Alberto's Mushroom Crostini.

NICK KOON, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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5 favorites from '06

With an eye on new culinary trends, food editor Cathy Thomas revisits memorable recipes from the past year.

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Phyllis Ann Marshall is a food-and-restaurant trend specialist. As president of Food Power Inc., a national restaurant consultancy business based in Orange County, she helps restaurateurs fine-tune their eateries to make them more successful.

As we get ready to move into 2007, I asked Marshall to name five current food trends. She started by talking about changes in culinary techniques on a global scale.

Global change, the culinary climate

"The overwhelming trend is that it's a small, small world after all," she said. "Many of the culinary basics that you and I learned in culinary school are changing. There is a revolution in food chemistry – food science of sorts – and new techniques. Many of these new methods are coming from chefs in Spain and France. And they are spreading to kitchens around the world, turning old techniques upside-down.

"The food-chemistry revolution is changing the way we understand ingredients and the way we put them

together to add natural longevity and potential for variety.

"There are new ways of whipping cream or egg whites. We learned to whip them fast at high speed. Now they have discovered that whipping very slowly for a long time creates a structure with very tiny bubbles. The mixtures are more stable."

New equipment

The evolution of new culinary gizmos allows chefs and home cooks to add flavor, improve texture and improve storage techniques. New and improved sous vide equipment allows chefs to manage production volume.

Sous vide involves "Cryovacking" a dish or ingredient by placing it in a heavy plastic bag, then vacuum packing it. Sometimes it's cooked in the bag, but with other dishes the pressure from the packing process is used to infuse flavor and/or change texture.

"Originally, it was done in big factories (in France); the equipment was enormous," Marshall said. "But now the equipment has been modified; it's small, and (the process) is all about thermometers. Fish done using this technique is incredible."

And the Big Kahuna of blenders can provide a new way to create sauces, specifically emulsions.

"Yes, kitchen equipment continues to change, and some are being used in home kitchens, such as the Vita-Mix (a high-power blender). It's so strong and easy to control. It emulsifies ingredients. You can put in some good yogurt and some seasonings, turn it on and you have a perfect emulsification. So if you want, you don't have to depend on high-fat ingredients such as oils or mayonnaise."

We can do it better

Americanization is alive and well in restaurants and home kitchens. Adaptations of authentic dishes from foreign cuisines seem to be thriving.

"We used to say that other countries did it better," she says. "But look what has happened to sushi. We've Americanized it, adapted it. The California Roll was just the start. And we've done it with pizza, too."

Marshall explained that in years past, American chefs struggled to create authentic thin-crust pizza like those made in Naples, Italy. They used imported Italian flour and tomatoes. But in recent years more U.S. chefs have developed authentic-tasting Neapolitan-style pizza using special flours and tomatoes produced in the U.S.

We can grow it, we can nurture it

"We find something that we love, and now rather than importing it, we produce it," she said. "It's a growing trend, but not brand new, that chefs and restaurateurs are working with growers. We now grow truffles and produce foie gras. We now have buffaloes to produce the milk for buffalo mozzarella.

"And Kobe (style) beef produced in America. Never before has a restaurant offered guests a choice like the

new Wolfgang Puck restaurant, Cut (in Beverly Hills.)"

Patrons can choose the specific beef they want, from USDA prime Nebraska corn-fed, to American Kobe-style, to true Japanese 100 percent Wagyu beef. The latter, Marshall says, is as rich as foie gras.

Health issues

According to Marshall, the focus in the press on obesity issues and unhealthy ingredients has added to increased interest in healthful eating. Now much of the general public accepts the responsibility for their diet decisions. Many home cooks and chefs seem united in their willingess to experiment with ways to prepare delicious foods that contain fewer calories while maintaining appealing flavor and texture.

My favorites

We live in very exciting culinary times. And talking to Marshall always makes me excited about the future. It also makes me hungry. Here are five of my favorite recipes that I sampled in 2006. Most are very easy to prepare, which make them perfect to use when entertaining family and friends. One can be prepared with a Vita-Mix blender, but a standard blender will do. One turns pumpkin shells into candy-like food. One takes the rumaki appetizer of the '60s to a whole new level of delectability. And one adds some truffle oil to mushrooms, a great combination if there ever was one. One turns yogurt into cake.

Happy New Year!

RECIPES

Alberto's Mushroom Crostini

Oleum Olivae shop on the Via Sant' Egideo in Florence, Italy, offers a glorious array of olive oils, balsamic jellies, wines and cheeses. The owners, Alberto and Margherita, shared their irresistible crostini. Toasted rounds of thinly sliced bread were topped with sautéed mushrooms (a mixture of porcini and button mushrooms combined with garlic and herbs). A drizzle of truffle oil put the dish over the top in both aroma and flavor. If desired, you can garnish each with a little finely chopped prosciutto or a pinch of grated Parmigiano-Reggiano. If you have leftover topping, use it to stuff an omelet.

Yield: about 24

1 ounce dried porcini mushrooms

1 baguette, cut into thin slices; see cook's notes

Extra-virgin olive oil, for brushing on bread, and for sautéing mushrooms, about 3-4 tablespoons

Salt to taste

1 pound fresh, clean, sliced (common white "button") mushrooms, finely chopped

2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley

2 cloves garlic, minced

About 3/4 teaspoon truffle oil; see cook's notes

Cook's notes: You will probably use about two-thirds of the baguette. If baguette is slender, cut slices on diagonal to create more surface area for topping. Truffle oil, extra-virgin olive oil flavored with truffles, is sold at some supermarkets, such as Bristol Farms or Gelson's, or online at sites such as www.amazon.com.

Procedure:

1. Place dried porcini mushrooms in small bowl and cover with warm water. Soak at least 20 minutes. Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

2. Place bread slices in single layer on baking sheet(s). Brush bread lightly with olive oil; season with smidgeon of salt. Bake until golden and crisp, about 5 to 7 minutes. Remove from oven.

3. Drain porcini mushrooms, wringing out excess water with hands; finely chop. Place 2 tablespoons olive oil in large, deep skillet on medium-high heat. Add all mushrooms and cook 3 minutes, stirring frequently (if needed, add a little more olive oil). Add parsley and garlic; continue to cook until mushrooms are cooked through and starting to brown. Remove from heat and drizzle with truffle oil; toss. Taste and add a little more truffle oil, if desired, or salt, if needed.

4. Spoon mushroom mixture on each toasted bread slice (amount varies depending on diameter of slice).

Nutritional information (per two slices): Calories 200 (23 percent from fat), protein 6.0 g, carbohydrates 33.2g, fat 5.1 g (saturated 0.5 g), cholesterol 2 mg, sodium 580 mg, fiber 1.9

Source: Oleum Olivae in Florence, Italy

Lucca's Gorgonzola-Stuffed Dates

These irresistible appetizers are from Lucca Café in Irvine. They taste smoky, salty and sweet at the same time. Cathy Pavlos, chef-owner of the cafe, often accompanies them with a side salad, a mixture with an appealing bitter edge such as arugula and radicchio napped with a balsamic vinaigrette. Or these cheesy torpedoes are accompanied with tangerine segments and candied walnuts. Guanciale is wrapped around the cheese-stuffed dates before they are baked; it's cured, heavily peppered hog jowl (or cheek) that is cut into paper-thin see-through sheets. Guanciale is available at www.ingredientsgourmet.com and www.nimanranch.com. Or, if you prefer, substitute prosciutto (the fattier portion) or pancetta.

Yield: 18 stuffed dates

18 Medjool dates

18 (3/4- by 1/4-inch) "bundles" Gorgonzola cheese (from a 1/2-pound piece); see cook's notes

18 thin slices guanciale, about 4-by-3-inches

18 wooden toothpicks

Cook's notes: Pavlos says either style of Gorgonzola sold at Trader Joe's works well in this recipe. She says the cheese should be soft and pliable.

Procedure:

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and preheat oven to 400 degrees.

2. Remove pits from dates using a small, pointed knife to make a lengthwise incision along one side. Stuff 1 bundle of cheese into each date. Wrap with guanciale. Secure with wooden toothpick. Can be prepared to this point a day in advance, chilled airtight. Bring to room temperature before baking.

3. Arrange dates 1 inch apart in a shallow baking pan. Bake about 5 minutes, or until heated through and outside is crisp. Drain on a paper towels. Remove toothpicks before serving.

Nutritional information (per stuffed date): Calories 190 (51 percent from fat), protein 4.7 g, carbohydrates 20.3g, fat 10.7 g (saturated 6.9 g), cholesterol 46 mg, sodium 410 mg, fiber 1.0 g

Source: Cathy Pavlos, chef-owner Lucca Café, Irvine

French Yogurt Cake With Marmalade Glaze

I love this cake, not only because it's delicious and easy to prepare, but because I usually have all the ingredients on hand (so it's a great last-minute emergency dessert).

Yield: 8 to 10 slices

Butter for greasing pan

1 cup all-purpose flour

1/2 cup ground almonds

2 teaspoons baking powder

Pinch of salt

1 cup sugar

Grated zest of 1 lemon

1/2 cup plain yogurt

3 large eggs

1/4 teaspoon vanilla extract

1/2 cup flavorless oil, such as canola or safflower

For glaze:

1/2 cup lemon marmalade or orange marmalade, strained

1 teaspoon water

Optional garnish: chocolate sorbet, fresh berries, whipped cream topped with hot fudge sauce and toasted nuts, lemon curd

Procedure:

1. Adjust oven rack to center position and preheat to 350 degrees. Generously butter 8 1/2-by-4 1/2-inch loaf pan. Line bottom of pan with parchment paper. Set pan on baking sheet.

2. Whisk together flour, ground almonds, baking powder and salt.

3. In separate bowl, place sugar and zest. With fingertips rub zest into sugar until sugar is moist and aromatic. Add yogurt, eggs and vanilla; whisk vigorously until mixture is very well blended. Still whisking, add dry ingredients, then switch to large spatula and fold in oil. You'll have a thick, smooth batter with a slight sheen. Scrape batter into prepared pan. Bake 50 to 55 minutes or until cake begins to come away from sides of pan; it should be golden brown and a thin knife inserted into center should come out clean. Transfer pan to rack and cool 5 minutes. Run blunt knife between cake and sides of pan. Unmold and cool to room temperature.

4. Prepare glaze: Place marmalade and water in small saucepan. Stir over medium heat until hot and liquefied. Using a pastry brush, gently brush cake with glaze. Slice and serve with optional garnish, if desired.

Nutritional information (per slice without garnish): Calories 276 (40 percent from fat), protein 5.1 g, carbohydrates 35.0 g, fat 12.2 g (saturated 3.1 g), cholesterol 41 mg, sodium 284 mg, fiber 1.2 g

Source: Adapted from "Baking From My Home To Yours" by Dorie Greenspan

Watermelon Margaritas

My first cookbook was published this year. While teaching recipes from the book at a local cooking school, they offered the use of their Vita-Mix super-duper blender to whip up a batch of Watermelon Margaritas. I love the recipe because rather than ice, rock-hard pieces of puréed frozen watermelon give the cocktail its slushy chill. Brrr, brrr, brrr. That mixer chewed it up and spit out a concoction with the consistency of silk. It seems the high-speed motor made the cells within the fruit exude more flavor. With my $20 blender at home, I have to add one frozen chunk of melon at a time. The texture is ok, but it could never survive a side-by-side taste test. But the Vita-Mix is a costly piece of pleasure. It retails for $379 (blender) or $499 (professional blender) at www.surlatable.com.

Yield: 4 cocktails

4 cups seedless, red-flesh watermelon (1-inch) cubes with rind removed

Fresh lime juice and coarse salt (such as kosher) for coating rims of glasses

1/2 cup freshly squeezed lime juice

1 tablespoon sugar

1/2 cup tequila

2 tablespoons orange liqueur

Procedure:

1. Freeze watermelon cubes. Place in single layer on rimmed baking sheet in freezer. Freeze until solid, at least 1 hour. Store airtight in container or zipper-style bag.

2. To salt rims, place lime juice and coarse salt in separate shallow bowls. Dip lip of 4 margarita glasses in lime juice, then in salt. Set aside.

3. In blender, combine 1/2 cup lime juice, sugar, tequila and liqueur. Add a few frozen watermelon chunks and whirl. Keep adding chunks, a few at a time, until drink has thick, smooth consistency. Pour into prepared glasses and serve.

Nutritional information (per cocktail): Calories 259 (less than 2 percent from fat), protein 1.0 g, carbohydrates 63.5 g, fat 0.3 g (saturated 0 g), cholesterol 0 mg, sodium 23 mg (not counting the salt around the rim, which would bring it to about 350 mg), fiber 0.2

Source: "Melissa's Great Book of Produce" by Cathy Thomas

Pascal's Pumpkin Crème Brûlée

In October and November, Pascal Olhats, chef-owner of Traditions by Pascal and Pascal's Epicerie in Newport Beach sold these incredible baby pumpkins at the Epicerie. Not only was the custard-y filling delicious, but the pumpkin was edible (and delectable), too. The pumpkin shell is candied in a mixture of water, butter and sugar. Pascal warns that the baby pumpkins need to be edible (not the kind that are coated with wax), preferably the ones labeled organic. He also advises that the amount of filling provided in this recipe is an approximation; baby pumpkins vary in size, so you may have leftover filling. Now that pumpkins have disappeared from the marketplace, Pascal uses the smallest acorn squash he can find. He cuts off a slice at the bottom so they can stand up properly.

Yield: 5 servings

5 baby pumpkins

3 quarts water

1 cup sugar

1 cup butter (2 sticks)

2 cups heavy whipping cream

1/2 vanilla bean

1/3 cup sugar (for custard), plus 1 cup (for caramelized top)

10 large egg yolks

Procedure:

1. Wash pumpkins thoroughly. Cut off tops of pumpkins; scoop out seeds and membranes with spoon.

2. In large pot or Dutch oven, combine water, 1 cup sugar and butter. Bring to boil on high heat. Add pumpkins, reduce heat and simmer 4 minutes, or until pumpkins are cooked (test with point of knife – if pumpkin is cooked it will yield). Remove pumpkins; drain and chill.

3. In a clean, large pot or Dutch oven, combine cream and vanilla bean. Bring to boil and set aside.

4. In an electric mixer or large bowl, combine 1/3 cup sugar and egg yolks; beat or whisk until creamy. Remove vanilla bean from cream. Add cream to yolk mixture in thin steam, whisking constantly to prevent curdling. Pour mixture back into large pot or Dutch oven (in which cream was heated). Heat until mixture just barely comes to a simmer, whisking constantly.

5. Strain and ladle cream mixture into pumpkins, filling to top. Refrigerate until set to custard-like texture.

6. Before serving, generously cover tops with remaining 1 cup sugar. Use kitchen torch (sold at kitchen shops such as Williams-Sonoma or Sur La Table) to caramelize sugar to a golden brown. Serve as is or accompany with fresh berries or fruit coulis (puréed sauce often made with raspberries).

Nutritional information (per serving): Calories 576 (69 percent from fat), protein 7.1 g, carbohydrates 39.0 g, fat 44.3 g (saturated 5.2 g), cholesterol 89 mg, sodium 217 mg, fiber 0.3 g

Source: Pascal Olhats, chef-owner Traditions by Pascal, Pascal's Epicerie, Newport Beach

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