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Chef's Apron

Contact Susan Nye at  
[susannye@tds.net](mailto:susannye@tds.net)  
or 603/526 7319

More information the web at  
[www.susannye.com](http://www.susannye.com)

November is an in between month, it's neither here nor there. Summer is long gone. The fall foliage is nothing but a colorful memory. And unfortunately the ski season is still too many weeks away. Thank goodness for Thanksgiving. It is a welcome oasis, a cheerful respite in this otherwise cheerless month.

If any month feels like a month of Sundays, November is it. It crawls by at glacial speed and seems to go on and on and on for, well, forever. Day light savings time ends\* so this already interminable month actually gets an extra hour. Every day the sun grudgingly rises later and later and then sets earlier and earlier. To make matters worse, November is both the cloudiest and the rainiest month of the year. Each day seems greyer than the last. Temperatures hover around freezing to produce a bone-chilling, icy rain. It's enough to discourage the sunniest optimist.

Since November feels like a month of Sundays maybe the best solution to our misery and boredom is to indulge ourselves and enjoy a bunch of Sundays. Even if the calendar says Thursday, treat that grey, rainy day like a long, lazy Sunday. Indulge yourself and spend the day like you have nowhere special to go and nothing in particular to do.

There is no wrong way to spend a day of lazy leisure. The only guideline is to banish everything you *have to do* from your agenda. Instead, use the time for something you really, truly *want to do*. Unless you absolutely love to do it; don't cook, clean, do the laundry, iron, empty the gutters, shovel snow or shop.

It's okay to think small. It's only a dreary Sunday, hardly cause to book tickets to Kilimanjaro or audition for *American Idol*. Talk on the phone, draw or paint, write letters to people you love, waste hours on the internet, make soup, read the big Sunday newspaper, plant bulbs, practice yoga or take a nap.

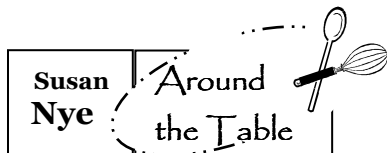
No one said you have to spend your lazy days alone. Find kindred spirits and go out for a three hour brunch, have a marathon game of poker or Scrabble, give and get manicures or curl up on the couch with that special someone and watch your favorite old movies.

When I was in middle school I was a huge fan of old movies. On icky Sundays I would commandeer the den and watch one after another. I loved Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, Bing Crosby, Rosemary Clooney and June Allyson, Cary Grant, Katherine Hepburn and Jimmy Stewart. They lived exciting, adventurous lives. Their troubles were certainly bigger, more dramatic and definitely more interesting than any of my boring teenage trials and tribulations. No matter how convoluted the caper or perilous the predicament, these glamorous stars managed to solve everything in ninety minutes. Businesses were saved, the show went on and true love was found. They tap danced and sang. They made me laugh and cry. And not a one of them had pimples.

How will you spend this seemingly endless month of dreary days, this month of Sundays? I hope that you find many occasions to relax and enjoy doing not much of anything.

Bon appétit!

\* Don't forget to change your clocks and fall back an hour this Saturday night!



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[susannye@tds.net](mailto:susannye@tds.net)

603/526 7319

PO Box 1875 - New London  
New Hampshire 03257

### Roasted Butternut Squash Risotto

Homey and comforting but far from ordinary, risotto is great on a chilly night. If your family is willing to try something new, skip the mashed potatoes and add it to your Thanksgiving menu. Enjoy!

Serves 6 as a main course and 12 as a side dish

About 2 pounds butternut squash, peeled, seeded and chopped

Olive oil

2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

1 medium onion, chopped

1 1/2 cups Arborio rice

1/2 cup dry white wine

1 tablespoon cognac

5 cups chicken stock

2 teaspoons chopped fresh sage leaves

1 teaspoon chopped fresh thyme leaves

Pinch nutmeg

2 tablespoons butter

2 tablespoons cream

2 ounces grated Parmesan cheese, plus more to garnish

1 tablespoon chopped fresh chives

Roasted pumpkin seeds

1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Place the squash in a single layer on rimmed baking sheets. Drizzle with a little olive oil and balsamic vinegar; sprinkle with salt and pepper and toss to coat. Stirring occasionally, roast until tender and lightly browned, about 30 minutes. Reserve. (You can roast the squash a day or two in advance, cool and store in the refrigerator.)
2. Heat the chicken stock to a simmer and then reduce heat to low to keep warm.
3. Meanwhile, heat a little olive oil in a large, heavy saucepan over medium. Add the onion, season with salt and pepper and cook until it starts to turn translucent, about 2 minutes. Add the rice and cook, stirring for another 3 minutes.
4. Combine the wine and cognac and add it to the rice. Reduce the heat to medium-low. Simmer until the wine and cognac are absorbed. Add 1/2 cup hot stock; simmer until it's absorbed, stirring frequently. Add the remaining stock, 1/2 cup at a time, allowing the stock to be absorbed before adding more and stirring frequently.
5. After 10-15 minutes, add the roasted squash, sage, thyme and nutmeg. Continue to add stock and stir until the rice is tender and creamy, about 20-25 minutes total.
6. Season the risotto to taste with salt and pepper. Add the butter, cream and the Parmesan cheese; stir to combine.
7. Spoon the risotto into shallow bowls and garnish with chives and pumpkin seeds. Serve immediately and pass more grated Parmesan cheese for those that like a cheesier risotto.