

Cooking Parties & Classes
Winter/Spring 2007-2008

December

5 Tapas & Finger Food

January

11 French Country Cooking

25 Italian Country Kitchen

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9 Italian Country Kitchen

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June

6 Summer Salads

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It is that time of year when the wheels of industry come to a grinding halt. Well at least for a few hours. Yes, it is time for the annual holiday office party. For many years I worked for a big computer company and I have attended my fair share of office parties. At my old company the office party was always the first Friday night of December. Hardly an intimate affair, it was 600 people gathered in the cafeteria and lobby for food, drink, merriment and dancing.

The frivolity continued throughout December with smaller holiday lunches celebrated by each work group. The definition of group was rather fluid and most people attended at least 3 and often more lunches. When I joined the company, I had two bosses (two lunches), they each had a boss (two more lunches) who shared the same boss (one more lunch). Then a colleague who was always looking for something, in fact anything, to celebrate came up with some lame excuse and invited all of us out again (for a total of six). And while no one ever wore a lampshade, a few revelers came very, very close to dancing on a table.

All these parties were squeezed into the first two or three weeks of December. Eventually someone figured out that all of these lunches were costing the company a whole lot of money and even more time. People would begin drifting out of the office around 11:30 and never wandered back before 3:00, generally closer to 4:00. Back in the office, feeling logy and full of too much food, most everyone headed home early. Within a year or two, the powers-that-be found ways to reduce the holiday lunch overload.

When I became a boss I reinvented the Holiday Lunch for my group. I moved it to the weekend, brought it home and invited spouses and significant others. The result was a relaxed and elegant evening. We sipped champagne in front of a crackling fire and then enjoyed a lovely dinner around my big farmhouse table. Most of my team had children and a few years later, we reinvented again. Children came along; we did Sunday lunch instead of dinner and added a few frames of bowling.



When I moved to California, the internet boom had just gone bust and the company cancelled all holiday parties. I decided we should celebrate the season anyway. With help from my assistant, Bonnie, we organized a Sunday afternoon family party. It was potluck and I encouraged everyone to bring a dish from their traditional holiday table. As hostess, I decked my halls, cooked up a few treats and made goodie bags for all. For entertainment, we held a Yankee Gift Swap for the adults and Santa graciously sent a helper to discuss wish lists with the kids.

With holiday music playing in the background, conversation flowed easily. And with children and spouses about, we were less tempted to talk shop. The gift swap was good fun, with holiday tchotchkes, dust-catchers and boxes of chocolates passing hands several times. The children were delighted to have the chance to get up close and personal with Santa. They would hardly let him leave and followed him out to driveway looking for his sleigh, riddling him with questions and requests. Luckily several deer arrived as if on cue, creating a diversion for Santa's escape as well as adding to the excitement and authenticity of his visit. I can not speak for my team, but for my vote it was the best office party ever.



If an office party is in your holiday plans, enjoy. And beware, if you get an urge to dance on the table, put a lampshade on your head or tell your boss exactly what you really think of him; it's time to go home!

Bon appétit! - Susan

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Mixed Reds & Greens Salad

Going to a potluck this holiday season? Bring this simple, festive, salad. Enjoy!
Serves 10-12

12 ounces mixed lettuces, washed, dried, and torn into bite-size pieces
1 head radicchio, quartered and thinly sliced
3-4 tablespoons Roasted Shallot Vinaigrette (recipe follows)
2-4 ounces blue cheese, crumbled
1/4 cup walnuts, toasted and roughly chopped
1/4 cup sweetened, dried cranberries

1. In a large bowl, combine lettuces and radicchio; toss with roasted shallot vinaigrette. Sprinkle with cheese, walnuts and cranberries. Serve immediately.

Roasted Shallot Vinaigrette

Makes about 1 cup

3-4 cloves garlic, peeled
1 shallot, peeled and quartered
1/2 teaspoon dry thyme
3/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil
3 tablespoons red wine vinegar
1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
Coarse salt and freshly ground pepper

1. Preheat oven to 350°. Place garlic, shallot, thyme and oil in a small oven proof baking dish (I use a custard cup), and season with salt and pepper. Roast until garlic and shallot are very soft, about 30 minutes. Set aside to cool.
2. In the bowl of a small food processor or blender, combine roasted garlic and shallot, oil, vinegars and mustard. Process until combined and smooth.