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Chef's Apron

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Last week I was puttering around my kitchen and it dawned on me that fall is the perfect time to entertain. This epiphany happened as I prepping and getting ready for one of my Eat Well – Do Good* dinners. All in all, it was a delightful afternoon. A cool breeze was stirring the kitchen curtains. The foliage outside my window was taking on a decidedly golden hue. And I was happily chopping up a butternut squash to roast with a little bit of olive oil and balsamic vinegar.

I figured there must be at least a dozen good reasons to cook and entertain in the fall. Here are my top three:

1. During the summer, my kitchen can (and frequently does) start to feel like an inferno by 11 a.m. Fall is a welcome respite. Even on a gorgeous, Indian summer day, my kitchen is a comfortable and cozy place to spend the afternoon. Instead of hot and cranky, I am cool, calm and relaxed when my first guest rings the bell.

When the weather cools down we all look forward to soups and slow cooked stews. With a little bit of upfront effort you can cook up a delicious dinner of marvelous comfort food. While dinner bubbles, you can relax and enjoy your guests. There is little or no last minute rushing around with grills to light, fires to tend or lots of different serving dishes to sort out. When the time is right, pull out your ladle and serve up a tasty one pot meal.

2. There are wonderful fall vegetables at the farmer's market, farm stand and supermarket. I love leafy greens and you can find them in abundance. Lovely bouquets of chard and mustard greens and heads of escarole, chicory and radicchio are all in season. These leafy greens are great sautéed in a little olive oil with a hint of garlic, spicy pepper flakes and a splash of lemon juice.

Another favorite, newly harvested winter squash are in the market. Beautiful blue Hubbards and tasty butternuts are piled high. Squash is great in soups, risotto and stews. And don't forget all the fun and funky gourds and pumpkins. They make wonderful decorations for your table and front stoop.

Not to forget, for at least for a week or two more, many of our favorite summer treats are still available. Instead of a simple ear of corn on the cob, think about adding kernels to a yummy chowder, chili or stew. Roasting is a wonderful way to enjoy the last of the fresh, local green beans and zucchini.

3. After a busy summer, we are all getting back to normal. Or as normal as some of us get. Since many friends and neighbors have been away enjoying a special summer vacation, it's fun to reconnect. With suitcases emptied and back in the attic, it's time to share stories of trips, travels and adventures.

On the other hand, we all know at least a handful of snowbirds. To avoid the cold New England ice, snow and wind, these fair-weather friends and family members head south for the winter. It's time to grab them for one last meal before they fly south until May.

As for me, with lots of family and friends coming and going, summer on Pleasant Lake is fantastic time of year. However, as wonderful as summer is, I have to admit there are many summer days and nights when hectic is the ultimate understatement. Fall is calmer, quieter and a lot less frantic. I'm delighted to share a more relaxed me with friends around my table.

I hope that you are enjoying fall and will think about inviting a few friends around your table soon.

Bon appétit!



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or just look like one!

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Tex-Mex Braised Beef, Black Beans & Fresh Corn Serves 8-10

Olive oil
3 onions, chopped
1-2 tablespoons (or to taste) minced jalapeno pepper
2 tablespoons (or to taste) chili powder
2 teaspoons ground cumin
2 teaspoons (or to taste) cayenne pepper
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1/4 teaspoon (or to taste) crushed chipotle chili flakes
Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
4 cloves garlic, minced
1 tablespoon brown sugar
1 ounce (1 square) unsweetened chocolate
3 pounds London broil, cut about 2 inches thick
2 cans (28 ounces) tomato puree
1 cup dry red wine
1 teaspoon dried oregano
1 bay leaf
1/2 cup sour cream
3 (15-16 ounce) cans black beans (about 4 cups), rinsed and drained
4 cups fresh corn kernels (about 8 ears) (it's okay to use frozen corn when fresh is not available)
Garnish: fresh chopped cilantro

1. Heat a little olive oil in a large, heavy casserole over medium-high heat. Add the onions, jalapeno pepper and spices; cook, stirring often, until the onions soften, about 8 minutes. Add the garlic and cook 1 minute more. Add the tomatoes, bay leaf, oregano, brown sugar and chocolate to the pot. Stir well and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to low and simmer, stirring occasionally, while you brown the beef.
2. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.
3. Pat the beef dry and sprinkle with salt and pepper. Heat a little olive oil in a large skillet over medium high heat; add the beef and brown well on both sides, about 5 minutes per side.
4. Transfer the beef to the casserole with the sauce. Add the red wine to the skillet and deglaze by bringing to a boil and scraping up the brown bits for about 1 minute. Add the wine to the casserole and simmer uncovered for 5 minutes.
5. Cover the casserole and transfer to the oven. Cook, turning the beef once or twice, for 1 hour.
6. Put the sour cream in a small bowl. A few spoonfuls at a time, whisk about 1 cup of the sauce into the sour cream and then add back to the casserole. Add the beans to the casserole. Return to the oven and cook for 1-1 1/2 hours more, until the beef is very tender.
7. Remove the meat from the casserole. Stir in the corn kernels and return the casserole to the oven while you slice the beef. Cut the beef across the grain in thick slices and arrange in a deep serving platter or individual bowls, top with beans and corn, garnish with cilantro and serve.

This dish can be made 2 or 3 days ahead. Bring to a simmer on top of the stove and then transfer to a 350 degree oven and heat until warmed through.