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Let the Festivities Begin!

By Susie Iventosch



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After endless months of politics invading our every waking moment, the election is finally behind us and we can get back to the business of focusing on family, friends and ... food! In fact, with the holidays just around the corner, we need to focus on food!

Maybe you will have some festive 3B's (Bridge, Books and Bunco) holiday parties, or maybe you will be entertaining friends and family, but whatever the case, it's always fun to have a new recipe or two to try on your guests! Grapes rolled in a blue cream cheese blend and toasted pecans make a delightfully fresh appetizer for your holiday parties. It's a little tricky rolling the grape in the cheese, but the nuts hold everything in place nicely, and they are delicious.

If your plans include overnight guests, this spicy pumpkin bread is sure to delight, and you can serve it plain, or top it with a caramel glaze. The classic "sugar and spice" pull-apart rolls are amazing, and a requirement in my household during the holidays. Thanksgiving is just not the same without these delicious treats for breakfast!

The artichoke heart grilled sandwiches are fancy enough for guests, but easy to make and the flavors make you feel like you're enjoying the holidays in a Mediterranean villa overlooking the sea. Oh my, that sounds lovely!

Red Grapes Rolled in Blue Cheese and Pecans



Ingredients

1 small bunch seedless red grapes (about 48-60 grapes)

8 oz. cream cheese

1/2 cup crumbled blue cheese

1-2 tablespoons dry sherry

Dash white pepper

1 1/2 cups finely chopped, toasted pecans

Directions

Place pecan halves on a baking sheet and bake at 350° F for approximately 8-10 minutes, or until toasted. Remove from oven and cool completely. Then finely chop. (I use the pulse on the food processor, being careful not to turn pecans into a paste.) Set aside in a small bowl.

In a mixing bowl, place blue cheese and 1-2 tablespoons cream cheese and beat with electric beater until as smooth as possible. Add remaining cream cheese and sherry, and blend well. Mix in a dash of white pepper.

Take clean grapes, one at a time, and roll in the cheese mixture. This might be a bit tricky because the cheese doesn't adhere too well, but just spread cheese over as much of the grape as possible and work out the kinks in the next step! (It's worth it!)

Roll cheesy grapes in finely chopped, toasted pecans until evenly coated. Chill grapes until ready to serve. The yield will vary depending upon the size of the grapes, so if you've purchased very large grapes, you may either use more cheese and more pecans, or just make fewer. You can also adjust the cheese mixture to use more or less blue cheese, according to your tastes.

Grapes rolled in bleu cheese and toasted pecans.

Photo Susie Iventosch

Holiday Sugar and Spice Pull-Apart Rolls



Holiday sugar and spice pull-apart rolls. Photo Susie Iventosch

- 1 1/2 cups finely chopped walnuts or pecans, or both
- 1 1/2 cups currants
- Sugar and spice filling
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 1/2 cup brown sugar
- 1 1/2 teaspoons cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon cardamom

Directions

In a large bowl combine 2 1/2 cups of the flour and yeast and mix well. Heat butter, milk, sugar and salt in a small saucepan, stirring all the while until butter almost melts and mixture reaches approximately 115°F. (Do NOT boil.)

Add milk mixture to dries. Add eggs and beat with electric mixer on low speed for about 30 seconds. Beat for another three minutes on high speed, scraping down sides of bowl with a rubber spatula. Add enough of the remaining flour (half cup at a time) and mix by hand to form soft dough. Place dough on lightly floured surface and knead for about 5-8 minutes.

*You may need to add a little bit of flour as you knead dough, and you'll need to sprinkle the work surface with extra flour, too. The dough should be slightly elastic, and bounce back when you pull at it.

Shape dough into a smooth ball and place in a large greased bowl, turning once to lightly grease top of dough. Cover top of bowl with a slightly damp clean kitchen towel, and place in a warm, or sunny spot (not in a heated oven) for about 1 1/4 hours, or until dough has doubled in size.

Meanwhile grease a 10-inch tube or Bundt pan. Melt the butter and let cool slightly. Mix sugars and spices in a medium bowl. Finely chop nuts.

When dough has risen, punch a little hole in it to let it deflate. Divide dough into approximately 36 balls, each 1-1 1/2 inch in diameter. Roll balls in butter and transfer into sugar mixture. Roll in sugars and place in bottom of tube pan. When you have a full layer, sprinkle 1/3 of the nuts and currants over the dough balls. Repeat for two more layers, ending with nuts and currants. Cover with damp kitchen towel and let rise again until doubled, approximately 1 hour.

Bake at 350°F for 35-40 minutes. Remove from oven and cool in pan for 10-15 minutes. Invert onto plate, removing tube pan. Serve warm. Can be made ahead and refrigerated or frozen. Wrap in foil and reheat before serving.

Yes you can! If you're afraid of yeast breads, don't be. This recipe is as easy as pie, actually easier. All you need is a little patience to let the dough rise-twice. Once you get past the dough, let the family chip in. Form a little assembly line, and the rolls will be done in no time. While you make the balls, let the little munchkins roll them in the butter and sugar mixture. This breakfast treat is so tasty you'll wish every weekend was a holiday. This recipe is a take-off on an old Better Homes & Gardens Plaid Cookbook recipe for Golden Bubble Ring.

Ingredients

Dough

- 4-4 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
- 2 packages active dry yeast
- 1/2 cup butter or margarine (1 stick)
- 1 cup milk
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 eggs

Toppings

- 1 cube butter, melted

Pumpkin Bread with Raisins, Walnuts and Decadent Caramel Glaze (optional)



-Pumpkin spice bread Photo Susie Iventosch

Ingredients

Bread

- 3 1/3 cups all purpose flour
- 1 1/2 cups light brown sugar
- 1 1/2 cups granulated sugar
- 2 teaspoons baking soda
- 1 1/2 teaspoons salt
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon nutmeg
- 1 can (15 oz.) pumpkin
- 1 cup vegetable oil
- 4 eggs, lightly beaten
- 2/3 cup water
- 1 cup raisins (or Craisins)
- 1 cup coarsely chopped walnuts

Caramel Glaze

- 1/4 cup butter
- 1/4 cup granulated sugar
- 1/4 cup brown sugar
- 1/4 cup heavy cream
- 2/3 cup powdered sugar

1 teaspoon vanilla

Directions

In a large bowl combine the first six ingredients. In another bowl combine the pumpkin, oil, eggs and water. Mix well with a whisk. Stir egg mixture into dry ingredients and mix well with whisk or wooden spoon. Stir in raisins and coarsely chopped walnuts. Pour evenly into two greased 9x5 loaf pans. Bake at 350°F for 60 to 65 minutes or until a toothpick tests clean. Cool for 10 minutes in the pans. Remove pans to a wire rack to finish cooling. (When making mini loaves, cook for 30-40 minutes, or until tester is clean.)

For glaze, combine in a saucepan butter, sugar, brown sugar and whipping cream. Cook until sugars are dissolved and mixture starts bubbling. Cool for 20 minutes. Stir in powdered sugar and vanilla until smooth. Drizzle over cooled loaves.

Grilled Artichoke Heart Sandwiches

Makes 4 Sandwiches

Ingredients

- 1 cup marinated artichoke hearts, drained and coarsely chopped
- 3 tablespoons sun-dried tomatoes, drained and chopped
- 1/4 cup crumbled feta cheese
- 4 ounces chèvre (goat cheese-can be herbed)
- 3/4 cup grated sharp cheddar, or Parmesan, or sliced fresh mozzarella
- French bread, sliced or baguettes halved, or sliced whole wheat sandwich bread, enough for 4 sandwiches.

Directions

Mix artichokes, sun-dried tomatoes and feta in bowl. Spread goat cheese on bread slices. Spoon artichoke mixture over and sprinkle with cheese. Grill in a frying pan with a little cooking spray or olive oil, or bake open-faced at 425°F until cheese is melted and bubbly and bread is toasted. Or, grill close-faced, if using sliced bread. Serve with a side dish of mixed Mediterranean olives.

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