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Feasting with Royalty: Dinner with Caesar

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Articles on Ancient Rome by Francine

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Dinner: Ancient Roman Style

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Recipes from Ancient Rome

from *Philosopher's Kitchen*
by Francine Segan (Random House)

Meatballs in Pomegranate Sauce

Serves 4

This dish is inspired by *The Satyricon*. Plums and pomegranate seeds not only look whimsically like flames on charcoal, but together create a delicious sauce, with just the perfect mix of sweet and tart.

1 pound ground pork or beef
2 tablespoons breadcrumbs
1 tablespoon dried oregano
2 tablespoons minced fresh mint
3 tablespoons minced fresh parsley
1/4 teaspoon fennel
1 egg
3 tablespoons minced shallot
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon freshly milled pepper
2 tablespoons olive oil
1 cup red wine
1 fresh pomegranate
1/4 teaspoon nutmeg
1 bay leaf

1/4 cup beef stock
1 plum, skin on, thinly sliced

Mix the ground meat with the breadcrumbs, oregano, mint, parsley, fennel, egg, shallots, salt, and pepper in a large bowl. Form 1 1/2-inch meatballs.

In a large non-stick skillet fry the meatballs in olive oil over medium heat, turning them so that they cook on all sides. Remove the meatballs from the skillet and cover to keep warm while you make the pomegranate sauce.

Add the wine to the skillet and bring to a boil until reduced by half, about 5 minutes.

Cut the pomegranate in half and reserve 2 tablespoons of seeds. Very gently squeeze each half of the pomegranate until you get 1/4 cup of juice.

Add this juice, the nutmeg, bay leaf, stock, and plum slices to the skillet. Continue to cook on high until the plums are soft, 3 to 4 minutes. Return the meatballs to the pan and toss with the sauce. Season with salt and pepper. Top with about 2 tablespoons fresh pomegranate seeds and serve immediately.

Spaghetti with Caramelized Onions

Serves 6

Onion bulbs were thought to be aphrodisiacs and both the ancient Greeks and Romans served them at wedding feasts to “seek the door of Venus.” The sauce can be made hours ahead and reheats nicely. Inexpensive, yet elegant, this dish is perfect for a large group.

3 large onions, very thinly sliced
2 medium purple onions, very thinly sliced
1 teaspoon dried marjoram
1 teaspoon dried thyme
1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil
1/4 cup pine nuts
1/3 cup dry breadcrumbs
1/2 cup dry white wine
1 tablespoon honey
1 tablespoon Muscatel or sherry vinegar
Salt and freshly milled pepper
1/4 cup minced assorted fresh herbs such as parsley, mint, and basil
1 pound spaghetti

Sauté the onions, marjoram, and thyme in oil in a large skillet over low heat for at least 45 minutes until very soft.

In the meantime, prepare the topping. Toast the pine nuts in a dry, non-stick pan over medium heat until light golden. Reserve in a small bowl. Using the same non-stick pan, toast the bread crumbs over medium heat, stirring frequently until they are golden brown. Add the bread crumbs to the toasted pine nuts and reserve.

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil.

After the onions have cooked for 45 minutes, raise the temperature to high, and caramelize them for 8 to 10 minutes. Add the wine and honey and continue cooking on high until most of the wine evaporates. Remove the onion mixture from the heat and stir in the vinegar. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Drop the pasta into the boiling water and cook according to package directions. Drain. In a large bowl, toss the cooked spaghetti with the onion sauce and minced herbs. Top with the pine nut-breadcrumb mixture. Serve immediately.

Herbed Olive Puree

Serves 8

Cato the Elder, 234-149 BC, the Roman orator and statesman, wrote a book about small farm management in which he details a recipe for chopped olives mixed with herbs and spices eaten at the start of a meal. This modern version is not only wonderful as a dip with pita bread but is also delicious tossed with cooked spaghetti.

1/2 cup pitted oil cured black olives

1/2 cup pitted large green olives

1/4 cup chopped sweet onion

1 garlic clove, minced

10 fresh mint leaves

1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil

1 teaspoon fennel seeds

1 teaspoon ground cumin

1 teaspoon ground coriander

1/4 cup minced assorted fresh herbs such as parsley, mint, and basil

6 Pita Bread, cut in quarters

Puree the olives, onion, garlic, mint, oil, fennel seeds, cumin, and coriander in a food processor until smooth. Place the puree in a serving bowl, cover with plastic wrap, and set aside at room temperature for at least 6 hours.

Stir well before serving, top with minced herbs, and plate with warm pita bread sections.

Smoked Trout Custard with Dill

Serves 4

The Romans enjoyed amusing their guests by serving whimsical dishes. This smoked trout recipe by Apicius, delightedly points out that guests will be astonished by fish served in a custard form. Sea nettles, or jellyfish, were added to the original dish to help solidify it. This modern version omits the jellyfish but keeps the other marvelous flavors. Rich and creamy this custard is beautifully complemented with salty capers and tangy shallots.

3 large egg yolks
1 whole large egg
1 1/4 cups half and half
2 teaspoons freshly squeezed lemon juice
2 teaspoons chopped fresh dill, plus fronds for garnish
1/2 teaspoon dry mustard
1/2 teaspoon salt
4 ounces smoked trout, finely flaked
2 tablespoons capers
2 tablespoons finely minced shallots
Toast points

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees F.

Put 4 half-cup ramekins into a casserole dish and set aside.

Whisk together the yolks, egg, half and half, lemon juice, chopped dill, mustard, and salt in a large bowl, until well combined.

Divide the trout among the ramekins. Pour the custard mixture evenly into each ramekin. Fill the casserole dish with hot water halfway up the sides of the ramekins.

Bake in the center rack of the oven until set, 25 to 30 minutes. Remove the ramekins from the water bath and allow to cool.

When the custards are cool, run a sharp knife around the edges of each and invert onto a serving plate. Serve with capers, shallots, and toast points. Garnish each custard with a dill frond.

Port of Naples Seafood Stew with Almond Pesto Crostini

Serves 6

This recipe was originally named after the fashionable seaside resort town, Baiae, near the bay of Naples. Prized for its volcanic hot springs, many wealthy Romans including Nero owned second homes there.

1 large sweet onion, diced
3 celery ribs with leaves, diced
1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil
2 garlic cloves, minced
1/2 teaspoon ground cumin seed
1/2 teaspoon ground coriander seed
1 cup dry white wine
2 dozen littleneck clams, in shells, scrubbed
2 pounds mussels, in shells, scrubbed and debearded
8 ounces small shrimp, peeled and de-veined
8 ounces sea scallops
3/4 cup fresh parsley, minced
Salt and freshly milled pepper

2 tablespoons slivered almonds
4 large green Sicilian olives, pitted
2 tablespoons small capers, drained and rinsed
12 baguette slices, toasted

Sauté the onions and celery in 1/4 cup of the olive oil in a large stockpot over medium heat until the onions are translucent, about 8 minutes. Add the garlic, cumin, coriander, and wine, raise the heat to high, and bring to a boil. Boil for 2 to 3 minutes to reduce the wine.

Add the clams and mussels and cook until the shells open, about 4 minutes. Add the shrimp and scallops and continue cooking, until the scallops are opaque and cooked through, 1 to 2 minutes. Remove from heat, stir in 1/2 cup of the minced parsley, and season to taste with salt and pepper. Puree the almonds, olives, capers, and remaining 1/4 cup of parsley in a food processor until smooth. Slowly add the remaining 1/4 cup of olive oil and continue to puree until well blended. Spread a bit of pesto onto each toasted baguette slice and serve with the warm stew.

Red Snapper in Parchment

Serves 4

Juice of 2 lemons
2 garlic cloves, minced
1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil, plus more as needed
4 bay leaves, crushed
1/2 tablespoon whole pink peppercorns
2 tablespoons capers, rinsed
15 oil cured black olives, pitted and halved
4 red snapper fillets, about 8 ounces each
Salt and freshly milled pepper
4 twelve-inch-long parchment sheets
1 lemon, cut into wedges

Combine the lemon juice, garlic, olive oil, bay leaves, peppercorns, capers, and olives in a large bowl. Add the red snapper to the marinade, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate for at least 2 hours.

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees.

Brush both sides of the parchment paper with a little olive oil. Remove a fillet from the marinade, season with salt and pepper, and place it on the paper topped with several spoonful's of marinade. To close the packet, bring the top and bottom edges together and fold them over about 1/2 inch. Continue folding until you reach the fillet. Tuck the sides of the parchment on each end under the fish. Repeat for the other 3 fillets. Place the parchment packets onto a baking sheet.

Bake the packets for 10 to 12 minutes. Serve the fish in the paper with lemon wedges on the side.

Pork Loin with Apples and Pancetta

Serves 6

Pork and apples has been paired since antiquity. This ancient Roman recipe, originally named after a friend of Julius Caesar who especially loved the dish, combines leeks and tart green apples to create a moist and flavorful stuffing for pork loin. A great dish for a dinner party or buffet as it can be assembled ahead and baked just before guests arrive.

2 green apples, unpeeled, diced
2 leeks, white and tender green parts, thinly sliced
3 tablespoons olive oil
1/4 cup apple cider vinegar, or other fruit vinegar
1 tablespoon honey
1/2 teaspoon cumin
1/2 teaspoon coriander
Salt and freshly milled pepper
1 Pork loin roast, butterflied, about 4 pounds deboned
12 thin slices pancetta, about 4 ounces

Sauté the apples and leeks in olive oil in a small skillet over high heat until softened, about 3 minutes. Add the vinegar, honey, cumin, and coriander and simmer until the vinegar evaporates. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Allow the mixture to cool slightly.

Preheat the oven to 450°.

Spread the mixture in the center of the pork loin, roll to close, and tie with kitchen string. Liberally season the outside of the pork loin with salt and pepper. Wrap the pancetta slices very snugly around the pork loin, slightly overlapping it. Roast in a baking pan for 10 minutes, at 450 degrees then reduce the oven temperature to 325 degrees, and cook for about 25 minutes per pound.

Peaches in Spiced Wine

Serves 4

Apicius, the first century Roman gourmet, lists recipes for both peaches in wine and berries with vinegar in his Roman cookery book proving that these favorite Italian summer desserts have a 2,000 year-old tradition.

Originally from Persia, peaches were planted in ancient Greece and there introduced to the Romans. Initially, the Romans treated peaches with suspicion, believing that those picked in Persia were poisonous. Galen, the renowned 1st century physician, even thought that peaches could cause fevers. Luckily for peach lovers, the Romans overcame their concerns deciding that peaches planted on Italian soil were safe.

3 firm peaches, peeled and thinly sliced
2 tablespoons honey

1 cup dessert wine
1 teaspoon ground cumin

Divide the peach slices into 4 large wine glasses and top them with the honey. Pour 1/4 cup of wine into each glass and sprinkle with cumin. Serve immediately.

Hazel-Walnut Honey Custard

Serves 6

Toasting the crushed nuts before cooking not only increases the nutty flavor, but produces a no-fail, professional looking golden top crust.

1/4 cup walnuts
1/4 cup blanched hazelnuts
2 cups whole milk
1/4 teaspoon freshly milled nutmeg
Pinch of ground allspice
Pinch of freshly milled five-color peppercorns
1/4 cup honey plus 2 tablespoons
Pinch of salt
3 eggs
1 egg white
3 tablespoons nut liqueur such as Frangelic or Amaretto

Finely grind the walnuts and hazelnuts in a food processor. Toast the nut mixture over medium heat in a dry non-stick skillet for 2 to 3 minutes until golden. Reserve 2 tablespoons.

Place the remaining toasted nuts, milk, nutmeg, allspice, and pepper in a saucepan and bring to a low boil over medium-low heat. Gently simmer the mixture for 10 to 12 minutes to reduce the milk and infuse the flavors. Remove from heat and stir in 1/4 cup of the honey and salt. Allow to cool to room temperature.

Preheat the oven to 325 degrees. Lightly grease six 1/2 cup ramekins and place them in a deep baking pan.

In a small bowl, beat the eggs and egg white and whisk them into the milk custard until well incorporated. Pour the custard into the ramekins. Fill the baking pan with hot water until it reaches 3/4 of the way up the ramekin. Cover the pan with aluminum foil.

Bake in the center of the oven until set and firm, about 30 minutes. Turn off the heat, but leave the ramekins in the oven for another 10 to 15 minutes.

While the custard is cooling in the oven, make the sauce. Mix the remaining honey with the liqueur in a small bowl.

Serve them in the ramekins, or if you prefer, invert the custard onto a plate, then invert again onto a serving plate so that it rests golden-side up. Drizzle with the honey-liqueur and top with the reserved toasted nuts.

Bay Leaf Cookies

Yield: 2-1/2 dozen cookies

Cato the Elder, the Roman Statesman, inspires this memorable dish of bay leaf flavored cookies.

1/2 cup butter, room temperature
1/2 cup sugar, plus 2 tablespoons
1 egg
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1/2 cup white grape juice concentrate, thawed
1 teaspoon anise seed
1 teaspoon ground cumin
2 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
1/2 cup ricotta
3 bay leaves, finely crumbled and coated with olive oil

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Beat the butter and 1/2 cup of the sugar in a large bowl using an electric mixer until creamy. Add the egg, salt, baking soda, grape juice concentrate, anise seeds, and cumin and continue beating. Slowly add in the flour until combined.

In a small bowl mix the ricotta and remaining 2 tablespoons of sugar.

Drop the dough by rounded teaspoonfuls onto a greased non-stick cookie sheet and make an indent in the center with a teaspoon. Place half a teaspoonful of the sweet ricotta mixture into the center. Top with a sprinkle of crumbled bay leaves.

Bake in the center rack until the bottoms are golden brown, 15 to 18 minutes.