

Private Chef, Catering & Cooking Classes

I'd be delighted to help you with any and all of your celebrations.

Join Me Around the Table for an Eat Well-Do Good Dinner!

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Although I love the fall, I am well aware that not everyone welcomes the changing seasons with a smile. (And I must admit I'm not a huge fan of the bone-chilling rain that often comes with cooler temperatures.) If the cold and wet have got you down, defy the weather and invite friends and family for a tapas party. A tasty tradition from sunny Spain, it is the perfect way to spend a chilly evening.

Tapas are little bits and bites eaten with a glass of wine or beer in the late afternoon or early evening. Think sidewalk café at the end of a warm, sunny day. Roughly translated, tapas means *cover*. Of course there is lots of speculation of what exactly is being covered. Or covered up! One legend has it that small slices of bread were used to protect glasses of wine from marauding fruit flies. The story goes that hospitable barkeeps added nuggets of cheese or thin slices of ham to go with the bread and a tradition was born. Another tale suggests that 16th century tavern owners served their patrons smelly cheese, free of charge, to cover up the taste of their cheap wine.



In Spain tapas can include anything from fried baby squid to marinated olives to a nibble of cheese or sausage. Called mezze in the Middle East, dim sum in China and grazing here in the US, these little tidbits are a delightful way to start, or better yet replace a meal. Grazing on lots of small dishes makes for a great party. Consider tapas for your next football gathering or girls' night out.

Purists stick to Spanish flavors but I just look for small bites of delicious-ness that more or less work together. When contemplating a tapas party, remember, you don't need to make everything from scratch or at the last minute. Include treats from your favorite deli or bakery and dishes which can be made well in advance.



If you're replacing dinner, you'll need more than crackers and cheese. Make sure your menu includes a few hot dishes, especially on a cold night. Mini kabobs are delicious, easy to serve and eat, as is shrimp or scallops. Fresh vegetables with your favorite dip will add balance. To end on a sweet note, I like to serve tiny cookies or mini brownies and fresh fruit.

If you are worried about an evening of constant passing, don't. A buffet table filled with tantalizing goodies will invite your guests to pick and choose, nibble, and then pick and choose some more. And no, you don't need to invest in a bunch of small plates. At least I didn't. Instead I ferret out every saucer I own and stack them high with a pile of salad forks.

Daunted by the thought of making lots of little dishes? Why not share the work and make it a tapas potluck? Most everyone has a favorite appetizer or hors d'oeuvre recipe. And for those that don't? Invite them to bring a bottle of wine or box of chocolates.

Whether you serve tapas at the start of your party or replace a meal, have a wonderful evening.
Bon appétit!

Susan

Lemon Rice Cakes with Spinach & Manchego

Bring a taste of Spain to your table with my tasty rice cakes. Enjoy!

Makes about 24 cakes



Olive oil
 1 small onion, finely chopped
 1 cup Arborio rice
 1/2 cup dry white wine
 Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
 2-3 cups chicken stock, hot
 Juice and grated zest of 1/2 lemon
 8 ounces baby spinach, roughly chopped
 2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil
 2 tablespoons chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley
 1 ounce Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, grated
 Pinch nutmeg
 1 tablespoon butter
 4 ounces Manchego or Pecorino Romano cheese, grated
 About 1/4 cup fine corn meal

Heat a little olive oil in a heavy saucepan. Add the onion and cook over medium heat until translucent. Stir in the rice and sauté for 2-3 minutes.

Add the wine, salt and pepper to taste and simmer, stirring often, until the wine is absorbed. One cup at a time, add the hot chicken stock and continue to simmer and stir.

After about 18 minutes, stir in the lemon juice and grated zest. Add the spinach in large handfuls and stir into the rice. Stir in the parsley and basil and continue cooking and stirring, adding more stock as needed, until the spinach has wilted and the rice is al dente. Total cooking time should be 20-25 minutes.

Stir in the Parmigiano-Reggiano, nutmeg and butter. Check for seasoning and add salt and pepper to taste. Transfer the rice to a bowl and cool to room temperature. When the rice has cooled, stir in the Manchego, cover and refrigerate until cold, at least 2 hours.

Using 1-2 tablespoons per cake, shape the rice mixture into small patties. Dust the cakes with corn meal and shake off any excess.

Heat a little olive oil in a heavy skillet on medium high heat. Working in batches, fry the rice cakes until crisp and golden brown, 2-3minutes per side. Drain on paper towels and serve hot.

The rice cakes can be made early in the day. Arrange the cakes on a sheet pan and re-warm at 375 degrees until crispy and piping hot.

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