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COOKING AT HOME

# Winter Comfort

*Celebrating with Vegetables*

BY LYNETTE LA MERE

**T**he early winter offering at our Farmer's Markets are extraordinary. Purple grapes and eggplants, bright red, orange and yellow beets, tomatoes and carrots, and the earth tones of the sweet winter squash are an inspiring spectrum of color. As the days get shorter, the urge to provide comfort food for our families and friends coaxes us back to the kitchen.

During the cooler months I like to start using an assortment of winter squash in my cooking. They're so beautiful and fun to have around the house. This highly nutritious group of vegetables is named after the Naraganset Indian word askutasquash. Included in this category are Green Acorn, the ribbed Gold Nugget Sugar Pumpkin, the smooth Calabazas, the striped Turban, the Blue Hubbard, and a common favorite, the Butternut Squash.

Butternut Squash, with its sweet, earthy flavor, its smooth texture, and its high vitamin content has been a favorite with my children since they started eating solid food. Simmering the peeled golden chunks in lightly salted water, just enough to cover, and then pureeing them in the food processor with cinnamon and pure maple syrup is still a favorite easy dish alongside grilled meat and a green salad. Here are a few others I know you'll love.

### ROASTED WINTER VEGETABLES

*Serves 8 as a side dish, 4 as a main course*  
These are terrific served with grilled chicken breasts, marinated first in olive oil, lemon juice, fresh herbs and a spoon or two of mustard, or as a main course over brown rice or couscous.

- 2 **red peppers**, seeded and cut in 1 ½" squares
- 2 **red onions**, peeled and cut in 1" cubes
- 1 lb. **butternut squash**, peeled and cut in 1" cubes
- 6 small red or white **boiling potatoes**, cut in 1" cubes
- 3 cloves **garlic**, peeled and minced
- 3 T. **olive oil**
- 2 tsp. dried **thyme**

Preheat the oven to 425 degrees. Toss the vegetables, olive oil, garlic, and thyme together. Spread out on an oiled metal half sheet pan and bake for 35-45 minutes, loosened with spatula, and stir after 20 minutes.

*(continued)*

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**COOKING AT HOME**

(continued)

**WINTER SQUASH AND APPLE SOUP WITH FRESH GINGER**

*Serves 6 for a starter*

This recipe is so versatile. You can vary the vegetables, the herbs, change to vegetable stock, add a touch of cream, etc.! This is how I make all pureed vegetable soups. I usually use homemade chicken or vegetable stock and it does make a difference in the final product, but the new boxes of "homemade style" stocks are quite good.

- 1 -2 T. **safflower or light olive oil**
- 1 **yellow onion**, peeled and diced
- 1 **leek**, white part only, cleaned and sliced
- 3 cloves **garlic**
- 2 tsp. minced fresh **ginger** (peeled first, of course)
- 1 ½ lbs. **winter squash**
- 2 **tart apples** (such as Granny Smith) peeled and chopped
- ¼ cup **white rice**
- 1 quart chicken stock or vegetable **stock**

Heat the oil in a large heavy-bottomed soup pot over medium heat and sauté the leek and onion until they begin to soften. Add the garlic and ginger and sauté another 3 minutes. Put the squash, apple chunks and rice into the mixture and cover with stock. Simmer covered for 40 minutes or until the squash and apple chunks are tender. Puree in batches in the blender. This freezes well for up to three months, or keep in the refrigerator for up to a week. Heat to serve, adding a spoon of cream or a dollop of yogurt.

**LENTIL SOUP WITH WINTER VEGETABLES AND PASTA**

*Serves 6 – 8*

This soup is even better made ahead. Serve it as a main course with salad and bread, making a hearty, nutritious dinner.

- 1 cup **lentils**, rinsed and picked over for pebbles
- 2 cups thinly sliced **savoy cabbage**
- 1 cup **cauliflower** florets
- 1 cup peeled, diced (half inch) **butternut squash**
- 1 large yellow **onion**, peeled and cut into half inch dice
- 1 large **red pepper**, seeded and cut in half inch dice
- 1 **carrot**, peeled and thinly sliced
- 1 rib **celery**, thinly sliced
- ¾ cup freshly grated **Parmesan cheese**
- 10 cups **water**

- 1 cup small **shell pasta**
- ¼ cup **extra-virgin olive oil**
- salt and pepper** to taste
- ½ cup fresh **Italian parsley**

Place all vegetables, water and ¼ cup cheese in a large soup pot. Bring to a boil, and reduce heat to simmer the soup, covered for 40 minutes. All vegetables should be soft and tender. Add the pasta, and cook until al dente (meaning tender yet still firm to the tooth), another 10 to 15 minutes. Stir in the olive oil and parsley and season with salt and pepper. Serve hot, passing the remaining cheese.

**PUMPKIN, PROSCIUTTO AND RED PEPPER LASAGNA**

*Serves 12*

This is a party dish, it's delicious, unusual and can be assembled ahead and baked an hour before serving. To make this lighter and quicker, 4 cups of prepared marinara sauce, mixed with a cup of light cream could be a substitute for the creamy cheese sauce in this recipe. Serve with crusty Italian bread, heated for five minutes at 350 degrees and then sliced, and a crisp salad.

Filling:

- 4 T. **unsalted butter**
- 2 **yellow onions**, diced
- 6 cups peeled, diced **cooking pumpkin or butternut squash**
- 3 **red peppers**, seeded, cut into 1" squares
- 3 T. **olive oil**
- salt and pepper**

Sauce:

- 8 T. **unsalted butter**
- ½ cup **unbleached flour**
- 2 cups chicken or vegetable **stock**
- 2 cups **light cream**
- 1 cup freshly grated **parmesan cheese**
- ¼ tsp. **nutmeg**
- salt and pepper** to taste

Assembly:

- 1 ¼ lbs. **lasagna noodles**, cooked al dente and drained
- ½ lb. diced **Prosciutto** (another smoky ham would be fine)
- ¼ cup fresh **sage leaves**
- 1 cup freshly grated **parmesan cheese**
- 2 cups grated **mozzarella cheese**

Preheat oven to 425 degrees. Butter a 10 X 15 inch pan.

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ENTERTAINING  
CAN BE SIMPLE,  
FUN AND CLASSY.

A PARTY  
THAT SAYS  
**C'EST  
CHEESE!**

BY LYNETTE LA MERE

*“These twin fruits of the earth were made for one another.”*

—PIERRE ANDROUET

**E**ntertaining guests for an enjoyable wine and cheese mixer can be anything but difficult. A selection of your favorite wines, a visit to your local cheese shop, and some quick and easy recipes provided, make a classy and entertaining night effortless.

I would plan on one bottle for every two guests to be safe. I also like to include a few non-alcoholic versions by Ariel and some interesting bottled waters.

For a variety of cheeses, look for a balance of flavor intensity. For this type of party it is best to avoid what James Beard refers to as “nasty little cubes” or deli style slices. Plan on 3 to 6 ounces per guest. Allow the cheeses about an hour to come to room temperature.

Stay with local sources or, to narrow the imported options, you could choose to represent a single European region, as cheese is ideally partnered best with wine produced near the cheese’s home. You could serve Sancerre wines with Crottin de Chavignol, Chianti with Pecorino Toscano or a strong Spanish Rioja with Manchego, or the Cabralas Blue Cheese Tart recipe here.

All of our local figs, grapes, apples, dried fruits, nuts and olives make wonderful accompaniments. Asian pears are great and wont brown if sliced an hour in advance. Crackers are too predictable; go for artisan, crusty, rustic breads and baguettes. Goat cheeses go well with walnut studded whole-wheat bread and olive bread is particularly good with any sheep’s milk cheese. If you bake, this is the time to make Gougeres to go with the red wines. Enjoy!

## **BREAD STICKS**

Delicious and dramatic; Fresh, hand-made bread sticks make a striking bouquet with their tips wrapped with thin slices of Prosciutto Ham.

- 1 box of **puff pastry**, 2 sheets
- 1 **egg**, beaten with a spoon of water
- 2 cup good **parmesan cheese**  
(tossed with 1 tsp. **paprika**)
- a **pepper mill**
- kosher salt**
- 12 oz. **Prosciutto Ham**, very thinly sliced

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**To make the filling:**

Beat room temperature cheese and butter together with a fork, then add the sour cream and eggs, and beat until blended. Fold in the basil and spread evenly into the crust. Press cherry tomato halves into the filling, cut side up in very even rows about ½” apart. Sprinkle with salt and pepper and bake 25 minutes. Cut into small squares with one cherry tomato in each square and serve warm or at room temperature.

**GOUGERES**

*Makes 28*

These are classic red wine accompaniments. They are incredibly easy to make and simply melt in your mouth. You can add a big pinch of thyme, a sprinkle of nutmeg, or a pinch of cayenne pepper to these if you like.

- 1 cup **milk**
- 4 oz. **butter**
- ½ tsp. **salt**
- 1 cup **flour**
- 4 **eggs**
- 5 oz. shredded **Gruyere** cheese
- ¼ tsp. fresh **ground pepper**
- egg wash, 1 **egg** beaten  
with a spoon of water

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Heat the milk, water, butter, and salt until the butter is melted. Add the flour all at once. Stir with a wooden spoon to blend flour in completely, until mixture pulls away from sides of the pan. Lower the heat a bit and stir about two minutes to dry out the dough.

Add eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Batter will be shiny and fall from the spoon when lifted. Stir in the cheese and pepper.

Butter and flour a baking sheet. Place tablespoonfuls of batter onto baking sheet (or snip the end off of a piping or ziploc bag), spacing them 2” apart. Brush the mounds lightly with the egg wash. Bake for 20 minutes until they are a rich, golden brown. Remove, let cool briefly and freeze or serve while still warm. They reheat very successfully.

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LYNETTE LA MERE *is the proprietor and Executive Chef of PURE JOY CATERING, Inc. (805) 963-5766 ([www.PureJoyCatering.com](http://www.PureJoyCatering.com)) and a freelance writer who lives in Santa Barbara.*

*Shopping hints: All recipe ingredients appear in bold-faced type and can be found at: Our Daily Bread, Farmer’s Market, Trader Joe’s, Ralph’s, Vons, Lazy Acres Market, Cést Cheese, or Tri County Produce.*