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Labor Day Weekend is a wonderful excuse for a celebration. Sure, the return to school and work is looming but for a few more days it's summertime. Labor Day celebrations take on a particular significance in our family. Depending on the year, and this is one of them, my mother's birthday falls at the start of the long holiday weekend. She has always done her best to celebrate her birthday with enthusiasm.

Then again, my mother pretty much does everything with enthusiasm. It is her gift to the world. That and her beautiful smile. Some people have a nice smile. Others have a lovely smile. My mother has a beautiful smile. In the days before her birthday we run around picking flowers, buying chocolates and tracking down special gifts. No matter what the gift, a bouquet of wild flowers or something a lot more elaborate, she rewards us with enthusiastic thanks and her beautiful smile. There is no energy shortage when it comes to that smile. It comes from the heart and lights up the entire room.

For years Mom managed to turn her birthday into a long, long weekend extravaganza. Forget a simple cake, one quart of ice cream was never enough. One party was never enough. Mom loves to bring people together. For four or five days she celebrated with a never ending round of lunches, dinners and cocktails. Family cookouts. Parties with friends. Romantic dinners with my dad. Lunch with the ladies. Cocktails on the beach. The list was long. Her birthday was the perfect excuse for one last grasp at summer fun.

Dreading a return to the suburbs and school, all the festivities were a welcome respite when we were kids. It's still good fun. After all, who doesn't love a birthday party? When you're little, as long as there is cake and lemonade, it doesn't really particularly matter if it's your own or someone else's birthday. And when you're a bit older? Well, maybe you'd prefer a glass of chardonnay or pinot noir instead of lemonade. Sounds about right to me.

You too can join the party. Celebrations start on Thursday, Mom's actual birthday. It's okay to jump in even earlier if you'd like. Throughout the long weekend, get together with family and friends. The possibilities are endless. A big breakfast on the porch. Mid-morning coffee and blueberry muffins at your favorite café. Lunch, drinks, dinner or a dance in the moonlight. While you are at it, raise your glass to birthdays, living life with enthusiasm and beautiful smiles.

Happy Birthday Mom and bon appétit!



Chocolate-Orange Tart

Chocolate is my mother's favorite, what about you? For a bit of a change, this tart is a wonderfully rich alternative to a cake. Enjoy!

Serves 12-16



Graham Cracker Crust

2 cups graham cracker crumbs
1/4 cup sugar
1/4 teaspoon salt
7 tablespoons butter, melted

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.

Line the bottom of a 10-inch tart or springform pan with parchment paper.

Put the graham cracker crumbs, sugar and salt in a bowl and whisk to combine. Add the butter and stir until well-blended.

Press the crumbs into bottom of the pan and about 1-1/2 inches up the side. Bake the crust at 350 degrees until golden, about 8 minutes. Cool to room temperature and refrigerate until ready to use.

Chocolate Filling

10 ounces very good dark chocolate, chopped
Grated zest of 1 orange
3 tablespoons sugar
1 teaspoon espresso powder
1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
Pinch salt
3/4 cup heavy cream
4 large egg yolks
1 tablespoon orange liqueur (optional)
2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract

Put the chocolate in a small bowl. One minute at a time, zap the chocolate in the microwave on medium heat until the chocolate begins to melt.

Whisk the sugar, espresso powder, cinnamon and salt together in a 1-quart heavy saucepan. Whisk in the yolks and cream and cook over low heat, stirring constantly until it registers 170 degrees on a candy thermometer. Immediately remove from the heat and pour the custard through a fine-mesh sieve into the bowl with the chocolate.

Let the chocolate sit with the hot custard for a few minutes to melt and whisk to combine. Whisk in the orange zest, orange liqueur and vanilla.

Pour the chocolate filling into the Graham Cracker Crust. Cool the tart to room temperature and then refrigerate for at least 6 hours.

Remove the tart from the refrigerator about 20 minutes before serving. Cut into thin wedges (it's very rich!), garnish with whipped cream and serve.