



BITE by BITE

Conquering My Culinary Bucket List One Dish at a Time

By Emily Banks Wooten

“Brunch is breakfast without the bounds of time and diet restrictions.”

— UNKNOWN

Serving brunch with flair

There are few things in life that I love more than a good, relaxing brunch. For me, brunch signifies either vacation or a special occasion. If, for whatever reason, you're unacquainted with brunch, we will solve that immediately.

Brunch is a category of meal that is usually eaten between 10 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. that is occasionally accompanied with some form of alcoholic drink (typically champagne or a cocktail - think Mimosas or Bloody Marys), according to Wikipedia. The word brunch is a portmanteau of breakfast and lunch. Brunch is often enjoyed in conjunction with special occasions such as weddings, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Christmas, New Year's or Easter.

According to “Joy of Cooking: All About Breakfast and Brunch” by Irma S. Rombauer, Marion Rombauer Becker and Ethan Becker, brunch originated in England in the late 19th century and became popular in the United States in the 1930s.

One of the things that I enjoy about a good brunch is that there is usually a variety of savory and sweet dishes - eggs Benedict, quiche, omelets, bacon, sausage, ham, pancakes, waffles, French toast, fresh fruit, pastries, scones, muffins, coffee cake, bagels, yogurt and granola - accompanied by coffee, fresh juices and the aforementioned cocktail.

Looking back, our family's brunches usually seem to be of a celebratory nature. I remember attending a Texas

Press Association Convention at The Woodlands Waterway Marriott Hotel & Convention Center many years ago. Hubby and I had just learned we were going to be parents so we stayed an extra night and treated ourselves to a scrumptious brunch.

Then there was the summer that - along with another family - we vacationed in Las Vegas. As our anniversary fell during that trip, one morning we left Daughter with the other family, happily enjoying the swimming pool at the Airbnb we'd rented. We “snuck off” to Bobby Flay's Mesa Grill located in Caesars Palace and had a lovely brunch, celebrating our 12th wedding anniversary.

For a number of years we had season tickets to Broadway Across America at the Hobby Center in Houston. Our tickets were for the Saturday matinee and we always enjoyed driving down early and enjoying a nice brunch prior to the show. Some of our favorite brunch spots in Houston are: Hearsay on the Green at 1515 Dallas St., Field & Tides at 705 E. 11th St., The Kitchen at the Dunlavy at 3422 Allen Parkway (which I understand is now closed), BB's Tex-Orleans at 2701 White Oak Dr., Batanga at 908 Congress St., Liberty Kitchen & Oysterette at 4224 San Felipe St. and Brass Tacks at 612 Live Oak.

Today I'm sharing three recipes I've recently discovered that I think will be wonderful additions to your next brunch. None of them were difficult, yet each one had a certain flair making it special and best of all, they were all delicious. ■



— Maple Candied Bacon —

From purewow.com

- 1 pound thick-cut bacon
- ¼ cup maple syrup
- ½ cup brown sugar
- Coarsely ground black pepper

- Preheat the oven to 375 degrees. Line a baking sheet with aluminum foil and top with a roasting rack. Lightly spritz the rack with a nonstick spray. Lay out the bacon on the rack, leaving just a tiny bit of room between each piece.
- Brush the bacon with the maple syrup and then sprinkle with the brown sugar. Top with a generous sprinkling of pepper.
- Finally, bake until the sugar is melted and the bacon is crisp, about 15 to 17 minutes. Or if you like it and prefer it a little extra crispy, feel free to leave it in a little longer. Let the bacon cool for 5 minutes before removing it from the rack and serving.

My notes:

• I prefer bacon more chewy than crispy. However, having said that, I ended up cooking it for 20-25 minutes and it still could have gone even longer.



— Mini Champagne Orange Muffins (Mimosa Muffins) —

From averiecooks.com

Muffins:

- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 ½ teaspoons baking powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ cup granulated sugar
- 1 large egg
- ¼ cup canola or vegetable oil
- 1 to 2 teaspoons orange zest
- 2 tablespoons freshly squeezed orange juice
- ½ teaspoon almond extract, or to taste (vanilla extract may be substituted)

¼ cup champagne or prosecco (use dry for less sweet muffins)

Champagne Glaze:

- 1 cup confectioners' sugar, or as needed
- 2 tablespoons champagne or prosecco, or as necessary for consistency

Muffins:

- Preheat oven to 375 degrees and spray one or two mini muffin pans with floured cooking spray or grease and flour the pan; set aside.
- To a large bowl, add the flour, baking powder, salt and whisk to combine; set aside.
- To a medium bowl, add the sugar, egg, oil, zest, orange juice, almond extract and whisk to combine.
- Add the champagne and whisk to incorporate.
- Add the wet to the dry mixture and stir gently to combine; don't overmix, some small lumps will be present.
- Fill the cavities of the mini muffin pans about ⅔ to ¾ full and bake for about 8 to 9 minutes, or until done, but starting checking after 7 minutes since mini muffins cook very quickly and all ovens and pans vary.
- Allow muffins to cool in the pan for about 10 minutes. While muffins cool, make the glaze.

Champagne Glaze:

- To a medium bowl, add the confectioners' sugar, champagne, and whisk until smooth.
- Dip the top of each muffin top into the glaze and set aside for about 10 minutes, or until glaze firms up before serving.

My notes:

• The recipe's author said she made 18 mini muffins. I don't know if my mini muffin pan is smaller or what, but I made the recipe as directed and I ended up with 24 mini muffins.

• As directed, I checked the muffins after 7 minutes but they weren't done. Mine ended up baking for about 9 minutes.

• I chose to dip my muffins in the glaze a second time because after the first dip dried, you could barely see it; plus, I wanted to use up the remaining glaze.

• In the future, I think I'd save just a little bit of the orange zest to sprinkle on top of the glaze.



— Asparagus and Brie Pastry with Thyme Honey —

From halfbakedharvest.com

- 1 bunch asparagus, ends trimmed
- 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
- Kosher salt and pepper
- 2 sheets frozen puff pastry, thawed
- 8 oz. brie, cut into 8 slices
- 1 egg, beaten
- 1 pinch crushed red pepper flakes

Thyme Honey:

- ¼ cup honey
- 2 tablespoons salted butter
- 1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves

- Preheat the oven to 375 degrees. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.
- Toss together the asparagus, olive oil, salt and pepper.
- Roll the pastry sheets out on a floured surface and cut into 8 squares. Place a piece of brie on each square and then add a handful of asparagus. Take 2 corners of the pastry and wrap up and over the asparagus to enclose.
- Transfer to the prepared baking sheet. Repeat with remaining squares. Brush each pastry with egg.
- Transfer to the oven and bake for 20-25 minutes or until golden brown.
- Meanwhile, melt together the honey, butter and thyme in a small saucepan over low heat.
- Serve the pastries warm, drizzled with thyme honey and crushed red pepper.

Italian wines - Chianti

Italy is the #1 importer of wine to the U.S., so it is worth exploring the Italian wines. With over a million vineyards and 500 grape varieties, no surprise that it is easy to get lost in the world of Italian wines. Most of us will be familiar with Prosecco (the Italian “champagne,”) Pinot Grigio (the dry white so popular in the U.S.) and today's feature wine, Chianti, the red wine we associate with spaghetti and pizza.

Here are a few basics to help you choose an Italian wine, especially Chianti, and food to go with it and why that food works so well. With all that Italian wine coming into the U.S., it is surprising how few we find in our area. (Actually, there are a wide range of Stella, semi-sweet or sweet wines ... we will cover those another time.) The only one I found widely was the Da Vinci 2020 Chianti at about \$10 per bottle.

Sangiovese (SAN-jo-vay-zay) is the Chianti grape, and it is the most widely planted grape in Italy. It produces a medium body, red wine, dry to the taste, 12-14%



De Gustibus
By George Hollenbeck

alcohol, with lots of tannin and acidity (more on tannin and acidity in a future note). The Da Vinci fits that profile, 13.5% alcohol, and is labeled DOCG. Italy has a wine classification with DOCG with the top, DOC next, Vino or Vino Da Tabula next, and an outlier IGT category that can include non-Italian grapes to make what is called Super Tuscan wines. Our Da Vinci is a DOCG wine and has received a number of good reviews.

Although 50 years ago when some of us were drinking chianti (remember the jug-shaped bottle wrapped in straw that we put candles in), Italian wine generally has come a long way since those days. Chianti is definitely a dry wine, not fruit forward or heavy. Our Da



Vinci has been described as “... a well-balanced wine of medium weight with jammy flavors of ripe plums, cherries and red fruit. It has a deep crimson color and is a lively wine with a soft mineral fin-

ish and round tannins that linger in a long, peppery finish.” Some of us may find the high tannin and high acidity a little “rough.” Because of those features, it goes very well with pasta sauce, pizza and meat dishes like steak.

Nothing is ever simple of course. There are more levels of Chianti: there is a small hilly region between Florence and Sienna that many consider the best of the Chianti, with “more structure, more layers of earth and spice,” and they require more aging. First there is chianti classico, then classico riserva, and at the top, and rare, Chianti Classico Gran Selezione, a new designation (2014) for “superior” wine that is aged longer. So much for marketing.

One more note before you get a chianti. Although sangiovese is widely planted in Italy and is “well-loved in its native country,” it is not widely found outside of Italy. The next time you have a pizza or lasagna or marinara sauce on spaghetti, try a chianti and bring “shades of Italy” to your table. Here is the way one article described it:

“Imagine the smells as you walk through an Italian grocery store: at the entrance, there's a bowl of preserved sour Amarena cherries. You walk under bunches of dried oregano, past a wall of dark, aromatic balsamic vinegar, then pass a counter where dry salami is being sliced. At the bar, dark espresso is dripping into a ceramic tazza. A whisper of sweet tobacco wafts in the door from the pipe of the old man outside. Chianti smells and tastes like Italy. There will be a little coarseness and tartness on the palate, but these aren't flaws, they are classic characteristics of Sangiovese.”

If that doesn't make you run out for a Chianti, nothing will. And there are lots of very good chiantis—we feature the Da Vinci just because it is locally available. And, you can be adventurous and move up the scale. Spend the bucks. As a pillow I saw said, “Go first class. Your heirs will.” Send us your comments, degustibus@livingston.net. Remember our motto: *de gustibus non disputandum est* - there's no accounting for taste. ■