

Fall Menu (Dinner For 6)

I thought of this menu when I started my website in the Spring. But, it is definitely cold weather fare. This is comfort food at it's finest. When I first tried the pork pot roast I made a complete pig of myself (is there a joke in there?). In the original recipe, there weren't enough pears and fennel to go around once I was done hoarding them. So I've made adjustments. The meal takes on a southern influence that has crept into my cooking since moving to Nashville in 1985. However, all the southerners who've tried the pecan pie agree it's one of the best they've ever eaten. Actually, the same has been said for the sweet potatoes and greens. I think the key is that neither the pie nor the potatoes are too sweet. The greens are not cooked to death, and the Serrano peppers just add a little tickle to the back of your mouth. The real beauty of this menu is that the potatoes, greens and pie dough can be made the day before. I do, however, prefer to bake the pie the day the meal is to be served. Typically, I deal with it first. And, although it takes the better part of an hour to get the roast ready to cook, once it's in the oven, you're done. Maybe you can tell, I'm really proud of this meal.

PORK POT ROAST with FENNEL and PEARS

This recipe is based on one I found in the February/March 1997 issue of FINE COOKING magazine. The original recipe called for half the amount of pears, fennel, sherry, and stock that I use.

3 to 4 pound Boston Butt, well trimmed

4 cloves garlic, slivered

2-3 bulbs fennel, coarsely chopped (about 3 cups)

3 shallots, minced

6 ripe pears, peeled, cored and diced

½ cup dry sherry

½ cup chicken stock

1 tablespoon fennel seeds, chopped

1½ teaspoons salt

¾ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

Heat the oven to 350 degrees. Poke the meat all over with a thin bladed knife and insert the garlic into holes. Put fennel, pears, shallots, sherry, and stock into a Dutch oven, and toss to combine. Add roast to the pan, pat it with the fennel seeds, and sprinkle it with salt and pepper. Cover pan and cook 3½-4 hours, or until tender. Remove from oven and let it rest for 5 to 10 minutes before serving.

TURNIP GREENS

This is a pretty basic, traditional southern approach to cooking greens.

3 bunches turnip greens

$\frac{3}{4}$ pound bacon ends and pieces

2 Serrano chili peppers

Fill a very large stockpot $\frac{2}{3}$ full of cold water and add bacon. Slice the peppers into a few pieces each and wrap them in cheesecloth or put them in a muslin bag. Tie the peppers to the pot handle with butchers twine and drop them into the water. Bring water to a boil. Meanwhile, wash greens in three changes of cold water until all traces of grit are gone. Add greens to water in batches as they cook down, and simmer until tender. Cooking time will vary according to the age of the greens. Once cooked, take pot off heat and let it cool. Reheat before serving.

WHIPPED SWEET POTATOES

I made this recipe up through trial and error. It absolutely makes this meal.

6 medium to large sweet potatoes

8 tablespoons unsalted butter (1 stick)

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup heavy cream

$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon cinnamon

$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon ground cloves

$\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon ground ginger

$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt

vegetable oil

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Poke potatoes in three places each with a fork, and rub with oil. Place on a foil lined cookie sheet, leaving as much space between them as possible, and cook in the center of the oven about 60 minutes, or until a knife goes in easily. Meanwhile, melt the butter, add the cream, spices and salt and heat through. When the potatoes are cool enough to handle, slice them open, scoop out the meat, run it through a potato ricer, or mash it, and mix in the butter-cream mixture. Stir until smooth. Transfer to a buttered 7"x11"x $\frac{1}{2}$ " baking dish and cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate. Let potato mixture come to room temperature and remove plastic wrap, before placing in a 350 degree oven. Heat for 45 minutes until hot.

PECAN PIE

I've spent more time perfecting this pie crust recipe than any other recipe I know. It began as a basic 3-2-1 dough (3 parts flour, 2 parts fat, 1 part water) my brother-in-law Sam, a professional cook, taught me. I experimented with different types of flour and ratios of fat, mixing and cooking techniques. I think I finally got it right. The recipe for the filling evolved from one I found in the SILVER PALATE COOKBOOK. I was attracted to the description at the top of the page that said "...not too sweet."

Pie Crust: Measured by weight

3 ounces cake flour

3 ounces all purpose flour

2½ ounces unsalted butter, cut into small pieces, frozen

1½ ounces vegetable shortening, chilled

2 ounces ice cold water

Place flour, butter and shortening in a food processor, and pulse until the mixture resembles coarse meal. Turn mixture into a large bowl. Sprinkle 1 tablespoon of ice water over the mixture and fold it in with a rubber spatula in three or four strokes. Repeat this process until the dough holds together when pressed. Gather it up in a ball and wrap it tightly in plastic wrap. Flatten it into a hockey-puck like disc. (I bet Julia Child never said hockey-puck) Let it rest in a refrigerator at least 30 minutes and up to 2 days. Let it sit out for 30 minutes to an hour, or until it has softened, before rolling out. Roll on a floured surface (I get the best results with a pastry cloth) until it is 1/8" thick. Line a 9" pie plate with the pastry making sure not to stretch it and that it is well fitted to the pan. Trim the excess so that a ½" of dough hangs over the edge of the pan. Wet the underside of the edge with water and fold it under to build a double-thick wall on the edge of the pan. Put a little flour on your fingers and flute the edge of the pie crust using the thumb and index finger of one hand and the knuckle on the index finger of the other hand. Place the crust in the refrigerator for 40 minutes, and then 20 minutes in the freezer. (This relaxes the gluten in the flour and prevents the crust from shrinking) Preheat oven to 375 degrees. (If you have a pizza stone, it's good to cook the pie crust, and the pie on it) Line the crust with 2-12" square sheets of foil, shiny side down, and line with pie weights. Place on the middle rack. Cook for 17 minutes, or until the edge is set. Carefully remove the foil and weights, and continue cooking 9 more minutes or until the crust is golden brown. Let it cool on a rack before continuing.

Filling:

4 eggs at room temperature

1 cup dark brown sugar, packed

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup light corn syrup

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup melted sweet butter (1/2 stick)

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

2 cups chopped pecans

$\frac{1}{3}$ cup pecan halves (enough to go around the edge next to the crust)

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Beat eggs well in a large bowl. Add brown sugar, corn syrup, salt, melted butter, and vanilla to eggs and mix thoroughly. Sprinkle chopped pecans in the piecrust and slowly pour egg mixture over pecans. Decorate with the pecan halves. Bake on the middle rack for 10 minutes, then lower the heat to 325 degrees and bake 35-50 minutes longer or until the filling is set. Remove from oven and let it cool to room temperature before serving.