

## Thursday Night Cooking Parties

### February

- 8 Romantic Dinners
- 22 Paris Bistro

### March

- 1 French Country Cooking
- 15 Moroccan Nights
- 29 Tuscan Feast

### April

- 12 Grazing on Tapas
- 26 More Paris Bistro

### May

- 10 Another Tuscan Feast
- 24 More French Country  
Cooking

### June

- 7 Summer Salads

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The weather in the north-east has been bizarre this winter. My neighbor's forsythia started to bloom in late November. My tulips and daffodils were seriously thinking about sprouting in mid-December. Then we had a few, very few, flakes of snow, lots of nasty rain and an ice storm or two. The only good news is that with oil and gas prices at an all time high, warmer temperatures have helped with the heating bills. That is until a series of frigid blasts began blowing a few weeks ago.



Living in Switzerland for so many years I was spoiled with wonderful snow and skiing. 6, 7 and 8,000 feet above sea level, snow comes early to the Alps and continues through April and even into May. Switzerland is quite wet with more than 30 inches of rain a year. A lot of that rain falls as snow in the mountains giving skiers at least 15 feet of cold, white stuff to play in every winter.

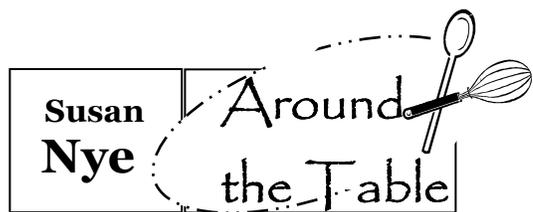
Droughts in Switzerland are few and far between. However, I do remember one winter, several years ago, when it refused to snow. It was not unseasonably warm, it didn't rain either. There wasn't even any wind. The New Year came and went; people shared stories and pictures of holiday hikes and picnics on brown slopes. January passed into February, still no snow. Geneva is surrounded by mountains, and during the drought a temperature inversion created a layer of fog over the city. With each passing day, the fog grew thicker and thicker. There was no snow or rain or wind to clear the air, just dreary, grey, damp fog. The city's health officials sounded the alarm. Pollution levels were up and parents were urged to take their children above the fog line to play in the fresh mountain air.

No official cranky alert was sounded, but there should have been. Both then and now, I have a tendency to get cranky when winter does not act like winter. I expect it to snow and more is definitely better than less. I had been living in Geneva for only a few years, but already I had developed the wonderful habit of skiing most, if not all, winter weekends. The exercise and fresh air was great and I was young, single and new to the city; it was a fun way to meet people. Without snow, I was at loose ends and didn't know what to do with myself.

Knowing that most of my skiing buddies were also out of sorts I decided to throw a there's-still-no-snow-and-I'm-cranky party. The idea hit me at about 11:30 on a Friday morning. I decided to have the party right away, the next night. It was in the days before widespread email and blackberries and instant messaging, so I got out my trusty Day Timer and started dialing. Since it was so last minute, I figured I would be lucky to get a handful people. Not only could everyone come, but quite a few extras tagged along. Everyone was anxious to celebrate something, anything, even if it was the dreary weather. It was a very easy party, everyone volunteered or was drafted to bring something; a bottle of wine, salad, a desert. All were commanded and promised to bring good cheer.

Like many spontaneous, last minute affairs, it was great fun; a welcome surprise and respite from too many grey days. I finally threw the last few stragglers out around dawn on Sunday. I would like to say that the positive energy generated by our impromptu get-together broke the drought and it started snowing just as the last guest departed. I could say that, it would make a nice story, but it would not be true.

Bon appétit! - Susan



## Let It Snow

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### Butternut Squash Lasagna *A crowd favorite and good party dish.*

Serves 10-12

- 1 (1 ½ to 2-pound) butternut squash, peeled, seeded, and cut into 1-inch cubes
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 3-4 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
- ½ cup white wine
- ½ cup chicken broth
- 1½ pounds Italian sausage; hot, sweet or a mix, casings removed
- Béchamel-Sage Sauce (recipe follows)
- 8 ounces lasagna noodles - 12 noodles
- 12 ounces ricotta
- 12 ounces shredded whole-milk mozzarella cheese
- 2 ounces grated Parmesan
- 2 ounces grated Pecorino Romano
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

1. Put the squash and onion, in a large, ovenproof pan; toss with olive oil and balsamic vinegar to coat. Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Bake uncovered at 350° for 30 minutes. Add the garlic, wine and chicken broth; combine and cook for an additional 15 minutes. Remove from the oven and roughly mash the squash with a potato masher or fork.
2. Meanwhile, heat a heavy non-stick skillet over medium-high heat. Add the sausage to the pan, breaking up the meat into bite-size pieces, cook until brown. Remove from heat, drain the fat and combine with the squash.
3. Combine the mozzarella, Parmesan and Romano cheeses in a large bowl and toss.
4. Make the Béchamel-Sage Sauce – recipe follows.
5. Cook the lasagna noodles according to package directions.
6. Position the rack in the center of the oven and preheat oven to 375°. Butter a large, deep ceramic or glass baking pan (about 13 by 10 by 3-inches).
7. Spread ¾ cup of béchamel-sage sauce in the bottom of the prepared baking dish. Arrange 4 lasagna noodles on top of the sauce. Spread ⅓ of the squash-sausage mixture and ½ the ricotta over the noodles; drizzle with ⅓ of the béchamel-sage sauce and sprinkle with ⅓ of the cheeses. Repeat with a second layer of noodles – squash-sausage – ricotta – béchamel – cheeses. Arrange remaining noodles over the filling. Spread remaining squash-sausage mixture on top of the noodles and drizzle with the remaining béchamel-sage sauce; sprinkle with remaining cheeses. Tightly cover the baking dish with foil.
8. Bake the lasagna for 45 minutes. Remove the foil, continue baking uncovered until the sauce bubbles and the top is golden, about 15 minutes. Let the lasagna stand for 15 minutes before serving.

### Béchamel-Sage Sauce

- ¼ cup butter
- ¼ cup all-purpose flour
- 3 ½ cups whole milk
- ¼ teaspoon nutmeg
- 2 tablespoons fresh sage, chopped
- ½ tablespoon fresh thyme leaves
- Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper

1. Melt the butter in a heavy medium-size saucepan over medium heat. Add the flour and whisk for 1 minute. Gradually whisk in the milk. Bring to a simmer over medium-high heat. Reduce the heat to low and simmer until the sauce thickens slightly, whisking often, about 5 minutes. Add the nutmeg, sage and thyme and whisk to combine. Check for seasoning; add salt and pepper to taste.