Finger-friendly stuffed vegetables great summer appetizer

BY DANA JACOBI
SPECIAL WRITER

Stuffed vegetables are a favorite hors d'oeuvre for warm weather entertaining. Perfect to serve outdoors, they help stave off hunger pangs and let you avoid dripping dip down your front while the grill heats up and you wait for dinner to cook.

Convenient for grownups, stuffed cherry tomatoes and little potatoes are finger-friendly choices that allow younger guests to navigate grabbing and eating an easy mouthful, too. Colorful as well as uncomplicated to make and eat, they also help us enjoy boosting our servings of vegetables, a goal most Americans do not fare well at achieving.

Stuffed cherry tomatoes are a snap to prepare. Cut a very thin slice off the bottom so they stand steady on a plate. Cut off about the top third of the tomato to make a good-size opening, yet leave a stable cup for filling. To scoop out the flesh and seeds, an espresso or demitasse spoon, or an infant's spoon, is ideal. Take care not to push the spoon through the bottom of the tomato. If you like, sprinkle a pinch of salt into the hollowed tomatoes. Set them upside down on a baking sheet covered with paper towels for an hour or two. Or, cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate overnight before filling.

Small potatoes, no more than 1 1/2 inches across, are also great to stuff. Cook them in salted water until tender all the way through, about 15 minutes. Unless they are quite small, halve them. Cut a thin slice off the bottom, and use a small melon-baller to scoop out half the flesh.

Potatoes are best when not refrigerated, so boil them only an hour or two before stuffing.

Sugarsnap pea pods, endive leaves, and cups hollowed out from thick cucumber slices are nice to stuff as well, but preparing them takes more work or they are less neat to eat. That old stand-by, stuffed celery, on the other hand, is quick and easy to produce.

Using a pastry bag speeds stuffing tiny vegetables. Select a wide tip, so anything chunky in the filling does not clog it. A cone made from wax paper also works.

A light, mousse-like salmon pâté makes the perfect summertime stuffing.

SALMON PÂTÉ-STUFFED VEGETABLES

- 4 oz. fat-free cream cheese at room temperature
- 1 cup canned pink salmon, picked through and skin removed
- 1 tablespoon low-fat mayonnaise
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh dill
- 2 tablespoons very finely minced red onion
- 2 teaspoons fresh lemon juice
- Freshly ground pepper
- Fresh vegetables suitable for stuffing: large cherry tomatoes, small new potatoes, stalks of celery hearts, peeled cucumbers

Using electric mixer, beat cream cheese in bowl until soft. Add salmon and mayonnaise and beat until mixture is creamy and fluffy. Mix in dill, onion and lemon juice. Season to taste with black pepper. Use immediately or refrigerate, tightly covered, up to 24 hours.

Prepare vegetables for stuffing. Cut tops off tomatoes, scoop out flesh and cut a thin slice off bottom if necessary so they stand upright. Boil or steam tiny new potatoes until just tender and cut in halves if not very small. Cut thin slice off bottoms so they will stand upright. Using melon baller, scoop out about half the flesh of each potato. Cut cucumbers in half crosswise, then into lengthwise halves or quarters, depending on size.

Using tip of small spoon, create deep groove down center, removing seeds. Make fresh cut at bottom end of celery stalks.

To stuff vegetables, use small pastry bag or improvise one with waxed paper rolled into cone. Pipe pâté into cavities of vegetables, mounding to form slightly rounded tops.

Serve immediately or refrigerate a few hours ahead of time, bringing them back to room temperature before serving. (Crackers can also be used to serve pâté.)

Makes 1 1/4 cups, enough for about 24 stuffed items, using various vegetables.

Nutritional information per tablespoon of pâté: 19 calories, less than 1 g. fat (less than 1 g. saturated fat), 1 g. carbohydrate, 2 g. protein, 0 g. dietary fiber, 73 mg. sodium.

Dana Jacobi writes for the American Institute for Cancer Research and is author of The Joy of Soy.

AMERICAN INSTITUTE FOR CANCER RESEARCH

Party pâté: *A light, mousse-like salmon pâté makes the perfect summertime stuffing in vegetables.*

Enhance foods with garlic

See related column on Taste front.

ROASTED GARLIC

- 2 garlic bulbs
- Olive oil
- Dried thyme

Use a small fork to poke several holes in the garlic bulbs. Leaving the crispy, leafy surface on, cut bulbs in half to create two half-bulbs so that each clove has a fresh cut. Assemble in roasting dish so that the fresh cut is on top, then pour olive oil on the cloves, and then sprinkle thyme leaves. Place in oven, set temperature at 250°F and cook for 45 minutes.

Serve as a spread on your favorite bread or mix with mashed potatoes.

GRILLED FLANK STEAK

- Flank steak, 1 pound
- Italian dressing
- Garlic, minced (at least four or five cloves)
- 2 teaspoons Italian seasoning or thyme
- Pepper, to taste

The day before, mix minced garlic and herbs with Italian dressing. Lay flank steak in a flat glass or plastic dish. Pour Italian dressing mixture over steak. Let marinate overnight or for at least 8 hours.

When cooking, sear the outside of the steak on a grill set on high, then bring heat down to medium. Cook for about 6-10 minutes on one side, then 5 minutes the other, then check the cut for doneness, being careful not to overcook.

Let steak rest for about five minutes before cutting, so you don't lose all the juices. Cut thinly against the grain.

Serve with grilled cherry tomatoes, peppers and onions.

Recipes courtesy of Ken Abramczyk.

TASTE CALENDAR

Send items for Taste calendar at least two weeks in advance of event to Ken Abramczyk, Taste Editor, Observer Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48150.

SCHOOLCRAFT COLLEGE CONTINUING EDUCATION
Schoolcraft College, 18600 Haggerty in Livonia, now offers the following Continuing Education classes in the culinary arts department.
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SUMMER REFRESHERS
Refreshing smoothies, cool coffee coolers, delicious ice cream drinks and many luscious fruit drinks will lower your temperature and help keep you cool this summer. Learn how to make these and others that will cool you off and make a splash the next time you entertain family or guests at this class taught 6-9 p.m. Wednesday, June 27. Class fee is $50, and for seniors $40.

QUICK SAUCES
Dress up any plate and add flavor and moisture to all your dishes at this class taught 6-9 p.m. Thursday, July 12. From breakfast to dinner, appetizers to snacks, creating these sauces will add an exciting finishing touch to your meals. This course will teach you about lighter and modern versions of sauces. You will never need packaged sauces again.

FRESH SALADS
Learn to create salads you'll be proud to serve from this class 6-9 p.m. Thursday, July 26. Salad types such as composed salads, entree salads, and side salads, pasta and rice salads, and what salad would be complete without a great homemade dressing? Grace your fresh salad creation with a vinaigrette or an emulsified dressing that will make your salad *la piece de resistance*. Class fee is $52, $41.60 for seniors.

SUMMER SIDES
Summer meals can sometimes be a dilemma. Learn new approaches to familiar favorite summer side dishes made with local and seasonal vegetables at a class 6-9 p.m. Thursday, Aug. 9. Class fee $52, $41.60 seniors.

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