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It's all about the relish tray!

Our grandchildren have no expectations of any festive meal, except for the relish tray. No matter what else is on the table, all is right in our grands' eyes if there is a relish tray. When our boys were young, the relish tray consisted of fresh cut carrots and celery, rounds of cucumber, little cherry tomatoes, maybe a radish or two, and, from the pantry shelf, pitted black olives and slices of sweet pickles. The adults ate the celery and most of the carrots and cucumber. One child inhaled the tomatoes as if they were required for life and half the olives were used as finger-puppets. In the end, only the radishes and the pickles made it through the meal, to be consumed or trashed at the dishwasher's whim.

Granny usually had a small relish tray at the table for special occasions, but it was the treats she served before holiday meals that showed her real Southern hospitality. Whether in Miami Beach or Sparta, her coffee table held little dishes of toasted pecans, cheese straws and stuffed dates. The pecans were coated in melted unsalted butter, baked until perfectly crunchy, then sprinkled with just enough salt to bring out the flavors of both the pecan and the butter. Pressed cheese straws were light and crispy, filled with butter, cheddar cheese and a hint of cayenne. My favorite was always the stuffed dates—Granny filled pitted dates with cream cheese, topped them with a pecan half and dusted each with powdered sugar.

Granny's stuffed dates were irresistible, but I remember all too well how I would fill up on those treats before the meal. So this year, while sticking to the tried and true for the relish tray, I expanded our horizons a bit by adding toasted pecans and stuffed dates and serving them with dinner instead of before. Well, they were a big hit—we even had to count to be sure everyone got their fair share. While I had to tweak the recipe since lactose is an issue for some of our family, we agreed the tangy chevre was an improvement. So try these at your next holiday dinner, but don't even think about skipping the relish tray. Your children and your grands will thank you!

Granny's Stuffed Dates

INGREDIENTS

12 large dates

3-4 ounces chevre

12 large toasted pecan halves (Bake about 10 minutes in a 350 degree oven and then let cool.)

1/4 cup powdered sugar

DIRECTIONS

Slit each date on one side to remove pit.

Use a small spoon to push chevre into the dates. Top chevre with a toasted pecan half. Repeat until all dates are stuffed.

Using a sifter or strainer, dust stuffed dates on both sides with powdered sugar.

Serve immediately. Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

What's Fresh Right Now?

- Beans**—green, yellow, purple, purple long, roma, pole
Beets
Bitter Melon
Bok Choy
Broccoli
Cabbage—green, napa
Chard—white, rainbow
Chayote
Citrus—orange, grapefruit, lemon, tangerines, tangelos
Chestnuts
Eggplant—purple italian, fairy tale baby, thai
Greens—mustards, mizuna, arugula, turnip, collard, spinach, komatsuna, tat tsoi
Herbs—garlic chives, turmeric, flat leaf parsley, cilantro, dill, spearmint
Honey
Kale—dino, curly, tuscan, red/white russian
Lettuce—red/green romaine, red/green leaf, bibb
Moringa
Mushroom—fresh/dried shiitakes
Onion—yellow, green
Peas—white acre
Peppers—shishito, red/green/yellow/orange/mini sweet bell, poblano, jalapeño, variety hot
Potatoes—fingerling
Radish—red, watermelon, easter egg, french breakfast, white/purple daikon
Rutabaga
Shoots, Sprouts and Microgreens
Squash—butternut, seminole pumpkin, calabaza, green/yellow zucchini, pattypan, yellow crookneck
Sweet Potatoes—orange, white, purple
Tomatoes—cluster, large plum, sun gold
Turnips—purple top, tokyo

Local and Fresh— Snap Beans

Green snap beans were a part of my childhood, from French-cut with almonds to Southern snapped with salt pork.

Green, yellow and purple snap beans are in the markets now. When buying, look for firm plump beans. Wrap loosely in a plastic bag and refrigerate. Eat raw or cook as soon as possible. Before cooking, snip off the ends with your fingers and snap to desired length or leave whole.

Steaming and roasting are always quick and easy, but don't forget to throw beans into salads, soups and stir-fries. While the holiday casserole with fried onions is fun, it is hard to beat the simple pure flavors of fresh veggies.

Green Beans with Shiitake and Shallot

INGREDIENTS

- 4-5 shiitakes, stemmed and thinly sliced
- 1 shallot, sliced lengthwise into long strips
- 1 Tablespoon olive oil
- 1 pound green beans, snipped and snapped
- Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste

DIRECTIONS

- Toss sliced shiitakes and shallot with oil.
- Heat ovenproof skillet over medium heat and add shiitakes and shallot with oil. Sauté, stirring occasionally, until light golden brown.
- Add green beans and stir to coat completely with oil. If the oven is already on, roast beans. If not, continue to sauté until crisp tender.
- Add salt and pepper to taste.
- Serve hot or warm.
- Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

 <p>HAILE FARMERS MARKET</p> <p>Saturdays 830am - 12pm</p> <p>Haile Village Center www.hailefarmersmarket.com</p>	<p>Glades Ridge Goat Dairy Raw Milk and Cheese Hormone/Antibiotic Free Available Fresh or Frozen ACFM/441 Farmers Market Saturdays 8:30am - 1:00pm Union Street Farmers Market Wednesdays 4:00pm - 7:00pm Wholesome Food—Animal Consumption Only Lake Butler 386 266 7041 gladesridge.com</p>	<p>Henderson & Daughter Plants and Produce Citrus Saturdays return on 12/10</p> <p>Booth #4 Alachua County Farmers Market at 441 Oranges: red/white navel, Hamlin, ambersweet Grapefruit: white (March seedless), pink Tangerines: satsuma, chinese honey Specialty: nova/orlando tangelo, meiva kumquat Acid: calamondins, meyer lemons *All grown without pesticides or herbicides We look forward to seeing you! www.facebook.com/henderson.and.daughter</p>	<p>Alachua County FARMERS' MARKET</p> <p>Alachua County Farmers Market Saturdays 830am—1pm 5920 NW 13th Street www.441market.com</p>
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Joan's Italian Green Beans

INGREDIENTS

1 pound fresh green beans
1 Tablespoon each olive oil and unsalted butter
2 garlic cloves, smashed and finely chopped
1 Tablespoon fresh rosemary, chopped into small pieces
Freshly ground black pepper

DIRECTIONS

Snip ends off each green bean and, if necessary, remove any strings. Cut or snap each bean into pieces, if desired.

Steam beans until bright green. Set aside until nearly ready to serve.

Heat large skillet over medium heat and add butter and oil. Stir in garlic and sauté for one minute before adding green beans and rosemary. Stirring occasionally, sauté until tender.

Season with pepper. Serve hot or warm.

Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

Shirley's Collards

INGREDIENTS

2 big bunches of collard greens
Ham hock or smoked turkey neck
2-3 quarts chicken broth, water or combination
1 whole onion, peeled but not cut
1/4 cup red wine vinegar
Several shakes of Tabasco
Salt and pepper

DIRECTIONS

Wash collard greens well by submerging in several changes of water and running hands over every stem and leaf to remove any grit.

Cut out the stems and slice collards into 1/2 inch pieces.

In a very large pot, combine ham hock or smoked turkey neck with water and broth.

Bring to a boil and let simmer 10-15 minutes.

Push prepared greens into pot, stirring to submerge completely.

Add remaining ingredients and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to simmer, cover pot and let cook for hours.

Serve hot.

Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

Reheat leftovers in their cooking liquid.

Lentil Soup

INGREDIENTS

1 cup shiitakes, chopped
2 Tablespoons olive oil
1 Tablespoon each chopped fresh garlic, ginger, turmeric and jalapeño (with seeds)
1 Tablespoon tomato paste
1 dark beer
3 cups no-chicken or veggie broth
1 cup dry green or brown lentils
1 cup each chopped carrots, yellow squash and onion
1 Tablespoon tamari
1 teaspoon each honey and apple cider vinegar

DIRECTIONS

Mix shiitakes with oil and sauté in large pot over medium heat.

Stir in garlic, ginger, turmeric, jalapeño and tomato paste.

Cook one minute, stirring continuously.

Add beer and broth.

Bring to a boil.

Add lentils, carrots, squash and onion.

Return to boil, stir well, cover pot,

lower heat and simmer until lentils are very tender.

Stir in tamari, honey and vinegar and simmer five minutes.

Taste and adjust flavors as needed.

Serve hot.



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Tricks and Tips

I chose the fruit in the Dried Fruit Morsels for their colors and tart flavors. Any dried fruit that is not exceptionally crunchy or sticky will create a pretty and moldable mixture.

It is important not to overload the food processor. If bowl is small, process the fruit in two batches.

Nuts may be incorporated into the fruit mixture. In order to form small balls, each nut piece must be finely chopped. This is best accomplished by hand before combining nuts with fruit in the food processor.

Craving decadence? Drizzle each morsel with dark chocolate.

Dried Fruit Morsels

INGREDIENTS

- 3 ounces dried apricots
- 3 ounces dried apple rings or chunks (soft, not hard or crispy)
- 3 ounces dried whole cranberries (unsweetened if possible)
- 2 ounces golden raisins
- 2 ounces maple syrup (measured by weight)

Finishing Touches

- 1 cup dry shredded coconut (place in a deep wide bowl)
- 24 toasted whole pecan halves
- 12 large whole dates, slit to remove pits

DIRECTIONS

In a food processor bowl, combine apricots, apples, cranberries and raisins. Pulse until chopped fine. Turn on continuously and stream in maple syrup and process until it begins to clump together. Remove to a separate bowl.

Coconut Covered Balls—Using bare hands or form-fitting food-safe gloves, wet hands with cold water and use palms to roll into round and compact walnut-sized balls. Roll in bowl of coconut until completely coated. Rinse hands with cold water after making 5 or 6 balls.

Pecan "Sandwiches"—Form a small clump of dried fruit into an oval ball about the same size as a pecan half, but twice as high. Press a pecan half on each side of fruit ball, using fingers to smooth and compact sides. Exposed edges may be rolled in coconut if desired.

Fruit Stuffed Dates—Open slit date with fingers and overfill with a generous amount of dried fruit "stuffing" until sides cannot close. Decorate with a toasted pecan half pressed into fruit, sprinkle with coconut or dust with powdered sugar.

Store in individual muffin cups in an air-tight container at room temperature for up to two weeks or indefinitely in refrigerator. Serve at room temperature for best results.