

GOIN', NUTS

They definitely bring the
inimitable backbeat to a recipe.

BY LYNETTE LA MERE

Pure Joy Catering Executive Chef

LYNETTE LA MERE is the proprietor of Pure Joy Catering Inc. (www.PureJoyCatering.com) and a freelance writer who lives in Santa Barbara. Shopping hints: All ingredients used in these recipes can be found at Farmer's Market, Whole Foods, Tri County Produce.

Hands down, the appetizers and side dishes—as well as entrées and desserts—that have nuts are the most popular on our menu. And, like listening to the Rolling Stones song “Start me Up” without the legendary drummer Charlie Watts setting the pace, nuts without chocolate rarely make it into my mouth. It’s the contrast in consistency, the balance and the satisfying crunch that nuts give to so many recipes that make them one of my favorite additions.

Fresh, fat cashews served alongside good cheeses are one of the simple ways I like to serve nuts. Toasted candied pecans and walnuts in salads, Gorgonzola and Walnut Focaccia, Basil Pesto with pine nuts, or Cilantro Pesto with peanuts, Sun Dried Tomato and Pine Nut Crusted Salmon filets, Caramel Fondue with farm fresh apples and toasted almonds to dip into, Pistachio Chocolate Biscotti, as well as peanuts in many of our Asian recipes, coconut in the Rock Shrimp Lollipops, Truffles...the beat goes on and nuts rock the menu. Here are some favorites.

Caramel Fondue with Apples and Toasted Almonds

I first had this at a Fall Harvest country faire in Springfield, Illinois. I still serve it every fall and winter; it's a simple, magic combo that never fails to get a great response. Perfect to set out after dinner—the secret to the caramel fondue is very unusual.

CARAMEL SAUCE

2 cans **sweetened condensed milk**
1/2 cup **heavy cream**
1 cup whole raw **almonds**
12 **apples**, a variety from Farmer's Market

Put the whole, unopened cans of sweetened condensed milk in a small pot, cover them with water and boil for three hours (really). Do not forget to check on them and keep them covered with water (set a timer to remind yourself). Just add water once in a while and let it boil away. Meanwhile, halve, core and cut the apples into wedges. Dip apple slices in an ascorbic acid solution (such as Fruit Fresh) or lemon juice to keep from browning. Arrange sliced apples on serving platter and add other types of fruit, such as grapes, as desired. Refrigerate until ready to serve.

Coarsely chop the almonds and toast them in the oven at 350° until the whites are golden and they become fragrant. After 3 hours remove the cans from the pot with tongs. Let them sit a few minutes, and then open the cans and scrape the contents out with a rubber spatula into a nice copper double boiler or a small fondue pot. Whisk in the cream and serve warm with the apple wedges and toasted almonds.

Sautéed Halibut with Pecan Shallot Topping

(Makes 4 servings)

4 (1-1/4-inch-thick) pieces **halibut fillet** (6 oz. each), skinned
3 tablespoons **olive oil**
1 cup chopped **shallot** (6 oz.)

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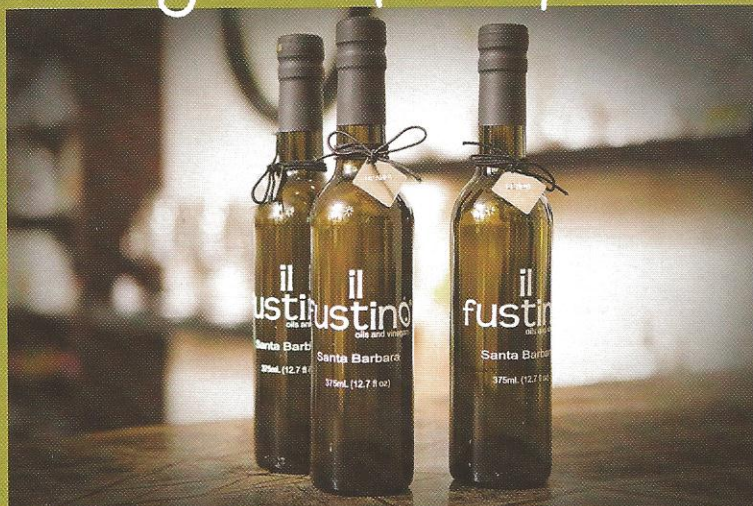
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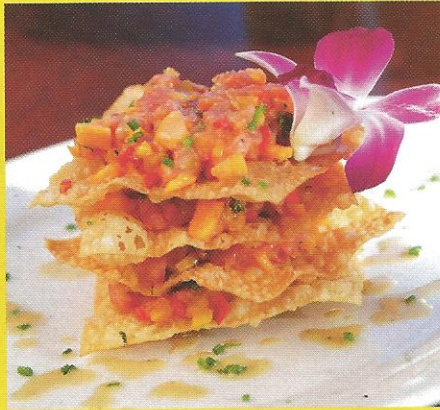
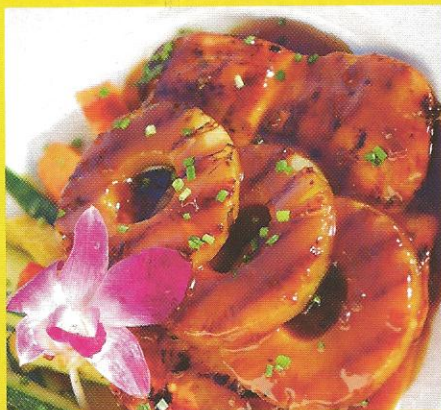
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(continued)

1/2 cup pecans (2 oz.), chopped
1/2 Tb. **unsalted butter**
1/2 tsp. finely grated fresh **lemon zest**
2 Tb. finely chopped fresh
flat-leaf parsley
Accompaniment: **lemon wedges**

Pat halibut dry and season with salt and pepper. Heat 2 tablespoons oil in a 12- inch heavy skillet over moderately high heat until hot, but not smoking, then sauté fish, turning once, until golden and just cooked through (4 to 6 minutes total). Transfer to plates and keep warm, loosely covered with foil.

Add remaining tablespoon oil to skillet and cook shallot over moderate heat, stirring occasionally, until pale golden, 3 to 4 minutes. Add pecans and sauté over moderately high heat, stirring, until fragrant and a shade darker, about 3 minutes. Add butter and stir until melted. Remove skillet from heat and stir in zest, parsley, and salt and pepper to taste. Sprinkle pecan shallot topping over fish.

Cilantro Pesto

(Yield 3 cups)

This is an easy dip for iced shrimp & crab claws, great on pizzas with red onions, Queso Fresco & Manchego Spanish cheese. The cilantro holds its vibrant color well. The flavors compliment grilled chicken and make a great sidekick for black beans and rice.

Process in a food processor:
4 cups **cilantro**, rinsed with thick stems removed
2/3 cup roasted **peanuts**
2 cloves **garlic**, chopped
2 **jalapenos**, chopped
6 **green onions**, chopped

Then add:
2 Tb. **fish sauce**
2/3 cup **lime juice** or **lemon juice**
1/2 cup **peanut oil**

Refrigerate until needed, holds best in a small zip-loc baggie or in a bowl with a film of plastic wrap touching the surface.

Crostini with Blue Cheese, Honey and Hazelnuts

(Makes 4 to 6 servings)

These little toasts are nice before dinner or alongside a green salad.

12 1/3-inch-thick diagonal
baguette slices
3 oz. **blue cheese**, room temp.
1/2 cup **hazelnuts**, toasted, husked,
coarsely chopped
Farmers Market honey

Preheat oven to 400°F. Place baguette slices in single layer on baking sheet. Toast in oven until golden, about 8 minutes. (Can be made 4 hours ahead.)

Spread blue cheese on baguette slices. Sprinkle hazelnuts over each. Drizzle each slice lightly with honey.

Candied Pecan or Walnuts for Salads

These will keep well out of refrigeration a week or more. The pecans go well with goat cheese or feta cheese and dried cherries in a nice, young salad mix. The walnuts with pears and a blue cheese are also a classic.

- 1 egg white
- 1/2 cup sugar
- Pinch salt & cayenne
- 4-1/2 cups whole pecans or walnuts

In a medium-sized bowl, whisk the egg white into a white foam, toss in the nuts & seasoning and fold together. Spray a sheet pan with vegetable oil and lay out the nuts in a single layer then bake 6 minutes at 375°, flip them around with a spatula & back in the oven until done (fragrant). Leave them whole (no choppy choppy) so that if someone doesn't like nuts they can pull them out.

Arugula Salad with Manchego, Dried Cherries, and Caramelized Walnuts

- (Makes 6 to 8 servings)
- 1/2 cup balsamic vinegar
- 1/2 cup walnut oil
- 3 Tb. Champagne vinegar or white wine vinegar
- 8 cups arugula
- 1 cup dried cherries
- 6 oz. goat cheese
- 1 cup caramelized walnuts
- 4 large shallots, minced

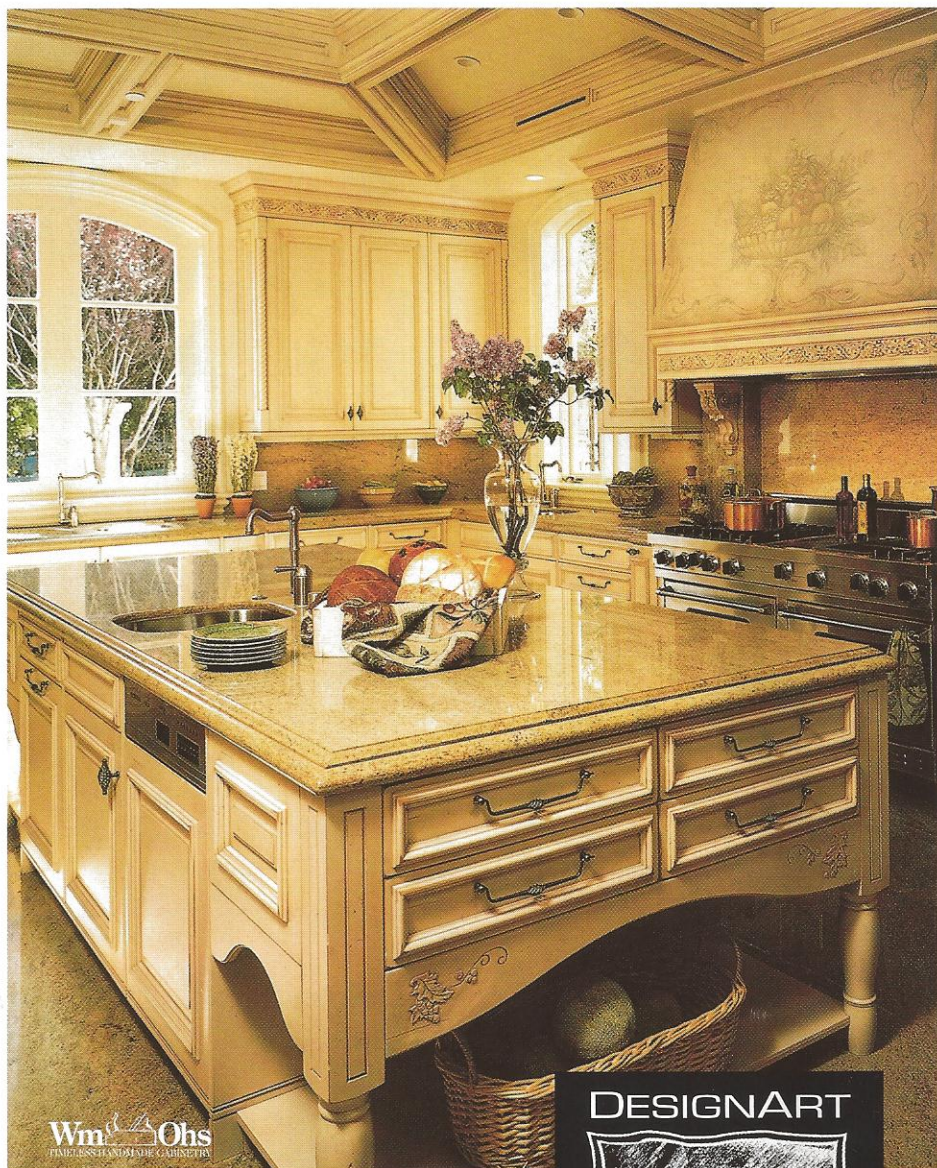
Boil balsamic vinegar in small saucepan over medium-high heat until syrupy and reduced to 1/4 cup, about 4 minutes. Whisk oil and Champagne vinegar in bowl. Season with salt and pepper. (Can be made 4 hours ahead. Keep at room temperature. Rewarm balsamic syrup before using. Re-whisk vinaigrette before using.)

Toss arugula, cherries, walnuts, and shallots in large bowl with enough vinaigrette to coat. Season salad with salt and pepper. Mound salad in center of each plate. Drizzle balsamic syrup around salads. Sprinkle remaining goat cheese atop salads.

Chestnut and Lobster Soup

- (Makes 6 servings)
- 1 1-3/4 to 2 pound live lobster
- 3 cups whole milk
- 2 cups (or more) chicken stock or canned low-salt chicken broth
- 1 small bay leaf
- 6 fresh thyme sprigs
- 4 fresh parsley sprigs

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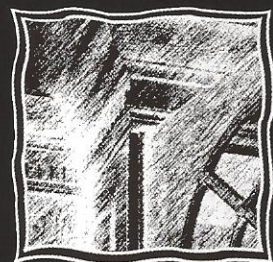
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(continued)

3 cups **vacuum-packed chestnuts**
(15 to 16 oz.)
1/4 cup **Madeira**
1 Tb. **butter**
Minced **fresh chives**

Cook lobster in pot of boiling salted water until shell turns bright red and meat is opaque in center, about 8 minutes. Drain. Transfer lobster to large bowl; cool. Working over same bowl to catch juices, twist off claws. Cut off tail. Cut lobster meat from shells. Reserve shells; scrape out green tomalley and discard. Cut meat into 1/2-inch pieces; cover and chill.

Bring milk, 2 cups stock, bay leaf, thyme, parsley, and lobster shells with any accumulated juices to simmer in heavy large saucepan. Cover; simmer 10 minutes. Strain into large bowl. Return strained liquid to pan. Add chestnuts; bring to boil. Reduce heat; simmer uncovered until tender, stirring occasionally, about 15 minutes. Working in batches, puree soup in blender. (Lobster and soup can be made 1 day ahead. Cover separately; chill.) Bring soup to simmer. Stir in Madeira. Thin with more stock, if necessary, and stir until heated through. Season with salt and pepper.

Meanwhile, melt butter in small skillet over medium heat. Add lobster meat; sauté 1 minute to heat through.

Ladle soup into bowls. Top with lobster meat. Sprinkle with minced fresh chives and serve.

Chocolate Truffles with Pecans and Dried Cranberries

(Makes 36)

Make these ahead if you like (they will keep for a week in the fridge) or make them on a whim, since the recipe is so easy.

3/4 cup **whipping cream**
6 Tb. (3/4 stick) **unsalted butter**
2 Tb. **light corn syrup**
3 Tb. **frozen concentrated cranberry juice cocktail**, thawed
12 oz. **bittersweet** (not unsweetened) or **semisweet chocolate**, chopped
1/2 cup **dried cranberries**
1/2 cup **pecans**, toasted, coarsely chopped
Powdered **sugar** (optional)
Unsweetened **cocoa powder** (optional)

Stir cream, butter, syrup, and cranberry concentrate in heavy large saucepan over medium- high heat until mixture comes to boil. Remove from heat. Add chocolate and whisk until melted. Mix in cranberries and pecans. Pour truffle mixture into 11 x 7-inch glass dish. Freeze until firm, about 50 minutes. Cut truffle mixture into 36 portions. Lift each out and roll between palms into round. Place on baking sheet. Roll truffles in powdered sugar or cocoa powder. Cover and chill up to 1 week. Serve cold.