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Chef's Apron

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New England attracts a lot of attention in the fall. Our gorgeous landscapes, culture, cuisine and a few of our interesting oddities are frequently in the news during this golden season. Tourists come from near and far to peep at our leaves. Journalists come poking around asking questions about pot roast, baked beans and Indian pudding. At some point or other, we are usually asked about our chilly demeanor and inclination towards thrift.

New Englanders have been described in many ways but fun-loving, madcap or joker isn't generally on the list. Accusations of slap-stick antics or endless outpourings of gregarious goodwill are rare, maybe unheard of. I prefer to think of us as a tad reserved rather than aloof. It's just not our nature to gush.

When it comes to our reputation for frugality, let's face it, it's probably well deserved. Heck, many of us admit it with pride. Every fall I see how long I can stand it until I finally turn the heat on. I put on a sweater, then a heavier sweater and ignore the cold, until finally, I have no choice. Eventually only a coat, mittens and hat could keep me from shivering while tapping away at the keyboard. That's when I finally breakdown and fire up the furnace.

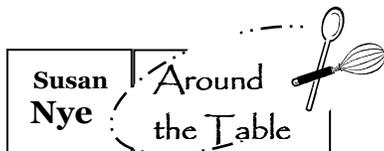
Even those who consider their thrifty ways a virtue must admit that from time to time the penny-pinching can be frustrating, infuriating, even downright irritating. That's when we take a deep breath, throw caution to the wind and splurge. Storm windows, a new parka, a case of antifreeze, you name it, we're the last of the big spenders.

But quite frankly, who can blame us. Look at our roots. New England was first settled by a bunch of no nonsense Puritans. No dancing, no singing, no fickle flights of fancy. To make matters worse, our ancestors settled in a pretty inhospitable region. New England is renowned for its rocky soil and short growing season. Our Pilgrim forefathers and foremothers had to be frugal. There was no supermarket down the road and no credit cards to max out ... just a long cold stretch between the fall harvest and spring's first, tender shoots.

Whenever my mother chose to be particularly frugal she proudly and cheerfully blamed it on her Scotch grandmother. Nana Grant grew up on a farm in Nova Scotia. I'm guessing that farm life taught her more than a thing or two about making due, going without and stretching just about everything. It could be getting one more meal out of that chicken or one more winter out of that coat. Following her grandmother's example, Mom turned leftover pot roast into beef stroganoff with a little sour cream and a lot of noodles. When it looked like another meal could not be scavenged from the Thanksgiving turkey, she found just enough for hash or tetrizzini.

My great-grandmother and mother are hardly alone. I sometimes suspect that we New Englanders grudgingly put up with a meal's first go-round in anticipation of the next day's feast. From the after-Thanksgiving turkey sandwiches to the reheated beef stew, we adore our leftovers. Could it be the virtuous feeling we get from leaving nothing to waste? Or heaven forbid; it's possible, just possible that we didn't let the stew simmer long enough on the first go-round!

Bon appétit!



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Braised Beef Bourguignon

A warm and comforting meal on a crisp fall evening. Don't skimp on time, let the beef braise slowly until its fork tender for a delicious dinner the first go-round. (It's also wonderful for leftovers!) Enjoy!

Serves 6-8

4 ounces thick-cut bacon, roughly chopped
3 pounds thick-cut London broil
1 large onion, peeled and chopped
4 carrots, peeled and chopped
4 stalks of celery, chopped
1 teaspoon herbs de Provence
1/4 teaspoon or to taste chili pepper flakes
Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper
3 garlic cloves, minced
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
3-4 cups dry red wine
3-4 cups beef broth
1 bay leaf
1 pound mushrooms, sliced
1 pound frozen pearl onions
1/2 cup sour cream
1/4 cup cognac (optional)
Garnish: fresh chopped parsley

1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.
2. Cook the bacon in a heavy casserole over medium heat until crisp and brown. Remove the bacon and reserve. Pour off all but 1-2 tablespoons of bacon fat and reserve.
3. Raise the heat to medium-high and brown the beef heat 3-5 minutes per side. Remove the beef and reserve.
4. Reduce heat to medium. Add 1-2 tablespoons of bacon fat to the pot (if you run out of bacon fat, substitute with a little olive oil); add the onion, carrot and celery; sprinkle with herbs de Provence and chili pepper flakes, season with salt and pepper and sauté until the onion is translucent. Add the garlic and sauté 1-2 minutes more.
5. Add the wine and mustard and stir to combine. Stir in the stock and add the bay leaf. Return the beef and bacon to the pot. Bring to a boil, cover the pot, transfer to the oven and cook at 350 degrees for 2 hours.
6. While the beef is braising, sauté the mushrooms in a little olive oil over medium heat until lightly browned and reserve.
7. Put the sour cream in a small bowl. A few spoonfuls at a time, whisk 1/2-1 cup of the hot braising liquid to the sour cream. Add the mushrooms, pearl onions, sour cream and cognac to the pot and stir to combine. Check for seasoning; add salt and pepper to taste. Return the pot to the oven and continue cooking, covered, until the beef is very tender, about 1 hour. If the dish gets too dry, add more wine and/or stock. Remove the meat from the pot and cut across the grain in thick slices. Arrange on a large, deep platter, top with the vegetables and sauce, garnish with parsley and serve.

This dish can be made a few days ahead. Cool to room temperature and then refrigerate. To reheat, bring to a simmer on top of the stove, transfer to a 350 degree oven and cook for about 30 minutes or until piping hot.