

Let Them Eat Cake!

Written by Debbi Covington
Wednesday, 06 January 2010 04:59

I have developed a recent fascination with French food that all began with a documentary on the French Revolution (or La Revolution Francaise 1789-1799) that I watched last week on the History Channel.



After taking four years of French in high school, I was surprised to learn how much I didn't know about that bloody and terrible time in France's past. The causes of the French Revolution were social, economic and political. But, did you know that one of the main reasons for the Revolution was that the people of France were starving? Bread was a major part of the French diet and during the Revolution the price of bread had risen so high that one loaf could cost as much as a whole month's salary. People were actually killing each other for wheat. Having never really been hungry before, I can't begin to imagine what starvation could cause a person to do. To make matters worse, the wealthy people of France were still having lavish parties while the poor people were dying on the streets. All of this has been blamed on King Louis XVI whose mismanagement put his country into debt. Louis' wife, Marie Antoinette, is said to have joked publicly about the bread shortage, though historians now agree that she never actually said "If they have no bread, then let them eat cake." However, I digress. Back to the topic at hand, this week's recipes are some of my favorite dishes! They are traditionally French but are simple to prepare and they're all quite delicious. I hope you'll enjoy them. Bon Appetit!

Crevettes au Pastis

1-1/2 pounds shrimp, peeled and deveined

3 tablespoons butter

2 shallots, finely chopped

2 tablespoons pastis or other licorice liquor

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1/3 cup heavy cream

Salt and pepper, to taste

Heat the butter in a large skillet over medium heat. Add the shrimp and shallots. Cook, stirring and shaking the pan until the shrimp are cooked through, about 3 to 5 minutes. Add the pastis and stir and then quickly remove the shrimp from the pan. Add the cream to the pan and cook on high heat until warmed through. Add salt and pepper, to taste. Divide the shrimp on individual appetizer plates. Pour the sauce over the shrimp and serve immediately. Serves 6 to 8.

Cake Aux Olives

1-1/2 cups pitted green olives

2 cups all-purpose flour, plus 2 tablespoons

2 teaspoons baking powder

4 eggs

2/3 cup safflower oil

1 cup dry white wine

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1-1/2 cups cubed ham

6 ounces grated cheese (gruyere, cheddar or jack)

1/4 teaspoon pepper

Drain the olives of any brine and then toss them with 2 tablespoons of flour to lightly coat them. Set aside. Mix 2 cups flour with the baking powder. Add the eggs and, using a wooden spoon, mix into a stiff dough. Stir in the oil and the wine and keep stirring until smooth. Stir in the floured olives, ham, cheese and pepper. Pour the batter into a non-stick 12-inch loaf pan or a greased Pyrex loaf pan and bake in a preheated 350 degree oven for 55 to 60 minutes or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean. Remove pan from the oven and allow to cool for 10 minutes before removing the bread. Allow to cool completely before cutting to insure clean slices. Refrigerate any unused portions. Serves 6 to 8.

Soupe Oignon with Gruyere-Parmesan Crouton

4 large onions, thinly sliced and separated into rings

1 stick butter, melted

2 tablespoons all-purpose flour

1 (10-3/4 ounce) can chicken broth

1 (10-3/4 ounce) can beef broth

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2 cups water

1/2 cup dry white wine

1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

3 green onions, chopped

French bread, sliced into six 3/4-inch slices

Melted butter

Grated gruyere (or swiss) cheese

Grated Parmesan cheese

Fresh chives, chopped

Saute onions in butter until tender in a Dutch oven. Blend in flour, stirring until smooth. Gradually add chicken broth, beef broth, water and wine. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer for 15 minutes. Add black pepper. Remove from heat and cool slightly. Puree 1/2 of onion mixture in a blender. Pour blended mixture back into onion mixture. Stir in green onion and heat through. Place French bread slices on a baking sheet and brush with melted butter. Place under broiler until bread is toasted. Remove from oven and top with gruyere and Parmesan cheeses. Place bread in preheated 350 degree oven until cheese is melted. Ladle hot soup into soup bowls. Top each bowl with a hot crouton. Garnish with chopped chives.

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Serves 6.

Rosemary-White Wine Vinaigrette

2 teaspoons fresh chopped rosemary

4 tablespoons white wine vinegar

4 tablespoons olive oil

1/2 small clove garlic, finely chopped

1/8 teaspoon ground black pepper

1/4 teaspoon salt

Mesclun salad greens

Place all ingredients in a jar and shake until the dressing is well blended. Drizzle over fresh salad greens. Serves 4.

Coq au Vin

1 (5 pound) chicken, rinsed, patted dry and cut into 6 large pieces

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2 medium carrots, cut into chunks

2 medium white onions, chopped

1 stalk celery, chopped

1 medium tomato, chopped

2 cloves garlic, chopped

1/2 teaspoon dried thyme

1 bay leaf

2 tablespoons chopped fresh Italian parsley

1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper

5 cups dry red wine

1/4 cup cognac

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1/4 cup light olive oil

1 teaspoon salt

2 teaspoons sugar

6 ounces sliced bacon, diced

1 (8-ounce) package frozen pearl onions, thawed

1 (8-ounce) package fresh mushrooms, cleaned and thinly sliced

2 tablespoons butter, softened

2 tablespoons all-purpose flour

Place the chicken in a large, deep non-reactive casserole dish. Layer the carrots, onion, celery, tomato, garlic, thyme, bay leaf, parsley and black pepper evenly over the chicken pieces. In a small bowl, mix together the red wine, cognac and olive oil. Drizzle the wine mixture over the vegetables and chicken and then marinate the mixture overnight for 8 to 12 hours. Preheat oven to 425 degrees. Melt 3 tablespoons of butter in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Remove each piece of chicken from the marinade, reserving the liquid, and brown them on each side. Set aside the chicken, scoop the vegetables out of the marinade, and cook them in the skillet for 5 minutes until they begin to get tender. Arrange the chicken in a deep, glass casserole dish, layer the vegetables over the chicken, and pour the reserved liquid over the casserole. Sprinkle salt and sugar over the mixture, cover, and bake it in the preheated oven for 20 minutes. While

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the chicken is baking, fry the bacon in the skillet until it is is crispy and set it aside to drain. Pour off all but 2 tablespoons of the bacon grease and saute the mushrooms and onions over low-medium heat for 6 to 8 minutes, until tender. When the chicken has cooked for 20 minutes, remove it from the oven and add the bacon, mushrooms and onions. Cover and return the casserole to the oven for 20 minutes more. Mix together the 2 tablespoons softened butter and the allpurpose flour until they form a smooth paste. Add the butter-flour mixture (called a beurre manie) to the chicken and vegetables for the last 5 minutes of cooking. Remove the casserole from the oven and stir the beurre manie throughout the dish. Allow it to sit and thicken for a few minutes before serving. Serves 4 to 6.

Cauliflower Gratin

1 large (3 pound) head of fresh cauliflower, cut into florets

5 tablespoons butter

4 tablespoons all-purpose flour

4 cups whole milk

2 teaspoons salt

1 teaspoon chopped fresh thyme

1/4 teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg

1-1/3 cups grated Gruyere cheese

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1/3 cup dry, seasoned breadcrumbs

1/4 teaspoon ground black pepper

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Butter a 9x13-inch baking dish and set it aside. Steam the cauliflower in a large pot of boiling water fitted with a steamer basket for 5 to 7 minutes, until the florets are just tender. Rinse them in cold water, drain, and arrange them in a single layer in the buttered dish. In a large saucepan over medium heat, make a bechamel sauce. Melt the butter and whisk in the flour until it forms a smooth paste. Continue whisking, cook for about 2 minutes, and then gradually, 1/3 cup at a time, add the milk. Continue whisking and cook until the sauce is completely heated through, smooth, and thickened. Remove from the heat and season with salt, thyme and nutmeg. Pour 2 cups of the bechamel sauce over the steamed cauliflower and gently toss the florets to make sure they are thoroughly coated with the sauce. Bake the gratin, uncovered, for 15 minutes. Stir together the gruyere cheese and breadcrumbs and sprinkle them over the gratin. Bake it for an additional 10 to 15 minutes, until the gratin is hot and bubbly and the cheese melted and browned. Sprinkle the surface of the baked gratin with the ground pepper and serve hot. Serves 8 to 10. ** Cook's note: This recipe makes extra bechamel sauce, which is perfect for drizzling over steamed vegetables.

Petits Pots de Creme au Chocolat

1 cup half and half

7 ounces dark chocolate, chopped

3 tablespoons strong coffee

3 eggs

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2 tablespoons cognac

Bring the half and half to a boil over low heat. Remove from heat immediately and stir in the chocolate. Let rest for one minute to melt chocolate, then blend until smooth. Stir in the coffee and mix until smooth again. In a medium mixing bowl, beat the eggs until thick and lemon colored. Add them to the chocolate and mix well. Add the cognac and mix until completely combined. While it is still hot, pour the liquid into small dessert cups. Refrigerate for a least 2 hours or overnight. Serve cold. **Cook's note: Serve within 24 hours since the eggs are not cooked. Serves 4 to 6.

Madeleines

3 eggs

3/4 cup sugar

1 teaspoon vanilla

1/3 cup milk, divided

2 cups flour

1 teaspoon baking powder

6 tablespoons butter, melted and cooled

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Powdered sugar

Beat the eggs with the sugar, vanilla and half of the milk until thick and light yellow. Add the flour and baking powder bit by bit and continue mixing until smooth. Stir in the rest of the milk and the melted butter. Carefully grease madeleine pan. Spoon about 2 tablespoons of batter into each mold. Bake for 15 minutes in a preheated 375 degree oven. Cool on a rack. Dust with powdered sugar. Makes 24 cookies.

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