

Work Smarter NOT HARDER

PART 2: THE APPETIZER



By Becky McKinley
beckymckinley@gmail.com

Last month I began a series on **Work Smarter, Not Harder**, and I've been thinking about it ever since. As I was reading one of my favorite culinary divas, I found myself questioning the way I've entertained for years.

Now, let me confess something. I have a touch of OCD when it comes to hosting. (All right... perhaps more than a touch.) I blame my twenty-plus years in the catering business. Catering teaches you one very important lesson: if it isn't done before the guests arrive, you're already behind.

Preparing for a dinner party is a bit like heading into the wilderness on a week-long camping trip. You'd better pack everything because there isn't a grocery store around the corner—or, in my case, no desire to make a last-minute dash for lemons while wearing an apron.

When my guests ring the doorbell, I want the kitchen to look as though a cleaning crew has just departed. No dishes in the sink. No frantic chopping. No smoke alarm serenading the neighborhood. Just candles glowing, music playing, a glass of wine in my hand, and the illusion that entertaining is the easiest thing I've done all week.

Then along came Ruth Reichl.

If you're not familiar with Ruth, she's culinary royalty. She has written more than a dozen books, including *The Paris Novel*, a delicious adventure through food, art, and fashion in 1980s Paris. She served as Editor-in-Chief of *Gourmet* magazine from 1999 to 2009 and was restaurant critic for both *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*. In 2024 she received the James Beard Lifetime Achievement Award. In short, when Ruth talks about food—or entertaining—I listen.

I read her Substack whenever I can, and last month she shared a story about entertaining that stopped me in my



tracks. I settled in, expecting to read another clever strategy for working smarter, not harder.

Instead, she completely upended my way of thinking.

Ruth said the most enjoyable dinner party she had ever attended began when the hostess greeted her at the door, handed her an apron, and said, "I'm so glad you're here. I need your help."

My first thought? Surely she was kidding.

I've always believed dinner should be in the oven, the counters spotless, and the dishwasher empty before anyone arrives. Ruth argued just the opposite. She believes one of the greatest secrets of entertaining is allowing your guests to become part of the experience. There's something about chopping herbs, stirring a sauce, or arranging flowers together that immediately breaks the ice. Strangers become friends, conversations begin naturally, and everyone feels invested in the evening.

Her advice to those of us who like every detail completed before the first knock at the door? Leave a little work undone.

Set out the wine glasses. Chill the champagne. Mix your signature cocktail. But save a few simple tasks for your guests. She promises you'll create a far more memorable evening than if everyone simply sat in the living room waiting to be summoned to dinner.

As I read Ruth's article, my thoughts immediately turned to my dear friend Carol Lovelady.

Carol would tell you she's always asking for help because she's "not organized." I don't believe her for a second.

She's a master at making everyone feel comfortable. Before long someone is slicing bread, another guest is arranging flowers, someone else is stirring a sauce, and somehow the conversation flows as effortlessly as the wine. Carol understands that people don't simply enjoy being served—they enjoy belonging.



Chilled Sweet Corn
Soup with Jumbo
Lump Crab Garnish

Recipe on page 40

Her husband, Sam, always has the perfect cocktail waiting, while Carol has dinner nearly complete. Then comes the tiny task she's intentionally saved for one lucky guest. It's brilliant entertaining disguised as disorganization.

Carol also inherited her love of hospitality from her mother, Helen Vahue, an accomplished hostess in her own right. Years ago their family compiled a cookbook filled with treasured recipes and traditions. I still pull it off the shelf from time to time because those recipes have stood the test of time—and many still appear on Carol's table today.

Last month we talked about creating an inviting bar, simple appetizers, and even squeezing a few extra chairs around the table. This month I'd like to move everyone into the dining room and talk about one of my favorite parts of any meal—the first course.

To me, the first course is much more than something to satisfy hunger. It's the culinary equivalent of a warm handshake.

It tells your guests, "Relax. You're in good hands. Tonight is going to be special."

Those first few minutes after everyone takes a seat often determine the pace and mood of the entire evening. A thoughtfully prepared first course

creates a memorable first impression, encourages conversation, and gently builds anticipation for what is to come.

Whether it's a silky soup, a crisp seasonal salad, or a beautifully composed plate, the flavors should awaken the palate without stealing the spotlight from the main course. Better yet, if it's prepared ahead of time and can be served in minutes, it allows the hostess to do the one thing she often forgets to do—sit down, relax, and enjoy the party she worked so hard to create.

Perhaps that's the real lesson in working smarter, not harder. Not that we should do less, but that we should leave just enough room for our guests to become part of the story.

BUTTER LETTUCE SALAD STACK

with Pear, Goat Cheese
and Candied Pecans

For six people

Butter Lettuce X 2 heads
2 soft pears, peel left on, I like a red one
Goat cheese crumbles
Candied Pecans
Fresh Chives

Maple Dijon Vinaigrette
½ C. olive oil
4 T. champagne vinegar
1 T. maple syrup
1 tsp. Dijon Mustard
Salt and pepper to taste

Place all ingredients in a bowl or jar. Whisk or shake until emulsified.

To Assemble

Wash lettuce and break into separate leaves. Thinly slice pears and drizzle with lemon juice.

Stack the lettuce. Surround with pear slices, pecans and goat cheese. This can be done ahead of time. Drizzle with dressing right before service and sprinkle with chives.

ROASTED BEET NAPOLEON

with Whipped Goat Cheese,
Pistachios & Champagne
Vinaigrette

Serves: 8

For the Beets

8 medium red beets
4 medium golden beets
2 T. olive oil
Kosher salt
Freshly ground black pepper

Whipped Goat Cheese

10 ounces goat cheese, softened
4 ounces cream cheese, softened
¼ C. heavy cream
2 tsp. honey
1 tsp. lemon zest
Fresh cracked pepper

Champagne Vinaigrette

½ C. extra virgin olive oil
3 T. champagne vinegar
1 tsp. Dijon mustard
1 tsp. honey
1 small shallot, minced
Salt and pepper

Garnish

½ C. toasted pistachios, roughly chopped
Microgreens
Fresh chives, finely snipped
Flaky sea salt
Fresh cracked pepper
Optional: edible flowers (Hard to find in Amarillo) sometimes you can find some at Natural Grocers

Roast the Beets

Heat oven to 400°F. Wash beets but leave skins on. Rub lightly with olive oil and sprinkle with salt. Wrap each beet individually in foil.

Roast until tender. Medium beets: about 50–60 minutes. Large beets: 70–90 minutes. These do take forever but can be done a couple of days in advance.

Cool completely. Rub off the skins using paper towels. Slice into ¼-inch rounds. For the prettiest presentation, use a 2½-inch round cutter to make perfectly even circles.

Make the Whipped Goat Cheese

Beat together: goat cheese, cream cheese, heavy cream, honey, and lemon zest.

Whip until very smooth and fluffy.

Place into a piping bag or zip-top bag with one corner snipped.

Champagne Vinaigrette

Whisk together: champagne vinegar, dijon, honey, shallot. Slowly whisk in olive oil. Season with salt and pepper.

Assemble the Napoleon

On each chilled salad plate: place one beet slice, pipe a thin layer of whipped goat cheese, add another beet slice, repeat once more. Finish with one final beet slice.

Drizzle lightly with champagne vinaigrette.

Sprinkle with: pistachios, chives, microgreens, flaky sea salt, and fresh pepper. If using edible flowers, add one or two just before serving.

Make-Ahead Schedule

Two Days Ahead

Roast beets. Prepare vinaigrette.

One Day Ahead

Make whipped goat cheese.

Three to Four Hours Before Guests Arrive

Assemble the Napoleons. Cover loosely and refrigerate.

Twenty Minutes Before Serving

Remove from the refrigerator to take the chill off. Add vinaigrette, pistachios, and microgreens (once again look for these at Natural Grocers) just before serving.

CHILLED SWEET CORN SOUP

with Jumbo Lump Crab Garnish

Serves: 8 first-course portions

For the soup:

8 ears fresh sweet corn
3 T. butter
1 sweet onion, diced
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 small Yukon Gold potato, peeled and diced
4 C. chicken stock
1 C. heavy cream
½ C. whole milk (if needed)

This is used to thin the soup the next day if needed before service

1 tsp. kosher salt
½ tsp. white pepper
Pinch of cayenne pepper
1 tsp. fresh thyme leaves
Juice of ½ lemon

Crab Garnish

12 ounces jumbo lump crab meat, carefully picked over
1 T. chives, finely sliced
1 tsp. lemon zest
1 tsp. fresh lemon juice
1 tsp. extra virgin olive oil
Salt and white pepper to taste

Optional Garnishes

Microgreens
Fresh chives
A few kernels of roasted corn
Smoked paprika
Crispy bacon bits

Melt butter in a large saucepan over medium heat. Add onion and cook until translucent, about 8 minutes.

Add garlic, thyme, and potato. Cook 2 minutes.

Cut kernels from the corn cobs. Add kernels to the pot.

Pour in chicken stock and simmer 20 minutes, until the potato is tender.

Purée

Blend until completely smooth using a high-powered blender.

For an elegant restaurant-quality texture, strain through a fine-mesh sieve, pressing firmly.

Fun Suggestions to Up Your Game

Add a thin slice of ripe avocado between layers for extra richness. Replace pistachios with toasted Marcona almonds or candied pecans. Tuck a few baby arugula leaves between the layers for a peppery bite. Finish with a drizzle of aged balsamic glaze for added sweetness and dramatic presentation.



Roasted Beet
Napoleon

Finish

Return to the pot and stir in cream. Season with salt, white pepper, cayenne, and lemon juice. If the soup is thicker than you'd like after chilling, whisk in a little milk. Refrigerate at least 6 hours, preferably overnight.

Prepare the crab

Gently combine the crab with olive oil, lemon zest, lemon juice, chives, salt, and white pepper. Keep refrigerated until serving.

To Serve

Ladle the chilled soup into shallow bowls. Place a generous mound of jumbo lump crab in the center. Finish with finely chopped chives

Tips I Follow

- Fresh summer corn makes a noticeable difference, especially at its peak.
- Don't boil the cream after adding it; gentle heat preserves its sweetness.
- Straining the soup gives it a silky, fine-dining texture.
- The soup can be made 2 days ahead, and the crab garnish can be prepared the morning of your dinner.

ARUGULA WITH GRILLED PEACHES AND WARM BURRATA SALAD

Salad

8 C. *baby arugula*
4 ripe but firm peaches,
halved and pitted
3 (4-ounce) balls burrata
cheese
2 T. olive oil
Kosher salt and freshly
ground black pepper

Candied Pecans

1 C. pecan halves
2 T. butter
2 T. light brown sugar
Pinch of cayenne (optional)
Pinch of flaky sea salt

Honey-Balsamic Vinaigrette

$\frac{1}{2}$ C. extra-virgin olive oil
3 T. aged balsamic vinegar
1 T. fresh lemon juice
1 T. honey
1 tsp. Dijon mustard
1 small shallot, finely minced
Salt and freshly ground black
pepper to taste

Garnishes

Fresh basil leaves
Flaky sea salt
Freshly cracked black pepper
Optional: prosciutto ribbons or
edible flowers

Make the Candied Pecans

Melt butter in a skillet over medium heat. Add pecans and brown sugar, stirring until the sugar melts and coats the nuts, about 3–4 minutes. Sprinkle with cayenne and sea salt, then transfer to parchment paper to cool.

Make the Dressing

Whisk together the olive oil, balsamic vinegar, lemon juice, honey, Dijon mustard, shallot, salt, and pepper until emulsified. Refrigerate until ready to serve. refrigerated until serving.



Grill the Peaches

Brush the cut sides lightly with olive oil. Heat a grill or grill pan to medium-high. Place peaches cut-side down and grill 2–3 minutes until beautiful grill marks appear. Turn briefly to warm the other side. Slice each half into wedges.

Grill the Burrata

Burrata is delicate, so it needs a little help on the grill. Pat the burrata dry. Lightly brush with olive oil.

Place each ball on a small square of well-oiled heavy-duty foil or in a cast-iron grill pan. Grill over medium heat for about 2–3 minutes, just until warmed and lightly smoky. The goal is to warm the creamy center without letting it burst.

Alternatively, sear briefly in a hot cast-iron skillet for 1 minute per side.

Spread the arugula on a large chilled platter. Arrange the grilled peach wedges over the greens.

Tear the warm burrata into large pieces and nestle them among the peaches or I like to leave them whole, they are so beautiful with the grill marks.

Sprinkle with candied pecans and basil leaves. Drizzle lightly with the honey-balsamic vinaigrette.

Finish with flaky sea salt and freshly cracked pepper.

My Notes to Self

If peaches aren't perfectly ripe, grill them a minute longer.



BEEF
IT'S WHAT'S FOR DINNER.®

The finest beef is available right here in the Amarillo area.

The following businesses urge you to take advantage of this nutritious food.
Enjoy beef at your favorite restaurant or serve beef to your family for a balanced diet.

Affiliated Foods, Inc. Affiliated Food Service

PO Box 30300
1401 Farmers Ave.
Amarillo, Texas 79120
(806) 372-3851

AgTexas Farm Credit Services

2001 S. Soncy Road
Amarillo, Texas 79124
(806) 376-4669

Amarillo Grain Exchange, Inc.

"Service With Integrity"
1300 S. Johnson
Amarillo, Texas 79101
(806) 372-8511

Bar G Feedyard

PO Box 1797
Hereford, Texas 79045
(806) 357-2241

Caviness Beef Packers

PO Box 790
Hereford, Texas 79045
(806) 357-2443

FirstBank Southwest

*Serving the Texas Panhandle
for over 100 years*
Amarillo - Hereford
Pampa - Perryton - Booker

Graham Brothers Jewelers

2201 Civic Circle
Suite 505
Amarillo, Texas 79109
(806) 352-0080
"Leave The Ordinary Behind"

Keeling Cattle Feeders, Inc.

PO Box 1853
Hereford, Texas 79045
(806) 357-2261

Rogers & Sons Feedyard

PO Box 547
Dimmitt, TX 79027
Mark Rogers
806-647-3448

Superior Livestock Auction

Will Durrett
Marketing Representative
PO Box 8
Wildorado, Texas 79098
(806) 433-6601

Triangle Realty, LLC

J.T. Haynes • *Broker/Owner*
Specializing In Exceeding
Expectations for Buyers
and Sellers
(806) 681-3421
www.trianglerealtyllc.com

Tulia Livestock Auction

Mark & Karen Hargrave
(806) 236-3021
(806) 995-4184
www.tulialivestockauction.com

Whiteface Ford

"Best deals in the Panhandle"
Jon Galland • Seth Woolsey
Hereford, Texas
(806) 364-1919
www.whitefaceford.net

X-Steakhouse

9181 Town Square Blvd
Suite 1311
Amarillo, TX 79119
Rowdy Leal
806-322-4227
www.xbarsteakhouse.com

Yellowhouse Machinery Co.

**John Deere Construction
Equipment**
11500 I-40 East
Amarillo, Texas 79118
(806) 335-1681



Funded by Beef Farmers and Ranchers



Bring your
best to
the table.

BeefLovingTexans.com



TEXAS BEEF COUNCIL

y'all hungry?



A guide to dining out in Amarillo and the area, Chomp is a result of opinions and experiences of the Accent West staff. Publication of a listing cannot be purchased or influenced by advertising. Reviews of restaurants are by anonymous critics to ensure no special treatment. Accent West is always interested in hearing about new restaurants and/or entertainment enterprises. Ideas and comments should be sent to Chomp Editor, Accent West Magazine, Box 1504, Amarillo, TX 79105. Deadline is six weeks prior to date of publication. Price scales are for a typical meal for one person, excluding drinks, tax or tip as follows:

Inexpensive – under \$7.00

Moderate – \$7.00 to \$20.00

Expensive – over \$20.00

Sa-vor Tapas Bar, 7679 Hillside Rd., Ste 600, 806-310-2600. Definitely an upscale, social dining experience! Urban, chic, small bites, big flavor. So many delicious options to choose but do start with the charcuterie board – bold, fresh and delicious, especially with an imaginative cocktail. Select cold or hot tapas to your liking – such as the Mejillones (mussels), Albondigas (pork meatballs with manchego), roasted artichoke flatbread... the list goes on and on! Of course, there're are salads, and entrees –including prime beef, seared snapper, Rainbow trout. Wines are extraordinary. Don't miss the crème brulee for dessert! Open daily 11 a.m. – Midnight; Brunch (Sat & Sun) 10 a.m. -3 p.m. Moderate to expensive.

Sad Monkey Mercantile, 9800 TX-217, Canyon, TX 79015, 806-488-2658. Just 15 minutes from Canyon and 25 from Amarillo, Sad Monkey Mercantile is the perfect stop for a relaxing break on your way to or from Palo Duro Canyon. This unique spot offers everything from hot sandwiches and fresh local coffee to craft beer from area breweries like Pondaseta Brewing Co., plus wine flights and mimosas at the Monkey Bar. The food trailer, open on weekends, serves delicious meals, while the pet-friendly patio with cornhole and occasional live music sets a laid-back vibe for all ages. Check out their Instagram for the latest on live music events. You'll also find camping gear, homewares, and "Panhandle Proud" merchandise to take home as souvenirs. With scenic views, a small dog park, and Texas longhorns nearby, Sad Monkey Mercantile offers a peaceful, family-friendly space to relax, grab a drink, and explore the best of the Texas Panhandle. Whether you're hiking, biking, or just looking to unwind, it's the perfect place to recharge. Open Sun – Thurs, 9 AM – 8 PM and Fri/ Sat, 9 AM – 9 PM. Moderate.

The Brunch Truck, 213 SW 7th, 806-373-4199. Downtown Amarillo has a flavorful new addition worth the stop—**The Brunch Truck**, the city's latest food truck concept with a twist. While meals are prepped in the truck, guests enjoy the comfort of indoor dining just steps away, combining the charm of street food with the ease of a sit-down experience. Offering a fast-casual approach to breakfast

and lunch, The Brunch Truck serves up an eclectic mix of morning favorites and midday staples. Think hearty breakfast burritos, fluffy pancakes, French toast, and the All-American breakfast alongside bold options like migas, tacos, burgers, enchiladas, salads, and sandwiches. Stop by for a quick bite that doesn't skimp on flavor—and stay for the fun, laid-back vibe that makes this local gem a standout. Lunch specials, Tues-Thurs (10 a.m. – 2 p.m.) Hours: Tues: 6:30 AM – 2 PM.; Wed-Fri: 6:30 AM – 7 PM; Sat-Sun Brunch: 9 AM – 3 PM. Call in orders for takeout. Moderate.

BORGER

Smitty Brothers All About Burgers, 3245 Fairlanes Blvd. 806-275-9107 Just off Hwy 136, west of Borger, sits a country-cozy stop made for hungry travelers. Family-friendly and laid-back, it's all about hearty, two-fisted burgers done right. Classics like the double cheeseburger and green chile burger never miss, but the standout is the **Triple "B" Burger**—topped with Kickin' Bourbon sauce, bacon, and your choice of cheese. For variety, try the avocado-topped **California Burger** or the smoky **Hickory Burger** with homemade BBQ sauce. Beyond burgers, there's crisp salads, golden chicken tenders, and catfish dinners. Don't skip the sides: hot, real-cut fries and irresistible onion straws seal the deal. Open for lunch 11 AM to 2 PM and dinner 4:30 to 8:00 PM, Mon – Fri. *A/W*

We proudly sponsor these and all other fine eateries in the area.

Local
806-345-7773



Watts
800-690-7476



Unforgettable Journeys!

AAA Travels With You in So Many Ways

Exclusive Member Benefits and Savings: Discover the special rates and perks AAA Travel has to offer

Travel Planning Services: Our knowledgeable travel advisors will bring your dream vacation to reality

The World at your Fingertips: Choose from a spectacular array of cruises, land tours, iconic rail journeys, and resort vacations

Total Peace of Mind: Travel with confidence with travel insurance options that protect your journey every step of the way

Your Global Passport: We'll help secure your passports, visas, and International Driving Permits



Book an Appointment Today!

1-866-986-1830

Visit a Branch



Victoria Jones JEWELRY



JOIN US FOR A DAY OF
WINE AND THE NEWEST
DEMEGLIO
COLLECTION AND
ENJOY WINE TASTING
AND LIGHT BITES.



THURSDAY,
AUGUST 13TH

1:00 PM - 7:00 PM



Sip, stack, and discover
bold Italian design paired
with brilliant diamonds and
high-tech ceramic.

DEMEGLIO

FINE JEWELRY AT THE SHOPS OF WOLFLIN SQUARE
2441 W. I-40 AMARILLO, TX 79109 | VICTORIAJONESJEWELRY.COM | 806-418-2312