles are always a part of these meals. Soft lighting is also really important for setting the mood. I may use a dozen votive lights in glass containers, and put the overhead lights on low.

Also, being organized ahead of time and cooking most of the meal ahead really helps to set the mood. I want to be sure I am not frazzled at the last minute – nothing can ruin a mood than rushing around trying to cook everything at the same time. And no kids, no pets, and no telephone calls.

Q: What make food sexy? (I wasn't quite sure how to answer this one at first.)

A: Texture definitely makes food sexy - the creaminess of a crème Brule or the experience of a ripe, juicy pear or peach. The velvety feel of a chocolate truffle all fall into the sexy food category.

And Taste also goes a long way to make food sexy - Cold salty fresh oysters with a hint of the sea. Deep, rich, dark chocolate, which melts away, is also quite nice.

Q: Ideas for plating? Setting the table?

A: Serve the dinner already plated. Tuck a small rose or other flower on the plate. Details matter! Use the dining room if you have one, for a change. I would like to use either a gold or silver trimmed plate, a red or white tablecloth and starched white napkins with a small silver or glass vase filled with red roses and red and white carnations or freesias.

Keep the flowers small and low. Stay away from highly scented flowers such as stargazer lilies. Too intense. Add lots of white votive lights, soft music, chilled wine or champagne, and your mood is set to go.

Q: Creating the mood - What are your top 3-5 favorite romantic/sexy foods? Why?

A: A juicy, ripe fresh pear or peach – the smooth texture and the sweetness and the juice of these fruits are incomparable for a mouth-watering experience.

Very cold Champagne- the explosion of the bubbles and coldness of the Champagne in the mouth has a very dramatic feel to it.

Lobster or lump crabmeat – juicy sautéed lobster or crab dipped and dripping in melted butter taste quite decadent.

Dark chocolate sauce poured on strawberries – the warm chocolate sauce and the sweetness of ripe strawberries really gets your mouth watering – what a combination.

Q: What one should include in a romantic dinner for two for Valentine's day?

A: Mood wise - taking the time to do something special and showing that you care is most important. Valentine's Day is a perfect holiday to give to others by doing something special.

A romantic meal is not just about food - it is about the effort and meaning that goes into it.

Some Tips:

What do you want to serve? Keep it simple - have 3 or 4 items, and not everything has to be homemade. Cook an easy recipe. Get a great dessert -go out and buy the most decadent chocolate cake you can find, or find fresh strawberries dipped in chocolate from your local candy store.

Make it light – a bloated heavy feeling is not really favorable to romance. And no garlic, please.

Choose food that your partner likes, not just what you like. This shows that you have put a lot of thought in to this and care, which is the point.

Be sure to start several days in advance. If you save everything for the day of the celebration, you will be frazzled and in not much of a mood to enjoy this time together.

Linger – savor the food and each other.

Remember that this is about Love, not Technique. Don't cook a complicated menu if you haven't cooked that way before. You both need to enjoy yourselves.

As with other activities associated with love, cooking does not have to be totally perfect. If something does not come out in time, or if it doesn't look exactly like the picture in the cookbook, relax. Stay in the mood you set out to create- being grumpy or upset defeats the purpose. Laugh and have fun. . .

HEART MONTH

Speaking of hearts, February is National Women's Heart Health Month.

Everyone needs to know about heart health and about the signs of heart problems. These are two great websites for information. Please do something good for yourself and visit them:

www.americanheart.org

www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/hearttruth/

RECIPES

In keeping with the New Orleans theme, this is my version of Jambalaya. Use chicken sausage, low salt broth and omit the ham for a more heart-healthy version. Be sure to drain meat and vegetables after sautéing them.

Jambalaya

4-6 Servings

- 1 teaspoons canola or vegetable oil
- 1/2 cup sweet onions, chopped
- 1/2 cup green or sweet red peppers, chopped
- 1/2 cup celery, chopped
- 1-2 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 chicken breasts halved, cut into two pieces, skin off (boned or boneless)
- 1 pound chorizo or sweet or hot Italian sausage, cut into 2 – 3 inch pieces
 (use chicken sausage for a lower fat content)
- 4 ounces good quality ham, cut into 3 – 4 inch pieces (optional)
- 1 can diced tomatoes
- 1 cup water
- 1 can good quality chicken broth
- 1 teaspoon thyme
- 1 teaspoon Adobe or hot chilé powder
- 1/2 tablespoon oregano
- 1 tablespoon paprika
- 1 Bay leaf
- Fresh ground pepper

- 2 cups cooked long grain rice
- Cayenne or Tabasco to taste

(I don't add salt to this while cooking since the sausage can be salty.)

Heat oil in a large heavy-bottomed pot or Dutch oven over medium heat.

Sauté chicken pieces until lightly brown on all sides around 10 minutes or so. Remove, drain well on paper towels. Add sausage and cook until browned. Drain well.

Add onion, green pepper, celery. Cover and cook slowly stirring often until onions are tender, about 6 – 8 minutes. Add garlic last and cook for another minute. Drain excess oil with paper towels.

Return chicken and sausage and add all remaining ingredients EXCEPT rice and stir together well.

Cover and simmer for 30 min stirring several times. Add up to another cup of water if there is not enough liquid.

Serve the rice in bowls and ladle the Jambalaya on top, and offer cayenne or Tabasco at the table.

Note: cooking rice on the side will not make traditionalists happy, but this is how I like it. There is more sauce and it will not be gummy or dry.

MIXED GREENS SALAD WITH APPLE-CHERRY BALSAMIC DRESSING AND BRIE

Here is a delicious salad, great for any time of year. Cherries are a traditional February food so I thought you'd enjoy this. Do-ahead tips are below.

Makes 4-6 servings

1-1/4 cups dried cherries
1/2 cup tawny Port
4 ounces Prosciutto di Parma, fat removed and chopped
2 shallots, minced
1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil
1/4 cup cherry balsamic wine vinegar, or other good quality balsamic
2 teaspoons sugar or Splenda

5-6 ounces of ripe Brie, or other semi soft cheese, cut into 1/2-inch-thick slices

1 5-ounce bag mixed micro salad greens

1/2 thinly sliced-Granny Smith Apple, skin on
1/2 cup walnuts, toasted

Combine cherries and Port in heavy small saucepan. Bring to simmer over medium heat. Remove from heat; let stand until cherries swell, about 15 minutes. Sauté Prosciutto in heavy medium skillet over medium-low heat until crisp, about 8 minutes. Add shallots; cook 2 minutes. Be careful not to burn the shallots. Add oil, then vinegar and sugar; stir until sugar dissolves. Stir in cherry mixture. Season with salt and pepper. (Dressing can be made 2 hours ahead. Set aside in skillet at room temperature.)

Combine salad greens and pine nuts in bowl. Re-warm dressing on low heat and pour over salad greens, apples and nuts; toss to blend. Top with goat cheese and serve.

Do-Ahead Tips:

- **Vinaigrette can be made up to a day hours in advance. Refrigerate and bring to room temperature before serving.**
- **Sauté Prosciutto, and toast nuts the day before so all you have to do is slice the apple, toss the greens and put on the dressing just before serving.**

VISITING AUTHOR

Mary Jo Kurtz, Wellness Coach, recently shared with us some coaching tips on creating healthy eating habits. She said:

"This month people are still in a healthy mind set and hoping to keep their New Year's resolutions a while longer. However, with Valentine's Day approaching and the winter blahs lurking it is certainly a time when people are feeling conflicted with food issues; And why not? For many of us "Food is Love!"

Food has always been at the heart of the way we nurture ourselves and others. We use food to express our love to others in social situations, celebrations, and even our own family meals. Food is also one form of love that we give ourselves. It is nourishment when we feed our bodies, but unfortunately, food can be used to fill a void when our emotions are wreaking havoc. This negative behavior is a leading cause of the obesity epidemic we are facing today.

A common challenge faced by my clients who are looking to make healthy life-style changes involves celebrations that center around food and unhealthy food choices. While food will always be important in our expression of love during these occasions there are a few easy tips that can enhance the experience. It is most important when planning any celebration to appeal to all of the senses. This will ensure a pleasant, loving experience for your family, friends and guests. Some simple suggestions to accomplish this include:

- If your celebration doesn't already have a theme such as a birthday, or anniversary, then create one. Use your theme in all your plans and be creative. This will decrease the focus on the food alone and, in the end, create a wonderful experience your guests will remember long after the menu fades from their memories.
- Use your atmosphere to tantalize your guests. Remember to use music, wonderful aromas, festive lighting, flowers, and other points of interest. These things combined with your food choices will nurture your guest souls too.
- Always keep your menu aligned with your theme, but most importantly, make your menu items the healthiest choices of nutrient dense foods. These food choices include plenty of fresh vegetables, fruits, whole grains and proteins. These foods are much more satisfying to our bodies and make us less likely to overindulge in rich desserts. If you do choose to partake in dessert, the protein will protect you from a crash after the sugar wears off. When our blood sugar is low, we are much more likely to eat even more sugar.
- Incorporate as many colors as possible into your food choices. While color is visually pleasing, different colored foods actually provide the body with a variety of nutrients, especially antioxidants.
- Have a game or activity with your theme that will encourage guests to make authentic connections. Engaging in meaningful conversations with friends and family, enjoying physical touch with real hugs, and laughing from your belly will create a truly fun celebration.

When preparing meals for yourself and your immediate family these tips are also important.

- Create some rituals for family meals. Use special plates or glassware; add candles or soft background music.
- Engage in deep conversation. Ask meaningful questions and wait for the reply. Make sure everyone's turn is respected. Create a truly loving family experience.
- As with planning a large celebration, creating a plan for your meals is vital. Have a weekly food plan. Set aside a few minutes before shopping and write down your weekly meals. Put it on your calendar. Get your ingredients. Stick to your plan. Your stress level will decrease and that alone will make everyone's dining experience more pleasant!"

We hope you find some of these tips useful and for more information about this topic and additional suggestions, you may subscribe to Mary Jo's monthly newsletter, at no charge, by visiting her website www.wellnecessity.com.

UPCOMING NEWS

A new cookbook review.

A feature about dieting.

Another new guest contributor.

I hope you enjoy this issue. I continue to get emails telling how much people look forward to my newsletter – thank you. It makes me feel really good to hear from you. If there is anything of particular interest that you would like me to include, be sure to let me know. You can reach me at: marybeth.gregg@verizon.net.

Enjoy the best of the season!

GO TO MY WEBSITE FOR MORE RECIPES AND TIPS

Website- <http://www.girlfriendsinthekitchen.com>

Marybeth Gregg has been cooking, entertaining and giving cooking advice for almost 20 years. She is well-known for her wonderful cuisine and great parties. She started her successful cooking school two years ago. She has attended cooking schools in Chicago, Philadelphia and in the New York metropolitan area. She lives in central New Jersey and has been featured in the Asbury Park Press and the Coast Star newspapers and was one of only ten culinary experts to be invited to the Spring Lake Kitchen Tour this fall.

Visit my [Girlfriends in the Kitchen Web Site](http://www.girlfriendsinthekitchen.com)

Please forward this newsletter to friends and colleagues.

You are receiving this complimentary e-Newsletter because you opted to do so. If you would like to change your e-mail address or be removed from this mailing, click this <http://www.girlfriendsinthekitchen.com>.

© 2006 Cook With Confidence, all rights reserved