

CULINARY SILLINESS FOR ALL AGES

"Relax with food! Relax in the kitchen! You're not performing neurosurgery, are you? If your soufflé falls, the universe won't spin off its axis," advises Chef Steven Mark Weiss.

"Culinary silliness" is the trademark of this author, food consultant and chef, who mixes his metaphors with a razor-sharp sense of humor to make a serious point: preparing and eating food can be delicious fun for the at-home chef.

"It's time," says the Arizona-based food expert, "to get back to the basics. For close to two decades, Americans have toyed with mousses, radicchio salads and pimiento garnishes to achieve culinary sophistication."

"We've explored the cuisines of the world and have been exposed to good food. We want the best of everything. But now there's a gourmet backlash, and the elaborate showiness is coming to an end," predicts Steve. "Today," he notes, "the height of sophistication is not worrying about how complicated food is but simply enjoying it. Food is one of the most pleasurable activities of everyday life. It's a source of comfort and joy," says Steve.

This Culinary Institute of America graduate has come to the rescue of gourmet-weary cooks with a number of fun and frivolous desserts. So, put on an "I Love Lucy" face and a pair of overalls and get down to a little silliness.

Take Pudding Pizza. "Pudding Pizza?" you ask. "Why not?" counters Steve. "It's a colorful and highly imaginative



Pudding Pizza is Chef Steven Mark Weiss's idea of culinary silliness.

dessert — for grown-ups and for kids," according to Steve. It's one of those quick and easy culinary "giggles" that the whole family can enjoy. This eye-catching treat features a cookie dough crust spread with a mixture of instant pudding and whipped topping. Half of the pizza is topped with fresh fruit for Mom or Dad; the other half, with tempting morsels like chocolate chips, nuts and miniature marshmallows for kids.

Another dessert that takes the wrinkle out of a fretted brow is a ready-made croissant filled with instant pudding and coated with a delicious homemade glaze. If that doesn't tickle your fancy, Chocolate-Dipped Frozen Sandwiches certainly will. One version will please kids' palates with a chocolate flavor pudding and peanut butter filling, while the minty variation provides a more sophisticated taste. Once the cookie sandwiches are frozen, dip them in an easy chocolate sauce, then sprinkle them with nuts. Put them back into the freezer for an anytime snack or dessert.

"We all grew up on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches," laughs Steve. So he created this nostalgic dessert version which he calls Pudding-Jelly Cake-Wiches. You'll find them even more yummy than the children's lunchbox standby.

Chef Steve Weiss recommends a little culinary silliness to cure the seriousness that afflicts so many cooks. "Serve one of these light-hearted desserts," he advises, "and your next meal will be a lot more fun."

Pudding Pizza

- 1 package (17 oz.) refrigerated sugar cookie dough
- 1 package (4-serving size) vanilla or French vanilla flavor instant pudding and pie filling
- 1-1/4 cups cold milk
- 1 cup thawed frozen whipped topping
- 2 cups (about) fresh fruit (sliced strawberries, halved seedless green grapes, blueberries)*
- 2 tablespoons (about) melted currant jelly

*Or use 1/2 cup miniature marshmallows, 1/4 cup chopped pecans and 1/2 cup semi-sweet chocolate flavored chips; omit jelly.

Cut cookie dough into 1/4-inch slices. Place on ungreased 12-inch pizza pan and press evenly on bottom and sides. Bake at 350° for 15 minutes or until golden brown. Cool, then chill.

Prepare pudding mix as directed on package for pudding, reducing milk to 1-1/4 cups. Let stand 5 minutes; then fold in whipped topping. Shortly before serving, spread pudding mixture evenly over crust. Arrange fruits on top and brush lightly with jelly. Chill. Makes 10 to 12 servings.

For Two-Way Pudding Pizza, arrange fruits on half and sprinkle marshmallows, nuts and chips on other half.

Note: Before arranging cookie slices, pizza pan may be sprayed with non-stick oil to prevent sticking.

Chocolate-Dipped Frozen Sandwiches

- 1 cup cold milk
- 1/2 cup creamy peanut butter
- 1 package (4-serving size) vanilla or chocolate flavor instant pudding and pie filling
- 1 cup thawed frozen whipped topping
- 24 large plain cookies (chocolate wafers or graham crackers)
- 2 squares unsweetened chocolate
- 1/3 cup milk
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1/2 teaspoon vanilla
- 1 cup finely chopped walnuts

Add milk gradually to peanut butter in deep narrow-bottom bowl, blending until smooth. Add pudding mix. Beat slowly at lowest speed of electric mixer until well blended, about 2 minutes. Let stand 5 minutes. Fold in whipped topping. Spread filling 1/2 inch thick on 12 of the cookies. Top with remaining cookies, pressing lightly and smoothing edges with spatula. Freeze until firm, about 3 hours.

Meanwhile, heat chocolate with milk in saucepan over low heat, stirring until chocolate is melted. Add sugar and stir until completely dissolved. Remove from heat. Add vanilla. Cool; then chill. Dip frozen sandwiches about halfway into chocolate mixture; then sprinkle generously with nuts. Store in freezer. Makes 2 dozen.

Minty Frozen Sandwiches: Prepare Chocolate-Dipped Frozen Sandwiches as directed, substituting pistachio flavor instant pudding and pie filling for vanilla flavor and adding 1/4 teaspoon peppermint extract.

Mocha Mousse Croissants

- 1 tablespoon instant quality coffee
- 1-1/4 cups cold milk
- 1 package (4-serving size) chocolate flavor instant pudding and pie filling
- 1 cup thawed frozen whipped topping
- 6 frozen croissants, thawed

Dissolve instant coffee in milk. Add pudding mix and prepare as directed on package. Fold in whipped topping and chill. Shortly before serving, split croissants horizontally and heat on ungreased baking sheet at 325° for about 10 minutes. Cool and fill with pudding mixture, allowing about 1/3 cup for each. Garnish with additional whipped topping and chocolate curls, if desired. Store any leftovers in refrigerator. Makes 6 servings.

For almond topping, combine 2 tablespoons softened butter or margarine, 1/4 cup firmly packed brown sugar and 1 tablespoon light cream or half and half. Stir in 1/2 cup slivered almonds. Prepare Mocha Mousse Croissants as directed, spreading nut mixture evenly over tops of croissants before heating.

Pudding-Jelly Cake-Wiches

- 1-1/4 cups cold milk
- 1/2 cup peanut butter
- 1 package (4-serving size) vanilla or butterscotch flavor instant pudding and pie filling
- 1 pound cake
- 1/2 cup currant or strawberry jelly

Gradually blend milk into peanut butter in deep narrow-bottom bowl. Add pudding mix and beat as directed on package. Chill. Shortly before serving, cut pound cake into 16 slices. For each cake-wich, spread one side of 2 cake slices thinly with jelly and fill with 1/4 cup pudding mixture. Chill; cut into halves diagonally. Makes 8 servings.