A Question of Taste

By Hilary Keating Callaghan

Bridal shower fare predictable

Weddings are ensconced in tradition.

The basic patterns created by these traditions prevent the prospective couple from being totally overwhelmed and immobilized by all of the details surrounding their nuptial celebration. As it stands, most of these details don't require much decision-making.

They will be done and done in a particular fashion simply because they have always been done this way. Some of these traditions are rich in symbolism and history. Others have simply evolved through practical considerations.

The format of bridal shower luncheons falls into the latter category. The structure of the shower varies with different ethnic groups. One approach is a no-nonsense business-like arrangement. Since the business of the shower is to extract as many gifts as possible from as many people as possible, the most efficient way to accomplish this is to gather all female friends and relatives and their respective gifts in a large hall, give the bride a pair of scissors and a microphone, have her open the gifts, feed everyone "wedding food" and send them home.

ANOTHER approach is to gather smaller groups of women in someone's home.

The luncheon served there is most likely to consist of a main-dish salad (chicken or chicken-ham-cheese), rolls, a jello salad, dessert and some mints.

It is actually a very pleasant menu that has gained popularity for a number of good reasons: It is reasonably priced; it can be prepared ahead; quantities adjust easily to accommodate large or small groups, and it consists of foods which most people enjoy.

The only real draw-back is that it is so predictable.

It might be more fun for bride-to-be and guests to vary the formula. A weekend brunch might offer a refreshing change of both time of day and menu. At the opposite end of the day, one of the most pleasant showers I have been to recently was an evening wine and cheese party in the middle of the week. It began at 7:30 — late enough that dinner was out of the way but early enough for everyone to be home in bed early. Unstructured (no games!), it was a very relaxing way to end the day.

FOR SOME reason, people insist on stereotyping women's tastes in food — they are expected to be light and delicate, both in flavor and quantity.

If warned in advance to bring their appetites, a group of women might actually prefer corned beef sandwiches and beer to tea sandwiches and fruit punch. Why not an ethnic menu — the ethnic backgrounds of the bride and groom might be an inspiration.

A participatory meal might be the perfect choice for a working hostess — an alternative to hours of advance preparation. Have guests cut up vegetables, meat, or fish for a wok meal.

Working together creates a relaxed atmosphere of sharing and forces people to interact as opposed to forming separate knots — the bride's school friends in one corner, her friends from work in another, and her relatives and those of the groom forming two more distinct factions (with valiant, conscientious members from each group making polite, determined efforts to intermingle).

Having said all this, I realize that the "ladies' luncheon" format will continue to be the dominant pattern for all the practical reasons already listed and because it is expected.

I would, then, like to suggest a slightly unconventional menu which still fits this time-honored mold. It features a cold tart from "The Dione Lucas Book of French Cooking."

The bulk of the preparation can be done the day before. The cheesy tart shells can be baked, the cold pea filling prepared, the eggs poached and kept in cold water, and the mayonnaise made. (It is well worth the trouble to make your own mayonnaise for this. It will act not merely as a binder but as a crowning touch.) The tarts need only be assembled shortly before serving.

The golden, fluted tart shells, the bright green peas, the white egg and the cream-colored mayonnaise make a beautiful, tempting visual presentation. Even better are the contrasts of flavor and texture. The crisp, cheesy shells, the tender, minted sweet green peas, the surprise of a cold poached egg, the creamy, tangy mayonnaise make these tarts a complex, delightful eating experience.

To make the menu more substantial, you might want to precede the tarts with a soup. To contrast with the green of the peas, a gazpacho or carrot soup would be lovely. A basket of freshly-baked rolls would also be welcome.

OEUFS POCHES CLAMART

Poached egg and Green Pea Tartlets, with Mayonnaise Sauce (cold)

(Serves 4)

Cheese Tartlet Shells:
1 cup all-purpose flour
5 tbsp. cool melted salt butter
3 raw egg yolks
2 tbsp. freshly grated Parmesan cheese
Salt
A few grains cayenne pepper
½ tsp. paprika
2 tbsp. ice water
2 cups raw rice (to anchor pastry)

Mayonnaise Sauce:
2 raw egg yolks
2 tbsp. tarragon vinegar
1 tsp. Dijon mustard
¼ tsp. lemon juice
Scant ½ tsp. salt
A few grains cayenne pepper
¾ cup vegetable oil
2 tbsp. heavy cream
2 tbsp. cooked peas from the filling preparation, rubbed through a fine wire strainer

Poached Eggs:
2 tbsp. tarragon vinegar
4 eggs
1 tsp. salt

Filling:
2½ cups shelled green peas (fresh or frozen), plain-cooked and cooled
2 tbsp. heavy cream
1 to 2 tbsp. finely chopped fresh mint
Salt
Freshly cracked black pepper

Garnish:
1 bunch crisp fresh watercress

Cheese Tartlet Shells: Preheat the oven to 375 degrees. Have ready 4 individual-size tartlet tins. Put the flour in a bowl or on a marble slab. Make a well in the center. In the well put the butter, egg yolks, grated cheese, a little salt and the cayenne pepper, paprika, and ice water. Work them to a smooth paste, then work them into the flour. Roll the dough out fairly thin, cut in large rounds with a fluted cutter (larger than the tins) and line the tins. Press a piece of buttered wax paper into each lined tin and fill it with raw rice to keep the shape of the shell while baking. Put the tins on a baking sheet and bake 20 minutes. Remove them from the oven, remove the paper and rice, lift the shells from the tins, and cool them on a wire rack.

Mayonnaise Sauce: Put the egg yolks in a mixer bowl, and beat until they are light and fluffy. Continue beating and add the vinegar, Dijon mustard, lemon juice, salt, and cayenne pepper. Slowly, drop by drop, beat in the vegetable oil. Last, beat in the heavy cream and strained peas. Chill the sauce in the refrigerator.

Poached Eggs. Poach the eggs, using the vinegar and salt in the water. As each egg is poached, transfer it to a basin of cold water to chill.

Filling. Mix the cooked peas with the other filling ingredients. Stir well together.

To assemble, place the baked tartlet shells on a flat serving platter. Fill each shell with the pea mixture. Lift the poached eggs from the cold water, drain, trim off any egg white streamers, and set the eggs on the peas. Spoon the mayonnaise sauce over them. Garnish each end of the serving platter with clusters of crisp fresh watercress.

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