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Cooking: The Art of Adaption

Special delights that remind us that in the end, it all comes back to the simple joy of gathering, sharing, and savoring

A few weeks ago, as I leisurely strolled along a trail in Palo Duro Canyon, I found myself lost in nostalgia. The canyon, with its towering rock formations and breathtaking hues, has always been a place of magic for my family—a landscape woven into the fabric of our memories. The colors, the textures, the sheer magnitude of the formations around me left me breathless, and suddenly, I was transported back to my childhood, to a time when life was simpler and picnics were the highlight of our adventures.

It was a lazy spring day, and Dad's bright yellow Wagoneer—one of the classic woody types, of course—was packed to the brim. Mom, ever the patient navigator, wrangled four whiny kids, a wicker picnic basket, and four plaid thermoses filled with Kool-Aid, her signature blend of two teaspoons of red powder and enough

sugar to guarantee a future dental visit. To us, it was pure magic in a cup.

Lunch was always a feast of simplicity and love. Egg salad sandwiches, neatly wrapped in dull wax paper and secured with toothpicks, sat beside a crinkly bag of ruffled potato chips and jars of homemade pickles. But the true treasures of our picnic spread were the desserts—Mom's beloved pecan bruisers and her thumbprint cookies filled with wild plum jam. Those wild plums had been foraged by my dad from the ranches he visited as a veterinarian, a small act of thievery he justified with Mom's peace offering: a freshly canned jar of that very plum jam, gifted back to the ranchers in thanks.

That insatiable need to recreate those moments led me to forge new traditions with my own children. The 1980s were a whirlwind—three children under four, John finishing a grueling surgical residency, and a move to Amarillo to start our new life.

Our summer vacations became synonymous with Colorado hikes and picnics, where I discovered the marvel that was the Coleman stove. Looking back, I wonder if I realized then that I was, in a way, launching my catering career. Packing up that little green-and-silver Coleman ice chest and heading into the mountains became my greatest joy. You'd be amazed at what can be whipped up on a simple Coleman stove—crispy fried trout, golden cottage potatoes, and even s'mores, though sometimes the family had to stand as a windbreak just to get the grease up to temperature. Those were the golden days, and I would return to them in a heartbeat.

Which brings me to my career in catering. If the canyon picnics and mountain cookouts taught me anything, it was to be prepared, flexible, and endlessly creative. Catering, much like a picnic, is an art of adaptation—everything is done offsite, and if you arrive unprepared or without a backup plan, disaster is sure to follow.

Over the years, I've cooked in tents as rain poured down, salvaged fallen wedding cakes, and once orchestrated a dinner for 400 people—only to realize the napkins never arrived. But oh, the adventures I've had. I've been fortunate enough to cook for Oprah, two U.S. presidents, two first ladies, and even teach a cooking class on Capitol Hill.

My journey from that wicker picnic basket to a monogrammed chocolate purse—filled, fittingly, with my signature chocolate mousse for none other than Laura Bush—has been nothing short of extraordinary. As I reflect on how far my culinary life has come, I am reminded that every meal, whether in the grandeur of a canyon or the formality of a formal dinner, is an opportunity to create something unforgettable. And in the end, it all comes back to the simple joy of gathering, sharing, and savoring.

EASY CHOCOLATE MOUSSE

for Laura Bush Chocolate Purse

1-½ C. marshmallows (baby ones) 9 ounces semi sweet chips
4 T. butter ¼ C. very strong coffee

Add the chocolates, butter, marshmallows and coffee to a saucepan. Melt chocolate, butter, marshmallows, and coffee just until melted. You may still have some white ribbon from the marshmallows. Do not overheat. Must still be shiny.

In your electric mixer: beat until it reaches stiff peaks:

4 C. heavy cream 1 T. vanilla
3 T. instant vanilla pudding mix 1-½ C. powdered sugar

Stir the somewhat cooled chocolate into the cream. Store in Ziplock bag or pastry bag for easy piping. You can refrigerate for up to one week or freeze before using. Each recipe fills 30 of the 3 ounce cups.

GOAT SOUFFLÉ

YUM!

¼ C. freshly grated Parmesan cheese ½ pound fresh goat cheese, (crumbled)
4 T. butter Salt and pepper to taste
½ C. all purpose flour 4 large eggs (separated)
2 C. milk 2 T. minced chives
1 bay leaf 1 T. minced flat leaf parsley

Preheat the oven to 375°.

Butter a 2-quart soufflé dish. Add the Parmesan and turn to evenly coat the bottom and side of the dish. Tap out any excess.

In a medium saucepan, melt the butter over moderate heat. Whisk in the flour until a smooth paste forms. Whisk in 1 C. of the milk until smooth, then whisk in the remaining 1 C. of milk and add the bay leaf. Bring the sauce to a boil, whisking constantly. Reduce the heat to low and cook, whisking frequently, until very thick, about 10 minutes. Scrape into a large bowl. Stir in the goat cheese and season with salt and pepper, then whisk in the egg yolks. Cover and let cool, then stir in the herbs.

In a large stainless-steel bowl, beat the egg whites with a pinch of salt until firm but not dry. Fold one-third of the beaten whites into the cheese sauce. Fold in the remaining whites, leaving a few white streaks.

Scrape the soufflé mixture into the prepared baking dish and bake in the center of the oven for 45 minutes, or until browned, puffed and still slightly jiggly in the center. Serve at once.

Make Ahead: The soufflé base can be prepared through Step 2, without adding the herbs, and refrigerated overnight. Bring the soufflé base to room temperature and stir in herbs before folding in the beaten egg whites.

ARINCINI BALLS WITH SMOKED MOZZARELLA

By Becky McKinley

1-½ C. Arborio rice	2 tsp. kosher salt
5 C. simmering chicken stock, divided	1 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
1 C. freshly grated Parmesan cheese	½ inch by ½ inch smoked gouda or mozzarella cubes
½ C. dry white wine	x number of balls you are making.
3 T. butter, diced	

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Place the rice and 4 C. of the chicken stock in a Dutch oven, such as Le Creuset. Cover and bake for 45 minutes, until most of the liquid is absorbed and the rice is al dente. Remove from the oven, add the remaining cup of chicken stock, the Parmesan, wine, butter, salt, and pepper, and stir vigorously for 2 to 3 minutes, until the rice is thick and creamy.

Place on a sheet pan and chill until firm.

To make the arincini balls:

3 C. flour
4 beaten eggs
Panko crumbs

Once the risotto has cooled, roll portions of the risotto in your hands to form balls of about 2 ounces, and stuff each one with a piece of mozzarella sealing any holes.

Place the flour, beaten egg, and breadcrumbs in separate bowls. Coat one risotto ball first with the flour, then with the egg, and finally with the breadcrumbs, then place it back on the baking sheet lined with parchment paper. Repeat this process until all the risotto balls have been coated thoroughly. I freeze the balls at this time.

In a large, heavy-bottomed skillet, heat 1 C. of virgin vegetable oil. Cook the arancini in the oil until they become golden brown all over. Remove each rice ball to a plate lined with paper towels to drain. Serve warm, topped with a sprinkling of grated Parmigiano Reggiano.

VANESSA'S ROLLS

1 ½ C. milk
¾ C. + 1 T. Sugar
1 egg
1 T. salt
2 T. yeast
2 C. of warm water
9 to 10 C. of all purpose flour
1 C. butter divided

Scald: 1 ½ C. of milk, ¾ C. sugar and ½ C. of butter in a microwave safe bowl, for about 2 minutes. Cutting the butter into pieces helps it melt faster. There will probably be some little cubes of butter still floating in the hot mixture, they will melt.

Stir into the scalded milk:

1 - 2 C. flour
1 egg
1 T. salt

In a measuring cup add:

2 T. yeast
2 C. warm water
1 T. sugar

Stir and add to the milk and flour mixture.



Add 8 to 10 C. flour to this mixture and stir by hand. I suggest only adding 2 C. at a time. At the end the dough will be dense and sticky, and may be hard to stir. You can use your hands to incorporate the flour. Only add as much as is easy to incorporate. Smooth the dough out in an oiled bottomed bowl and cover the bowl with plastic wrap. Leave it in a warm place and let it rise about 1 hour or until doubled in size.

Cover your working space with flour to prevent the dough from sticking. Dump your dough out and divide it into balls the size bun you are wanting for your tenderloin sandwiches. Place the balls on a greased cookie sheet about an inch apart. Let it rise in a warm place for about 45 minutes.

Bake at 350 degrees for 10 to 15 minutes. Watch carefully.

BECKY'S BEEF TENDERLOIN

Nothing brings more joy to my family than beef tenderloin. I have a simple never-fail recipe.

**1 tenderloin, 4 to 7 lbs.
cleaned of all silverskin and fat.**

Bring the tenderloin to room temperature.

Rub with:

A thin layer of Olive oil

Red Creek or Claude's fajita liquid marinade, a drizzle on top of the olive oil rubbed tenderloin

A generous amount of Montreal seasoning or other seasoning of choice

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Add the uncovered tenderloin to a 425 degree convection oven for 27 minutes for a Texas panhandle taste. It is rare at that point. If you do not have a convection oven place at 425 for 34 minutes. Remove from oven and let rest for 10 minutes at least. If you want it to cook more, cover with foil. Otherwise leave uncovered and it will be perfectly rare. *AM*

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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

Café Moonwater, 3316 SW 6th Ave., 806-670-6116. Cozy tables, each styled distinctly in a delightful, eclectic atmosphere – invite diners to relax and refresh in a world away from the everyday. Superb, satisfying lunches include such amazing homemade delights as avocado toast, irresistible caprese salad, chicken salad (several tempting ways!), sandwiches, soups... and the oh-my-goodness desserts. Dine in or take it to go. After lunch, the enticing Moonwater home decorations and designs throughout the store must not be missed! 11:00 a.m. – 2:30 p.m., Tues-Sat. Moderate.

Tyler's Barbeque, 3301 Olsen Blvd., 806-331-2271. When a van with New York license plates is parked in front, it speaks well that folks would come that far to eat barbeque! Tyler

does know his way around smoked brisket, ribs, sausage, pulled pork and chicken. Step right into this Texas-comfortable restaurant and settle in for some great meals – plates, brisket sandwiches, specials – be sure to savor that great sauce – you might even want to take some home. And, don't miss the cobbler (or banana pudding)! Tuesday-Saturday. Moderate.

Chicken Salad Chick, 2620 Wolflin Ave., 806-808-0709. Comfortable, clean, efficient restaurant. Fresh chicken salad – made so many ways – yummy with pecans, apples and grapes, but then try the zesty with ranch, bacon & shredded cheddar cheese, or with just the right diced jalapenos! The Lemon Basil is hard to resist too! Sandwiches, soup, salad – then there's pimento cheese and the signature sandwiches including the Turkey Club. Little Chick offerings and, for dessert – how about a Buttercream Frosted Flower Cookie, or a slice of pie, such as Pina Colada Pie?! Open for lunch, and on 'til 8 p.m. Dine-in, take-out, delivery. Moderate.

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.

Six Car Pub & Brewery, 625 S. Polk Amarillo, Texas, 79101, 806-576-3396. Located in the heart of Amarillo, Six Car Pub & Brewery offers a vibrant atmosphere and a diverse menu that's perfect for any occasion.

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