

MONDAY, JULY 13, 1992

TASTE

Cheap but classy cuisine

Little touches add elegance

■ Prepare elegant, wholesome meals without spending a fortune. Caterer Nancy Steinbrecher offers tips for stretching the gourmet food dollar.

By GERRI RINCHLER
SPECIAL WRITER



Cooking gourmet food doesn't have to be expensive. Stretching the "gourmet" food dollar has been overlooked until recently in Jacques Pepin's "Cuisine Economique."

Pepin's 11th published cookbook, (William Morrow and Company, June 1992, \$22) is a collection of recipes organized into seasonal menus that employ affordable ingredients.

When asked why he decided to concentrate on cooking economically, Pepin pointed out that cooking well, in fact, means cooking economically.

"As I travel around the country and work with young chefs, I am always most impressed with those who produce well-cooked food with speed, organization and economy than those who created complicated 'food art' at the expense of flavor."

Caterers like Nancy Steinbrecher of Troy, and chefs who prepare wholesome, elegant meals with style are constantly stretching the gourmet dollar.

"A dinner designed around a whole roasted chicken seasoned with herbs and served with roasted potatoes and vegetables can be served elegantly and only cost you about \$6," said Steinbrecher who has been catering for over five years. Cooking for a large family with seven children who now range in age from 15 to 32 gave her the expertise to go on and prepare dinner parties which serve up to 60 people.

"After you've cooked for 50 people on a regular basis as I have done for family get-togethers, it's easy to serve dinner to 100, 200 or more. The key is organization. The number of people you cook for certainly affects the cost, the savings come when you shop in quantity."

Steinbrecher uses a set of 5-by-8-inch cards to organize and plan every



Budget gourmet: Caterer Nancy Steinbrecher puts the finishing touches on an elegant torte made from a nine-inch chocolate layer cake.

catering event. She recommends establishing a budget, and then deciding whether the party is to be a formal, sit-down dinner, or casual buffet.

No matter the style of the event, Steinbrecher usually offers chicken or beef entrees and avoids the higher priced items such as seafood. "When serving beef, you can stretch your dollar even further by providing many side dish options, then balance the menu with color and texture to add elegance," she said.

For instance, serve an unusual salad of mixed greens, water chestnuts, mandarin oranges and walnuts. When the budget permits, toss in a few mini corn on the cobs to add yet another dimension. Instead of buying expensive feta cheese, toss one to two tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese into a salad.

"Your party will surely be a success if you add an elegant dessert at the end of the meal," said Steinbrecher because dessert is usually important to most guests. One of her favorite desserts is a chocolate raspberry torte. "It's rich, can be made ahead, and is affordable."

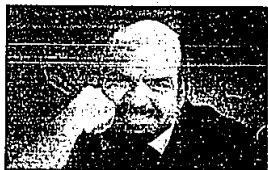
To make the torte she splits a nine-inch chocolate layer cake into six layers, fills the layers with raspberries which have been thickened with jam and covers it with whipped cream. When sliced, the torte will serve 15 people.

Just before serving, she dresses the torte with extra raspberry sauce and chocolate shavings or chocolate sprinkles. "Presentation of each dish is just as important in serving the meal as the organization is in planning the event," she said.

Chef Peter Kotogiannis has been serving customers gourmet food on shoestring budget for the past nine years at Peter's K, a small unadorned coffee shop at 25920 Greenfield in Oak Park. His menu tells it all, dinner selections range in price from \$9.95 to \$11.95. The restaurant is open 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Saturday. He strives to serve fresh, classic cuisine such as Veal Picante, Steak au Poivre and grilled whitefish with garlic-lemon sauce.

See recipes inside.

TASTE BUDS



CHEF LARRY JONES

Any way you spell it tomatoes are versatile

You say tomato and I say tomato. Vice President Dan Quayle says tomato, but would probably spell tomato. However you say it or spell it, the tomato is coming into season in many household gardens. There are about as many ways to cook this versatile fruit as there are fruits on the vine.

The tomato, also dubbed as a "love apple" has long been known to have aphrodisiac properties. That's probably one of the reasons it is a garden favorite.

Those of us accustomed to having the highest court in the land pronounce upon paramount issues of our national life will not be surprised to learn that as long ago as 1893 the justices resoundingly declared the tomato a vegetable, not a fruit. Either way, it ranks with lemons as a perennial favorite for a true culinary uplift.

When using fresh tomatoes in cooking, their juiciness is seldom an asset. To avoid watery results when cooking with tomatoes, professionals rely on removing as much of the juice and seeds as possible before cooking. This is easily accomplished by removing the stem, then holding your palm upside down over a bowl, squeeze the tomato to eject excess juice and seeds.

Hothouse tomatoes

In many sections of the country, fresh field grown tomatoes are not available during colder months, being supplanted by hydroponic or hothouse grown varieties.

Momma likened hothouse tomatoes to rubbery tennis balls and instead, opted for a trip to an Italian market in search for a more meaty, pear shaped tomato dubbed an Italian tomato, which she claims is sweeter and more tender than the typical American tomatoes. I'm sure you'll agree, however, that a fresh picked tomato right from the garden rivals anything for versatility and tastiness.

Tomatoes used to be reserved as a garnish for salads. Occasionally they might end up sliced on a layer of cold cuts and sandwiched between mustard slathered bread. The old standby was to spend a rainy day "putting up" or home canning everything from tomato sauce to tomato relish.

Good cooks know that a fresh picked garden tomato has the ability to end up on everything from a platter sprinkled with fresh basil and drizzled with a vinaigrette or cored and popped under a broiler after being sprinkled with dill and a little Parmesan cheese. Trendy cooks appreciate the virtues of the tomato in chunky salads, fajitas and in delicate hot or chilled soups dolloped with sour cream and sprinkled with chives.

Green tomatoes

Adventurous cooks can appreciate even the green tomato, realizing that even in its immature state, the green tomato can be coated with seasoned breadcrumbs and panfried or even chopped and made into a green tomato salsa with flavors all their own.

There are a few suggestions on handling and storing tomatoes that are little known but helpful. Ripeness is determined by the color of the tomato. For optimum results, they should be stored in the crisper section of the refrigerator, uncovered. Contrary to popular belief, green tomatoes ripened on a sunny windowsill tend to lack the flavor and definitely the nutritive value of a tomato picked right from the vine.

Immature and smaller green tomatoes, by the way, have a harder time ripening than their full-figured relatives. Tomatoes as a whole do not lend well to freezing but I have successfully frozen skinned and seeded chunks for wintertime use in sauces and salads.

Skinning tomatoes

Garden fresh tomatoes should have a tender skin unlike their hothouse counterparts. Cooks who use tomatoes as a whole in cooking will appreciate a skinned tomato test they find chunks of skin floating among their chili or soup. Skinning a tomato is relatively easy. The core can be removed and the tomato skewered onto a long handled fork and then immersed for about a minute in rapidly boiling water. Another quick favorite method for skinning calls for charring the tomato skin with a propane torch (doesn't every kitchen have one?) and peeling lightly to remove the skin. Either method is acceptable.

Remember, it's not how you spell it, it's how you make it. And in case Dan Quayle is reading, the "e" is added only when pluralized.

See recipes inside.

Make-ahead dinner helps you keep your cool

OBSERVER & ECCENTRIC Winner Dinner Recipes



Colorful and fresh-tasting, this delicious sauce keeps in the refrigerator and freezes well.

PESTO SAUCE

- 1 cup olive oil
- 1 cup fresh basil
- 1/2 cup fresh parsley
- 1/2 cup Romano cheese, grated
- 1/2 cup pine nuts or walnuts
- 2 cloves of fresh garlic, or to taste

Put the ingredients in a blender or food processor and blend well. Serve over cooked fettuccine or angel hair pasta. Serves four to six.

TOMATO AND RED ONION SALAD

- 2 tablespoons wine vinegar
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- 1 tablespoon grated Parmesan cheese
- 1/2 cup olive oil
- 1/2 teaspoon minced garlic
- 1 1/2 teaspoons dried oregano leaves
- 1/2 head romaine lettuce
- 1 large bunch arugula (aromatic salad green with a tart, mustard flavor)
- 1 cup red onion, thinly sliced
- 1/2 head red leaf lettuce, trimmed on long stems
- 6 firm, ripe tomatoes, cut into bite-sized pieces

To make salad dressing mix vinegar, mustard, cheese, oil, garlic and oregano. Tear greens into bite-size pieces. Place into a large salad bowl along with sliced onions.

Toss with the dressing, arranging the tomatoes on top. As an option, add 1/2 cup pine nuts or 1/2 cup artichoke hearts. Serves 4-6.

LEMON SQUARES

- 1 cup flour
- 1/4 cup confectioner's sugar
- 1/2 cup butter
- 2 eggs
- 3 tablespoons lemon juice
- 1/2 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/4 cup granulated sugar
- 2 tablespoons flour

Crust: Combine flour and sugar. Cut in butter until mixture is crumbly. Pat into the bottom of an 8 inch square pan. Bake at 350 degrees for 10 minutes.

Topping: Beat the eggs with an electric mixer. Blend in the granulated sugar and the lemon juice. Beat for 10 minutes or until smooth and thick.

In a small bowl, combine the flour and baking powder. Stir into the egg mixture just until blended. Pour over the crust. Bake at 350 degrees for 20-25 minutes or until the topping is set.

Cool: Sift the confectioner's sugar over the top. Cut into squares and serve.



BETSY BRETHEN

Recently, a copy of the Southfield Senior Arts League cookbook appeared in the Winner Dinner mailing. Edited and illustrated by Bill Mandt, and compiled as a fund-raiser for the organization, many of the recipes were submitted by Southfield senior citizens.

Leading thought, the temptation of putting together a super summer supper couldn't be resisted. Mixing and matching recipes, I came up with this week's Winner Dinner menu which is an easy, make-ahead meal, perfect for casual, al fresco dining. Featuring Southfield city councilman Peter Cristiano's recipe for pesto sauce, Cynde Friday's tomato and red onion salad, and Jack Cole's lemon squares, this light supper promises to help you keep your cool in the kitchen.

The Senior Arts League was formed for the promotion of, and involvement in, the performing and visual arts. Each year it sponsors two juried art shows for

seniors, and along with the city of Southfield, co-sponsors SRO (Standing Room Only) Productions, a civic theater group whose plays are about seniors or are of special interest to them. The Senior Arts League has also sponsored the restoration of a building constructed in 1854, in Southfield's historic park the Burgh.

If you are interested in learning more about the senior arts league, call 354-9362. Cookbooks are available for \$5 in the Southfield Senior Adult Center in the Southfield Civic Center, 24350 Civic Center Drive, Southfield, 48034, or \$6 by mail. All proceeds go toward continuing support and sponsorship of this non-profit organization.

Until July 27, all the best, and in the interest of trimmer waistlines, please keep those allsummer Winner Dinners coming!

Submit your recipes to be considered for publication in this column or elsewhere, to Winner Dinner, P.O. Box 3503, Birmingham, MI 48012. All submissions become the property of the publisher. Each week's Winner Dinners appear with the words Winner Dinner Winner on it.



Winning combination: Bill Mandt (left to right), Jack Cole and Pete Cristiano present a super summer supper that can be made ahead for casual, al fresco dining.

JERRY ZOLYNSKY/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER