

# Wassail

from page 1B

At home inventive hosts can easily entertain with wassail bowls and flame-tipped crowns of plum pudding as the after-dinner dessert party. "The traditional wassail punch which has been served at the Detroit Institute of Arts for some 20 years is quite a potent brew of dry sherry, beer, sugar, spices and vodka."

For a dessert party, you may want to consider a mellow blend of hot cider, spices and a bit of

sherry to complement the richness of a steamed fruit pudding.

Although most of the old English holiday dinners in southeastern Michigan occur early in December, in medieval times wassail feasting often went on past during Twelfth Night, the holiday period between Christmas and the Epiphany on January 6th. So you still have time to organize a menu and invite over a few friends.

As you can see, it's an almost anything goes when designing a menu. Levinson of OCC has established a number of guidelines for their students when planning their annual feast.

## Menu ideas

"Our dinners always begin with soups made with root vegetables which were evident during the Elizabethan era. The breads were hearty so we generally have

pork and whole grains. We always include a chicken course and a beef course."

Mark Stein recommends making a number of items in advance such as an individual beef and leek pie, and a hearty soup such as mutton-barley.

"If you choose to serve a steamed fruit pudding such as a figgy or plum pudding, they need to be made in advance," he said.

The recipe inside for Old Eng-

lish Plum Pudding is my personal favorite. The more authentic plum puddings of Queen Elizabeth's day were a steamed mixture of fruits and meats, and could not be sliced into a dessert as we know it today.

This recipe can be made days in advance. After it has cooled wrap the pudding in some cheesecloth which has been soaked in brandy, and cover in aluminum foil. At serving time,

set the pudding back into its original bowl, and steam until warm. Wrap the pudding in foil to reheat it in the oven.

To add a bit of whimsy to the festivities, it is customary to hide silver coins in the pudding before steaming to insure good luck. If you decide to do so, it's recommended that the coins first be wrapped in aluminum foil.

See recipes on Page 3B.

# Cognac

from page 1B

Asia. The fraction rounding out the production is sold in Europe.

"The best cognacs come from the best wine," Alain Royer contends. "In the cognac region, grape-growing is as important as distillation techniques." Perhaps Royer's attitude is the reason behind his unique cognac packaging.

"I wanted to have a wine approach," he said. "The label indicates this is the wine of the wooden-based cork conveys quality. The A. de Fussigny bottle has no modern imitation. It is a replica of an ancient hand-blown vessel I found in my cellar."

Royer uses his roots and time-honored association with a limit-

ed number of owners, growers and distillers to negotiate purchase of inherited, venerable cognac stocks these locals have hidden away in their modest country cellars. The significant quality enhancement offered to this master blend by these treasured cognacs cannot be overstated.

In our opinion, consumers claiming to be connoisseurs place too much emphasis on cognacs produced from the Grande Champagne and Petite Champagne growing areas. (If you're just beginning to understand cognacs, don't confuse the cognac use of champagne with the sparkling beverage of the same name.) Cognacs blended with large percentages from these regions require

years of barrel aging to produce a round, smooth, rich cognac, robust in character yet full of finesse. Understandably, these cognacs are higher priced.

While Royer goes to great lengths to purchase stocks of older cognacs on the open market, he is fond of the characteristics developed in the Borderies and Fin Bois areas.

"I like cognacs from the Borderies because the soil is acid," he said. "This contributes a unique mushroomy character. Fin Bois cognacs have a lively nose. The cognac smells good immediately after distillation and it reaches maturity early."

In his entry product labeled

Stars Cognac Reserve (\$51.68), he blends 70 percent Petite Champagne and 30 percent Fin Bois cognacs. The average age of the blending elements is eight to 10 years. Reserve is similar to a VSOP or Napoleon category, but with a much smoother almond-like finish and significant concentration of wood.

A. de Fussigny XO (\$75.96) is a blend of three cognacs: 10 percent Grande Champagne averaging 14 years; 60 percent Petite Champagne, averaging 20 years, and 30 percent Fin Bois with an average age of 15 years.

"XO quality is a benchmark in the eye of the consumer," Royer said. That said, you have to taste it to experience the elegant round-

ed palate expression with floral and violet accents. The smooth finish is unparalleled.

Several other cognacs round out the A. de Fussigny portfolio: Fine Champagne Vieille Reserve (\$106.45) is pure finesse with a dramatic and exciting vanilla character. Heritage (\$151.38) is complex and may be compared to Hennessy Paradis, but with a more evolved aroma.

Tres Vieille Champagne (\$208.51) is a single cask, 1937 vintage. Normally, to be most interesting, cognacs need to be blended. This is an exception.

While we recommend that the hand-crafted cognac artistry of A. de Fussigny be drunk neat, this holiday season, there's a new

wave "cocktail" enjoyment for cognac, particularly in the VS category. The current trend, begun in New York City, is to shake up America's idea of a classic cocktail by serving the Hennessy Martini.

Fill a shaker with ice. Add 2 ounces of Hennessy VS and squeeze in one lemon wedge (1/2 teaspoon). Stir gently, don't shake. Let settle. Strain into a chilled martini glass. Garnish with a lemon peel.

To leave a message for wine columnist Eleanor and Ray Heald, dial 953-2047 on a touch-tone phone, then mailbox number, 1864.

# Treat your guests like royalty, serve caviar with flair

AP — Caviar. The very word conjures up elegance and extravagance dining. Indeed, in years past caviar was reserved for royalty because of its high cost. Today, many delicious varieties of caviar are available, and they are surprisingly affordable. Here's what you'll find on the market these days, plus tips on how to store and serve caviar with flair.

## Your Caviar Options

Caviar refers to the roe of certain kinds of fish. It used to identify sturgeon roe only, but now applies to several kinds of caviar sold in supermarkets or in specialty food shops. Sturgeon caviars are still the premium caviar and the most expensive.

Beluga sturgeon: The steel-gray eggs are slightly smaller than pea size. Enjoy them with boiled new potatoes or French bread.

Osetra sturgeon: The size of these golden brown eggs are just slightly bigger than sesame seeds. Serve this caviar with potato pancakes and sour cream.

Sturgeon: Often billed as the best flavor for the money, these deep-gray eggs are the smallest of the sturgeon caviars. They taste delicious on their own or paired with unsalted crackers and thinly sliced cocktail bread.

American sturgeon: The silver-gray eggs of the paddlefish look similar to sturgeon caviar, only they taste slightly saltier.

Salmon (natural or red): Large coral or red eggs, about the size of small peas, make this a perfect garnishing accent. Salmon caviar is excellent with sour cream, cream cheese, or eggs (omelet, scrambled, or hard-cooked).

Whitefish (black or golden): These tiny eggs are about the size

of sesame seeds. They are kosher and have the mildest flavor of the caviars. Use whitefish caviar in hot or cold pasta dishes, sauces and soups.

Lumpfish (black, red, or golden): The tiny black eggs are often substituted for sturgeon caviar. Use any of the pretty colors for dips, spreads and appetizer garnishes.

## Buying and Storing Caviar

You can order fresh caviar wherever you can buy it in jars. Store this highly perishable product in the coldest part of your refrigerator for just a couple of days

for optimum quality and flavor.

Although most caviar products are available fresh, a more practical form is pasteurized caviar in jars. Pasteurized caviar keeps on the cupboard shelf for as long as six months, so you're ready for impromptu garnishing when unexpected guests arrive at your door.

If you're planning to use caviar for an appetizer or a garnish on a cold dish, chill it before opening.

Cover and refrigerate any leftover caviar in the original jar and use it within a few days.

Do not freeze caviar because it diminishes the quality.

## Serving Caviar

Caviar contains natural food dyes, which can color other ingredients. To prevent this, gently rinse the caviar in a sieve under cool, running water. Shake the caviar dry and turn it onto a paper towel. Blot up any remaining excess color and proceed. If you like, you can save the colored liquid to tint and flavor dips and souces. Here are some other hints on handling caviar:

Do not cook caviar. Instead,

add it to hot dishes after cooking. For cold dishes, add caviar just before serving so it's still chilled.

Caviar aficionados serve caviar from the tin, so it won't break up. Just put the tin of caviar on ice in a pretty glass bowl.

Because caviar tastes salty, serve it with unsalty foods. Ideal bases for caviar canapés include salt-free crackers, French bread and thin slices of firm-textured bread, toast, or pumpernickel bread.

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