

## Hosting an Appetizer Party

The exception to the rule that appetizers should stimulate the palate but not fill guests up is a get-together where appetizers *make* the meal. Cocktail parties often fall into this category, especially when they're scheduled in the early evening. It's too early for guests to have had dinner, but it's late enough that everyone is hungry. An all-appetizer party is also a good choice for a hostess who wants to entertain without the limitations of a standard dinner party. There's no need to have a huge dining room or service for 12. Many people also prefer an appetizer party because it's less formal and allows guests to mingle as they like.

### HELPFUL HINTS

Almost any dish can be turned into an appetizer—just cut the portion size down to a few bites. While there are no hard and fast rules about what one should serve at an appetizer-only party, there are a few suggestions we can make for a more enjoyable party:

- **Think small.** Whether hot or cold, any guest should be able to eat each appetizer in just a few bites.
- **Think flavorful.** Since each appetizer is only a few bites, they should present clean, clear flavors that are immediately appreciated but do not linger too long on the palate.
- **Think balanced.** Select appetizers that present a variety of flavors, colors, textures, temperatures, and cooking techniques. Choose some appetizers that can be served cold, and some that can be served at room temperature.
- **Think clean.** This kind of party allows your guests to mingle and move about, but that means the food you offer shouldn't be difficult to eat standing up while holding a plate or napkin in one hand. It's best to avoid foods that are messy or too drippy. Even dips served should not be so runny they're likely to drip on clothes or furniture.



### Cheddar Crisps

Makes 32 crisps

- 1 $\frac{3}{4}$  cups all-purpose flour
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup yellow cornmeal
- $\frac{3}{4}$  teaspoon sugar
- $\frac{3}{4}$  teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon baking soda
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup (1 stick) butter or margarine
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$  cups (6 ounces) shredded sharp Cheddar cheese
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup cold water
- 2 tablespoons white vinegar
- Coarsely ground black pepper

Combine flour, cornmeal, sugar, salt and baking soda in large bowl. Cut in butter with pastry blender or 2 knives until mixture resembles coarse crumbs. Stir in cheese, water and vinegar with fork until mixture forms soft dough. Cover dough; refrigerate 1 hour or freeze 30 minutes until firm.\*

Preheat oven to 375°F. Grease 2 baking sheets. Divide dough into 4 pieces. Roll each piece into paper-thin circle, about 13 inches in diameter, on floured surface. Sprinkle with pepper; press pepper firmly into dough.

Cut each circle into 8 wedges; place on prepared baking sheets. Bake about 10 minutes or until crisp. Store in airtight container for up to 3 days.

*\*Dough may be frozen at this point. To prepare, thaw in refrigerator and proceed as directed.*

### tip

When rolling out soft doughs, such as cookie or cracker doughs, work with small amounts and keep the remaining dough refrigerated to prevent it from getting too soft to handle easily.

## Pumpkin Ravioli

Makes 4 servings

- 1 package (14 ounces) wonton wrappers**
- ½ cup solid-pack pumpkin**
- ¼ teaspoon salt**
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper**
- Whole flat-leaf parsley leaves**
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil**
- 2 tablespoons butter**
- 2 to 3 cloves garlic, minced**
- 2 tablespoons chopped walnuts**
- ¾ cup shredded Parmesan cheese**

### tips

Use extra wonton wrappers to make wonton soup, a Chinese specialty in which wontons are cooked and served in a clear chicken broth flavored with green onion slivers.

Unwrap wontons; cover with plastic wrap. Mix pumpkin, salt and pepper; taste and adjust seasonings.

Have small bowl of water on work surface. Place 4 wontons in line on work surface. Brush 2 wontons with water, then place parsley leaf on each wet surface. Top each leaf with another wonton, pressing out air and sealing edges. Brush 1 layered wonton with water, then place 1 teaspoon pumpkin mixture in center of wonton. Top with remaining layered wonton, pressing out air and sealing all edges. Using 3-inch round or star cookie cutter, cut ravioli to shape, discarding trimmings. Repeat with remaining wontons, parsley leaves and pumpkin filling, keeping finished ravioli covered with plastic wrap until ready to cook.

In skillet, heat olive oil over medium-low heat. Add butter and garlic. Cook until garlic is aromatic and translucent, about 1 minute, taking care not to burn garlic. Turn heat to low or remove pan from heat until ravioli are ready to add to skillet.

Bring large pot of salted water to a boil. In small batches, slip ravioli into water. When ravioli float to surface, they are done, about 1 minute. Transfer to skillet, coating each ravioli in oil-butter mixture to prevent sticking. When all ravioli are heated through in oil-butter mixture, remove from heat and sprinkle with walnuts and cheese.



## Hosting a Formal Dinner Party

Formal doesn't have to mean stuffy or uncomfortable. With the proper plan and a focus on preparing as much as you can ahead of time, you can wow your guests with a truly dramatic party.

### SETTING THE TABLE

Take a little extra time to set a beautiful table for your dinner party with a tablecloth or placemats, napkins, tableware, and glassware. You may even wish to place the dessert silverware above the plate—that way you won't have to deal with it while you're serving dessert and coffee.

Although a flower centerpiece may be the first thing you think of for decorating a dinner, it isn't the only choice. Invest in a clear glass vase, bowl or tall container. Or, make a grouping of three simple containers of different heights. (Arrangements of odd numbers of things are often more appealing to the eye than groups containing even numbers of elements.) Fill them with lemons and limes, or polished stones that support one beautiful flower. Keeping it simple and subtle often makes for a more dramatic centerpiece and allows you to focus on preparing the food you'll be serving.

### GARNISHING THE FOOD

Making the food look attractive is as important as making the table beautiful. Garnishing adds the finishing touch to

dishes. Use one of the flavors in the dish or something that compliments the dish in color and flavor. For example, if you use fresh herbs in a recipe, hold back a few sprigs for garnish. For desserts, strawberries, red raspberries, lemon slices, lime peel strips, and chocolate curls are some easy choices. Remember, not every dish needs a garnish; many are colorful enough. A few well-placed touches go a long way.

### SPECIAL TOUCHES

A printed menu is a fun way to let guests know what's on the menu. Displayed near where you serve appetizers or drinks, this can be another easy conversation starter. For a dinner party in which the guests don't all know one another, hand-lettered place cards are a great way to help people remember new names, and it lets you direct where guests will sit.

Giving small brightly wrapped gifts to guests is a charming custom that your friends will talk about for a long time. Placing the gifts at each place setting with large gift tags with the recipients' names turns them into artful place cards.



### Filet Mignon with Tarragon Butter

Makes 2 servings

- 2 (8-ounce) trimmed beef tenderloin steaks, 1¼ to 1½ inches thick**
- 2 teaspoons olive oil**
- ¼ teaspoon kosher salt**
- ⅛ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper**
- 2 tablespoons butter**
- 1 clove garlic, minced**
- 2 teaspoons chopped fresh tarragon or ¾ teaspoon dried tarragon**

Rub steaks with olive oil. Season with salt and pepper; let stand at room temperature 15 minutes.

Heat medium skillet over medium-high heat. Cook steaks about 10 minutes, turning once, to 140°F for rare or to desired doneness. Transfer to serving plate; tent loosely with foil.

Melt butter in same skillet until it begins to brown slightly, scraping up any browned bits. Add garlic; cook about 15 seconds or until fragrant. Stir in tarragon. Pour sauce over steaks; serve immediately.

## Chicken Piccata

Makes 4 servings

- 3** tablespoons all-purpose flour
- ½** teaspoon salt
- ¼** teaspoon black pepper
- 4** boneless skinless chicken breasts (4 ounces each)
- 2** teaspoons olive oil
- 1** teaspoon butter
- 2** cloves garlic, minced
- ¾** cup fat-free reduced-sodium chicken broth
- 1** tablespoon fresh lemon juice
- 2** tablespoons chopped flat-leaf parsley
- 1** tablespoon drained capers

Combine flour, salt and pepper in shallow pie plate. Reserve 1 tablespoon of flour mixture.

Place chicken between sheets of plastic wrap. Using flat side of meat mallet or rolling pin, pound chicken to ½-inch thickness. Coat chicken in flour mixture, shaking off excess.

Heat oil and butter in large nonstick skillet over medium heat until butter is melted. Cook chicken 4 to 5 minutes per side or until no longer pink in center. Transfer to serving platter; cover loosely with foil.

Add garlic to same skillet; cook and stir over medium heat 1 minute. Add reserved flour mixture; cook and stir 1 minute. Add broth and lemon juice; cook 2 minutes, stirring frequently, until sauce thickens. Stir in parsley and capers; spoon sauce over chicken.

### *tip*

Use tongs, not a fork, to turn over chicken during cooking to retain the flavorful juices inside the roasted meat.



## Hosting a Dessert Party

There are many reasons to host an all-dessert party, not the least of which is that it's so much fun. Focusing on a single course also means you can go all out and experiment with more elaborate recipes, since timing separate courses isn't an issue.

### HELPFUL HINTS

- **Think small.** Your guests most likely will want to sample all the desserts you prepare, so you may wish to offer smaller-than-usual servings.
- **Think individual.** Preparing individual servings is a convenient way to offer your guests multiple tastes of different foods. This can mean preparing recipes that create individual servings or simply cutting a full cake or pie into individual slices before serving. You probably don't want to go so far as plating individual slices of cake, though, as a table full of plated desserts often begins to look like a cafeteria serving line.
- **Think variety.** Sure, most people you might invite probably love chocolate, but that doesn't mean that's *all* you should serve. Provide a variety of flavors, textures, and ingredients, just as you would at any meal or party.
- **Think drinks.** Coffee is a natural compliment to most desserts, but there are also many excellent (and surprisingly reasonably priced) dessert wines. A bottle of ice wine, port, or cognac is a great, yet simple, way to give your party a sophisticated atmosphere. Bring your menu to your local wine retailer and ask for a little advice on what to serve.
- **Think simple.** Don't have time to prepare four or five recipes? Pare down the menu but still offer your guests plenty of food by adding a small selection of fine cheeses or a variety of fresh fruit. It takes almost no time to wash a couple pints of berries and prepare some lightly sweetened whipped cream, but it rounds out a dessert table beautifully.

## Cherry-Almond Clafouti

Makes 4 servings

- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup slivered almonds, toasted\*
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup powdered sugar
- $\frac{2}{3}$  cup all-purpose flour
- $\frac{2}{3}$  cup granulated sugar
- $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup (1 stick) butter, cut into pieces
- $\frac{2}{3}$  cup milk
- 2 eggs
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon vanilla
- 1 cup fresh cherries, pitted and quartered

\*To toast almonds, spread in single layer on baking sheet. Bake in preheated 350°F oven 8 to 10 minutes or until golden brown, stirring frequently.

Preheat oven to 350°F. Spray 4 (6-ounce) ramekins with nonstick cooking spray; place on baking sheet.

Process almonds in food processor until coarsely ground. Add powdered sugar; pulse until well blended. Add flour, granulated sugar and salt. Pulse until well blended. Gradually add butter, pulsing just until blended.

Combine milk, eggs and vanilla in small bowl. With food processor running, gradually add milk mixture to almond mixture. Process until blended. Remove blade from food processor; stir in cherries.

Divide batter among prepared ramekins. Bake about 50 minutes or until tops and sides are puffy and golden. Let cool 5 to 10 minutes.

*tip*

Clafouti is a traditional French dessert made by layering a sweet batter over fresh fruit. The result is a rich dessert with a cake-like topping and a pudding-like center.



## Individual Irish Coffee Baked Alaska

Makes 4 servings

- 2 cups vanilla ice cream, softened
- 2 cups coffee ice cream, softened

### Cake

- $\frac{2}{3}$  cup sugar
- 3 eggs, separated
- $\frac{1}{4}$  cup cornstarch
- $\frac{1}{3}$  cup unsweetened cocoa powder
- $\frac{1}{3}$  cup all-purpose flour
- 2 tablespoons Irish cream-flavored liqueur

### Meringue

- 4 egg whites
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup sugar
- 3 tablespoons whiskey

### tip

To avoid meltdown, cover the ice cream completely with the meringue (it will insulate the ice cream for a short time). Or you can use a culinary torch to brown the meringue instead.

Preheat oven to 350°F. Line 4 (1-cup) ramekins with plastic wrap. Place  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup vanilla ice cream in each mold. Top with  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup coffee ice cream. Fold plastic down on top of ice cream. Freeze 4 hours or until hard.

**For cake**, line 13×9-inch baking pan with waxed paper. Beat sugar and egg yolks in medium bowl with electric mixer at high speed 4 minutes or until pale and thick; set aside. Beat egg whites in clean bowl at high speed until stiff peaks form. Sift cornstarch, cocoa and flour into yolk mixture; stir gently until blended. Fold in egg whites. Carefully spread mixture into prepared baking pan. Bake 10 minutes or until cake springs back lightly when touched. Cool completely in pan on wire rack. Cut cake into 3-inch rounds with cookie or biscuit cutter. Place rounds on top of ice cream in ramekins. Brush rounds with liqueur. Freeze until ready to coat with meringue.



**For meringue**, preheat oven to 525°F. Beat egg whites in clean bowl at high speed until foamy. Gradually add sugar; beat until stiff, glossy peaks form.

Remove desserts from ramekins. Remove and discard plastic wrap. Place desserts cake-side down on baking sheet. Spread  $\frac{2}{3}$  cup meringue over each dessert, working quickly to prevent ice cream from melting. Bake 2 minutes or until meringue is golden on peaks. Heat small skillet over low heat; add whiskey. Using long-handled lighter, ignite whiskey and carefully pour over each dessert. Allow whiskey to burn out; serve immediately.

## Hosting a Brunch Party

A brunch party can turn an ordinary day into something special. Even a casual weekend brunch naturally feels like a more elegant meal than the usual breakfast. What you serve at a brunch is most often determined by the time at which the party begins.

### HELPFUL HINTS

One of the great benefits of entertaining at brunch is the menu can be relatively simple and still be incredibly satisfying for your guests.

- **You don't have to do everything.** Even though your brunch menu will probably contain simple, easy-to-prepare recipes, getting everything done before the party is not always the easiest thing to do. And unlike entertaining in the evening, you won't have the benefit of most of a full day for preparation before your guests arrive. So take it easy on yourself—don't feel you have to make everything

from scratch the morning of the party. Be sure to consider rounding out your meal with no-prep items such as store-bought pastries or cut-up fruit from the salad bar at the deli.

- **Timing is everything.** Your brunch menu largely depends on the time you asked your guests to arrive. For example, brunches starting before 11:00 a.m. ought to be focused on breakfast items. Brunches starting after 11:00 a.m. can include both breakfast fare and a wider variety of more savory, lunch-appropriate recipes.



### Breakfast Banana Split

*Makes 1 serving*

- 1 banana
- 3 strawberries, sliced
- ¼ cup fresh blueberries
- 1 container (6 ounces) “fruit on the bottom” reduced-fat strawberry yogurt, mixed
- 1 tablespoon granola
- 1 maraschino cherry

Peel banana; slice lengthwise. Place banana in serving dish and separate halves. Place half of strawberries and blueberries on banana slices. Gently spoon yogurt over berries. Top with remaining berries; sprinkle with granola. Garnish with cherry.

# Breakfast & Brunch

## Bourbon Street Beignets

Makes 5 dozen beignets

- ¼ cup warm water (105°F to 115°F)**
- 1 package active dry yeast**
- ¼ cup granulated sugar**
- 2 tablespoons shortening**
- ½ teaspoon salt**
- ½ cup boiling water**
- ½ cup heavy cream**
- 1 egg, beaten**
- 4 to 4½ cups all-purpose flour, divided**
- Oil for deep frying**
- Powdered sugar**

### tips

Active dry yeast will keep for 6 months past the expiration date on the package if you freeze it tightly wrapped in plastic.

Dissolve yeast in warm water; set aside. Place granulated sugar, shortening, salt, and boiling water in mixer bowl. Stir until shortening is melted and sugar dissolves; cool to lukewarm. Add cream, egg, 3 cups flour and yeast. Attach bowl and dough hook to mixer. Turn to Speed 2 and mix 2 minutes. Add remaining flour ½ cup at a time, until dough clings to hook and cleans sides of bowl, about 2 minutes. Knead on Speed 2 for 2 minutes longer.

Place dough on lightly floured board and roll into 10×24-inch rectangle. Using sharp knife, cut dough into 2-inch squares.

Pour oil into large heavy saucepan or deep fryer to a depth of 2 inches then heat oil to 360°F. Fry beignets, four at a time, turning to brown on both sides, about 3 minutes. Drain on paper towels and sprinkle with powdered sugar.

