

Hogtown HomeGrown

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Christmas Eve on Shadowlawn Drive

We would leave our home in South Florida during the early morning hours of Christmas Eve. Presents filled the trunk as Mom, Dad and I headed to the center of the Christmas Eve universe—a little house on Shadowlawn Drive in Albany, Georgia. Home to mom's sister Nita, her football coach husband Pat, and their 4 children, my cousins! Christmas morning was devoted to mounds of presents, but the night before was a time for family and friends to gather from far and near. Everyone was welcome, but Aunt Nita had one rule and she never wavered—everyone will dress up, so coats and ties were required wear for men at Christmas Eve dinner. Every year, one relative or another, usually my dad, would threaten to wear just a coat, a tie, and a smile!

As dinnertime approached, people hurried in, straightening their ties and touching up their hair. The bar was open while talk of football filled the air. For those not indulging at the bar, there was always rich, boozy eggnog. Heavily doused with liquor and thick with cream lightened by beaten egg whites, it was ice cold and scented with nutmeg—not a teetotaler's drink by any stretch of the imagination! Of course, there were always little morsels to “tide us over to dinner” in the form of Georgia pecans toasted with butter and salt, hand-made cheese straws, and, if we were lucky, Granny's cream cheese and pecan stuffed dates.

The number of family and friends could easily top fifty, so pans of food covered every surface of Aunt Nita's kitchen, even the fold-down ironing board. Guests filed through making a line that snaked through the house or out the front door, depending on the weather. Plates overflowed with roast turkey and ham, gravies, mashed potatoes, rice, cornbread dressing with and without oysters, scalloped oysters, macaroni and cheese, broccoli casserole, yellow squash casserole and maybe an eggplant casserole. Sweet potatoes were either layered with slices of orange, covered with marshmallows or topped with a pecan praline. Depending on the cook, there might be creamed pearl onions or creamed peas or creamed peas with pearl onions. And beans—green or pole beans cooked for hours with salt pork or ham hock, until they dissolved in your mouth. Plus there was always Aunt Nita's special Watergate Salad—a fruit and nut-filled mint green Jello mold!

So we ate, and we laughed, and we talked, and we ate some more. Plates were cleared, belts loosened, chairs pushed away from the table, conversations continued as cleanup crews hit the kitchen and we let our stomachs “settle” for dessert.

Ah, dessert! When I close my eyes and picture Aunt Nita's dining room, I can see at least a dozen different possibilities. Pies—pecan, pumpkin, mincemeat, lemon chess, coconut custard and sweet potato. Cakes—coconut, caramel, chocolate and always one or two pound cakes. Cookies, rum or bourbon balls, and candy canes rounded out the choices, which is just fine, since I couldn't possibly eat another bite. Well, maybe one of Uncle Pat's prized chocolate covered cherries, but only if he offers, since it wouldn't be polite to ask!

What's Fresh Right Now?

- Bananas
- Bitter melon
- Bok Choy
- Broccoli
- Cabbage—green, napa, cone
- Carrots
- Chestnuts
- Cucumbers—mini seedless
- Eggplant—purple italian, purple asian, fairytale
- Garlic—chives, elephant
- Ginger, Galangal, Tumeric
- Greens—chard, kale, mustard, arugula, wild arugula, mizuna, collards, sorrel, moringa **with roots**—turnips, rutabaga
- Herbs—mint, italian/purple/lemon/thai and holy basil, thyme, sage, oregano, rosemary, stevia, curry leaf
- Honey
- Kohlrabi
- Lettuce—romaine, red/green leaf
- Mushrooms—shiitake, chanterelle
- Onions—green, large white
- Papaya
- Peppers—red/green/yellow/orange sweet, habanero, jalapeno, poblano, variety sweet and hot
- Potatoes—sweet
- Radish—daikon, globe, french breakfast
- Roselle
- Shoots, Sprouts and Microgreens
- Squash—zucchini, butternut, calabaza, seminole pumpkin
- Tomatoes—grape, sun-gold, cluster, heirloom, plum, green
- Turnips—purple-top, tokyo

Local and Fresh— Sage

Fresh and dried sage are a real representation of the difference in taste and strength of fresh versus dried herbs. While I use both in my cornbread dressing (remember, dressing in a pan, stuffing in a bird or fish) it is the dried sage that packs the flavor punch.

Fresh sage leaves can be easily dried and crumbled between your palms before adding to a dish, but have you ever tried frying them? Just a minute in hot oil makes an edible decoration with a wonderful flavor

Cornbread Dressing

INGREDIENTS

- 6-8 cups leftover cornbread, crumbled
- 3 stalks of celery, chopped finely
- 1 onion or leek, chopped finely
- 1/2 cup dried rubbed sage
- 1/4 cup fresh sage, chopped finely
- 1 Tablespoon dried marjoram (optional)
- 1 teaspoon dried basil (optional)
- 2 eggs, lightly beaten
- 2-3 cups chicken or no-chicken broth
- 4 Tablespoons butter, melted and divided

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly oil a 2 quart flat casserole dish.

In a large bowl, thoroughly mix together cornbread with vegetables and herbs.

Mix together eggs, 2 cups broth and 2 Tablespoons butter. Stir into cornbread mixture, adding broth as needed to moisten mixture.

Spoon into prepared casserole dish and cover with remaining butter. Seal with lid or foil. Bake 45 minutes, remove cover and bake additional 15 minutes.

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Triple Cranberry Sauce

INGREDIENTS

- 1 bag fresh cranberries
- 1 cup whole dried cranberries
- 1 cup unsweetened cranberry juice
- 1/2 cup orange juice
- 1/2 cup maple syrup
- 1/2 cup maple sugar or scant 1/2 cup demerara sugar
- 1 Tablespoon freshly grated orange zest

DIRECTIONS

In a large heavy saucepan, combine all ingredients, stir well, cover and bring to a boil over medium heat.

Remove cover, stir, lower heat and simmer until cranberries have popped and liquid is thickened.

Pour into a heat proof bowl, cover with a towel and let cool at room temperature. Stir again and then spoon into storage or serving containers, cover and refrigerate until serving.

Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

SERVING SUGGESTIONS

- Use as a condiment with meat or fish or on sandwiches.
- Serve as an accompaniment on a cheese board.
- Try a spoonful on a baked sweet potato or winter squash.
- For breakfast use in a bowl of oatmeal or cereal.
- Use it to flavor yogurt or a smoothie.
- Top a fruit salad, pound cake or ice cream.
- Mix with unsweetened whipped cream and eat as is or freeze in a graham cracker crust.

Croissant with Brie and Cranberries

INGREDIENTS

- 1 croissant
- 3 thin slices of crispy apple (Fuji apples have been good this year)
- 2 ounces brie, cut into slices to fit the croissant (best texture at room temperature)
- 2-4 Tablespoons Triple Cranberry Sauce (tastes best at room temperature)

DIRECTIONS

Cut croissant almost all the way in half to form a sandwich pocket large enough to hold remaining ingredients.

Layer apples slices on croissant and top with sliced brie.

Spoon on cranberry sauce.

Close croissant and eat. There won't be leftovers.

NOTE

It can get messy, so be sure eat over your plate (or the sink) and don't wear white!

Tricks and Tips

When cranberries are on sale, buy a bunch and store them in your freezer right in their own bags. A great addition to apple dishes, berry pies and bread puddings, cranberries are a versatile fruit that is full of vitamin C and antioxidants. Yes they require sweetening, but combining them with other fruits can reduce the amount of sweetener needed.

No they are not grown locally—our area's swamps are not a substitute for the cranberry bogs up North, but I always keep a couple of bags on hand.

Tricks and Tips

This recipe was written for brie, but cream cheese or chevre would work well too! Other soft cheeses to try? Fromager D'Affinois or Camembert are great, but there is always something to be said about the texture and the tang of an almost runny triple-crème brie!



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Our granddaughter may only be four, but Sophia knows what she likes. She said she wanted to make a pie with coconut, chocolate and strawberries, so her mother and I helped her get creative. Coconut as a crust was perfect since their family is gluten-free. Sophia wanted a layer of chocolate, but we had no fresh strawberries to put on top! So we made frozen strawberries into a pureed sauce and folded it into whipped cream to create a pink chiffon.

Sophia's Ballerina Pie

INGREDIENTS

- 4 Tablespoon unsalted butter, softened (not melted)
- 1 bag shredded coconut (8 -10 ounces)
- 1 pound strawberries (frozen is fine)
- 1/3 cup sugar
- 1 teaspoon lemon or lime juice
- 2 cups heavy cream, divided
- 8 ounces chocolate (your choice of milk or dark, but not unsweetened)

DIRECTIONS

- Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Butter a deep 9 inch pie plate. Make room in the freezer.
- Combine butter with 1/3 coconut in food processor and pulse to a grainy paste. Stir in remaining coconut. Press mixture into bottom and lower sides of pie plate, but leave crust edge "fluffy." Bake until edges are browned. Cool slightly then place in freezer.
- In a saucepan, simmer strawberries until juicy. Stir in sugar and juice and cook until thickened. Pour into shallow bowl and chill. Puree when completely chilled and set aside.
- Heat 1 cup cream to a simmer. Place chocolate in heat proof bowl and pour cream over it. Let sit 10 minutes, then stir until smooth. Cool at room temperature. Pour into chilled crust.
- Whip remaining cream and fold in strawberry puree. Spoon over chocolate. Freeze pie at least two hours. Let sit at room temperature 10 minutes before cutting. Store in freezer.



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