

Small Plates

Written by Debbi Covington
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What are small plates? They are unpretentious bites of robust and intense flavors, more substantial than a cocktail snack, but not as hearty as an entree. They are ideal for diners who are curious about flavor, adventurous about taste, and who want to vary their dining experience as much as possible in one sitting. Small plates are a relaxed style of entertaining and dining. There is no stress in trying to get all the courses on the table at the same time because they are served as prepared. Guests also enjoy appropriate pours of wines to complement the dishes. So retrieve those precious small dishes from the china cabinet, fill them with morsels of shrimp, chicken, lamb, vegetables, rice and salad. The invite fortunate friends to experience the joy of your small plates. Pepper the table with lively conversation and pour a few glasses of fine wine. A complete dining experience is in the making.

Individual Cheese Souffles

6 large eggs, separated
¾ cup half-and-half
½ teaspoon salt
1/8 teaspoon ground white pepper
Pinch cayenne pepper
½ cup grated Parmesan cheese
1 cup shredded Manchego cheese or white cheddar
2 cups soft bread, cut into ½-inch cubes (remove crusts)

In a medium bowl, beat egg yolks, half-and-half, salt, white pepper and cayenne pepper. Add cheeses and bread cubes. Let rest for at least 30 minutes to allow the bread to soak up the egg mixture. Beat egg whites until stiff peaks form. Fold into egg and bread mixture. Butter six 8-ounce ramekins. Place the ramekins in a deep baking pan; pour the mixture into ramekins. Fill the baking dish with hot water half way up the sides of the ramekins to make a water bath. Bake, uncovered, in a preheated 375 degree oven for 25 minutes, or until puffed and golden. Times may vary slightly. Souffles are done when a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean. Serve immediately. Serves 6.

Margarita Shrimp

2 pounds large shrimp, peeled and deveined
1 teaspoon sugar
1 jalapeno pepper, seeded and diced
½ cup tequila
½ cup chopped fresh cilantro

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½ teaspoon kosher salt

Zest and juice of 2 limes

Zest and juice of 1 large orange

1 lime, thinly sliced, to garnish

Cook shrimp until just pink; cool. In a medium bowl, combine all ingredients except for sliced lime. Toss well; marinate for up to 4 hours. Serve with toothpicks in an oversized margarita glass. Garnish with lime slices. Serves 6.

Roasted Beet, Spinach and Orange Salad

For the dressing:

Zest of 2 large oranges

1/8 teaspoon cayenne pepper

¼ cup balsamic vinegar

2 cloves garlic, minced

1 teaspoon kosher salt

½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

½ cup extra virgin olive oil

For the salad:

3 pounds fresh beets

2 tablespoons olive oil

5 cups baby spinach leaves

2 large oranges, sliced in rounds

4 ounces feta cheese, crumbled

½ cup chopped hazelnuts, toasted

In a bowl, whisk together all ingredients for the dressing. Wash beets; trim the ends and remove the greens. Rub beets with olive oil, place in aluminum foil, wrap tightly and put on a baking sheet. Roast in a preheated 400 degree oven for 1 hour. Remove from oven, open foil package and cool slightly. Under cold water, remove the skins of the beets (wear thin plastic gloves to prevent staining) and place in a medium bowl. Arrange the spinach leaves on a platter. Top with sliced beets, oranges, feta cheese and hazelnuts. Drizzle with dressing just before serving. Serves 4.

Cornmeal Fried Oysters with Jalapeno Aioli

For the aioli:

1 tablespoon diced jalapeno peppers

½ cup mayonnaise

1 tablespoon fresh lime juice

1 tablespoon chopped fresh Italian parsley

For the oysters:

Vegetable oil, for frying

1 pint oysters, drained

½ cup all-purpose flour

1 cup cornmeal

Sea salt

Freshly ground black pepper

Place jalapenos, mayonnaise and lime juice in food processor; process until blended. Stir in

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parsley; set aside. In a deep fryer, heat oil to 350 degrees. Combine flour, cornmeal, salt and pepper in a shallow dish. Place some of the oysters in the cornmeal mixture and toss to coat well. Shake off excess. Fry the oysters, in batches, until they are crispy and golden brown, about 2 minutes. Remove and drain on paper towels. Serve with aioli. Serves 4 to 6.

Chicken Piccata Brochettes

4 boneless and skinless chicken breast halves

2 cloves garlic, minced

2 tablespoons olive oil

Zest and juice of 1 lemon

½ teaspoon kosher salt

¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

2 bay leaves

¼ cup chopped fresh sage

¼ cup chopped fresh rosemary

1 teaspoon dried thyme leaves

2 teaspoons capers

12 to 16 (6-inch) wooden skewers

Cut the chicken breasts into 1-inch pieces. Place in bowl along with garlic, oil, lemon zest and juice, salt, pepper, bay leaves, sage, rosemary, thyme and capers. Toss; refrigerate for up to 6 hours. Remove the bay leaves. Soak wooden skewers in water for 10 minutes. Thread 4 to 5 pieces of chicken on each skewer, place on baking sheet and top with remaining marinade. Bake in a preheated 400 degree oven for 10 to 12 minutes or until chicken is no longer pink. Serve warm. Serves 6 to 8.

Coffee and Spice Lamb Kabobs with Lemon Mint Rice

2½-3 pounds boneless leg of lamb, trimmed of fat, cut into 1½-inch cubes

For the spice rub:

½ cup coarsely ground coffee beans

2 teaspoons ground cinnamon

1 teaspoon ground cumin

1 teaspoon ground allspice

1 tablespoon fennel seeds

2 cloves garlic, minced

1 teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon black pepper

2 tablespoons olive oil

Zest of 1 lemon

Juice of 1 lemon

In a medium bowl, combine all ingredients for spice rub. Add the cubed lamb pieces and toss well. Marinate in refrigerator for at least 2 hours. Thread lamb onto 6-inch skewers. Place in a roasting pan or prepare an outdoor grill. Roast in preheated oven at 350 degrees for 8 to 10 minutes or grill over medium heat for 3 to 4 minutes per side. Lamb should be pink in the center, not overcooked.

For the rice:

4 tablespoons butter

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½ cup chopped onion
2 cups long grain rice
4 cups chicken stock
Zest of 1 lemon
¼ teaspoon ground white pepper
1 teaspoon salt
¾ cup chopped fresh mint leaves
1/3 cup sliced almonds, toasted

In a small saucepan, heat butter and saute onion until softened. Add rice and saute for 1 minute. Add stock, lemon zest, pepper and salt. Cover and simmer for 20 minutes or until rice is cooked through and liquid is absorbed. Stir in mint and almonds. Serves 8.

The writer owns Catering by Debbi Covington and is the author of the cookbook, Dining Under the Carolina Moon. Debbi's website address is www.cateringbydebbicovington.com . She may be reached at 525-0350 or by email at debbic@cateringbydebbicovington.com.

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