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Chef's Apron

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I recently had a little debate with a few friends. I was gushing about a lovely fall day. "Stop!" they shouted (yes, people can shout on Facebook), "it's still summer." I stood corrected and made humble apologies. Fast-forward a few weeks and with the autumnal equinox, fall is officially here. The days will continue to get shorter. Soon, we'll be moaning and groaning when it is dark at 5:00 and then 4:30 and yikes 4:00.

But for now, this is New England's season. For the next month or so, we can enjoy the hills and dales in all their glory. In spite of chilly mornings and a little overnight frost, fall is my season. I love pulling out my turtlenecks and cozy wool sweaters. I'm partial to scarves and am delighted to flaunt my collection.

It's a colorful, vibrant time of year. Just as I watch for crocus, daffodils and forsythia in spring, I love to watch the changing colors in the fall. There are always a few trees that flash a spot of red in late August, just to tease us. Throughout September, up until the vibrant reds and rich golds reach their peak in mid October, the show constantly improves and changes daily. It is the perfect time to be out and about, to take a long bike ride, brisk stroll or hike in the hills. There are crafts fairs to browse and fall festivals to peruse. Many farmers' markets and farm stands will soon close down for the season so make sure to squeeze in one last visit. Farmers are harvesting lots of lovely cool weather greens and squashes, perfect for warm and wonderful fall dinners.

My lifelong love affair with fall in New England turned into a long distance longing when I moved to Geneva in the eighties. I went over for an eight week internship and, somehow or other, forgot to come home. The internship led to a one year contract, which opened up all sorts of interesting projects and jobs. Before I knew it, eight weeks had stretched into a seventeen year adventure.

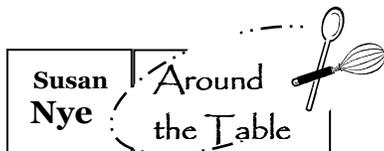
I always felt a little homesick and nostalgic in September and October. I missed the brilliant red maples, the apple cider and roasted acorn squash. When it comes to foliage, the Swiss and neighboring French countryside pale in comparison to a brilliant New Hampshire hillside. Apple juice and hard cider were easy to find but no substitute for our delicious seasonal sweet cider. My favorite squashes were nowhere to be found. The pumpkins were a perfect replica of Cinderella's coach but had little taste.

Some might call it cheating but I began a new love affair when I lived in Switzerland. This one was with wild mushrooms. In Western Europe, fall is, among other things, wild mushroom season. Every fall I made sure I indulged in all things mushroom. From wonderful bruschetta with sautéed mushrooms and garlic to marvelous soups, fabulous pastas and stews, I explored, sampled and most of all enjoyed many different varieties and dishes.

In the heat of summer it is sometimes hard to get enthusiastic about eating, let alone cooking. With the changing seasons, we're ready to cook again. We're putting away the grill and trying to remember where we stashed our soup pots and casserole dishes. We're pulling out our cookbooks, flipping through our recipe cards and getting ready to make our favorite soups and stews. As much as I love New England in the fall, I have a confession. Years in Switzerland and fond memories of vacations in France and Italy inspire me in my fall kitchen. I'm looking for excuses to make boeuf Bourguignon, risotto and a good gratin. And of course, I'm craving wild mushrooms.

Where ever you are, I hope that you are enjoying fall, out on country roads, in the kitchen, and around the table.

Bon appétit!



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Wild Mushroom Soup

After living in Switzerland for so many years, I will always think of the fall as wild mushroom season. This soup is one of my favorites. I love the woodsy flavor and hope you do too. Enjoy!

Makes about 3 quarts

4 ounces dried porcini, cèpes, morels or chanterelle mushrooms

3 pounds fresh mushrooms, trimmed, cleaned and sliced

Olive oil

1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar

Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

2 medium onions, roughly chopped

2 teaspoon fresh thyme

Tiny pinch of nutmeg

4 cups chicken stock

1/2 cup dry sherry

1 bay leaf

1-2 cups half and half

Garnish: chopped chives

Put the dried mushrooms in a colander and rinse well under cold running water. Put the mushrooms in a 1 quart container; fill the container with cold water. Soak the mushroom for several hours at room temperature or overnight in the refrigerator, longer is better.

Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

Put the fresh mushrooms in a large roasting pan. Toss with a little olive oil and balsamic vinegar and season with salt and pepper. Roast for 30-40 minutes, stirring occasionally. The mushrooms will be nicely browned and shrunk.

Put a little olive oil in a large, heavy soup pot; add the onions, season with thyme, salt, pepper and nutmeg. Cook stirring occasionally for about 15 minutes. Add the roasted mushrooms to the pot.

Strain the dried mushrooms, reserving the water. Rinse the mushrooms, drain and add to the soup pot. Let the mushroom water settle; carefully pour the mushroom water through a fine sieve into the soup pot, leaving any sediment behind.

Add the chicken stock, sherry and the bay leaf to the pot and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to low and simmer, covered, for 30 minutes. Let cool for 15-20 minutes.

Remove the bay leaf and transfer the soup to a blender or food processor; process until smooth. Return the purée to the soup pot and add the half and half. Check for seasoning and set over medium heat until steaming. Pour into small cups for an appetizer or soup mugs for a main course, sprinkle with chives and serve.

Like many soups, this one is best if made ahead. Cool to room temperature and store in the refrigerator for several hours or overnight. Reheat on medium-low until steaming.