

[Brandywine Table]

Easy Appetizers

SMALL BITES CARRY BIG TASTE

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Kathy Donovan and Susan Teiser

AS WE SALLY INTO THE WINTER holiday season, opportunities abound for raucous family feasts, intimate dinners and casual neighborhood cocktail parties. No matter the size of your gathering, you'll be well-served by having a few easy appetizer ideas in your apron pocket.

Chef/owner Susan Teiser, and manager Kathy Donovan of **Montrachet Fine Foods Catering** and **Centerville Café** in Centerville, Delaware have catered scores of parties in their café and garden as well as in the homes and offices of clients.

Appetizers are central to the fun. Their freezer is full of house-made small bites available for purchase.

Popular ones include mini beef Wellingtons, spanakopita and freshly made mini crab cakes. Their elegant seafood and pork pates, also made in-house, are definitely "not your father's liverwurst," Teiser jokes.

Taking out appetizers from Montrachet or having Teiser and Donovan cater your entire party are by far the easier options. But Teiser, who teaches a course on entertaining at Wilmington University, has some great party tips and easy recipes for home cooks who want to throw the party themselves.

To start, when choosing appetizers, consider the time of day and whether the apps are a prelude to a larger meal or the meal itself. If you're serving appetizers in place of dinner, allow for six bites per person per hour, not including cheese, charcuterie and dips.

Another good rule of thumb: aim for half hot and half cold choices. In Teiser's experience, hot appetizers always get gobbled

up, so be sure to make cold appetizers that you'll be happy to have left over.

Other considerations include your guests' dietary preferences: definitely offer gluten-free, vegetarian and low-carb options. Remember that unless your guests are super adventurous eaters, stick with dishes that have at least one familiar component. It's also fun, says Teiser, to take a familiar dish and miniaturize it. Why not draw inspiration from the popular Chicken Marabella of 1980s' *Silver Palate Cookbook* fame to create skewers threaded with chicken, green olives and prunes?

If your guests like to imbibe, have enough substantial apps to counter-

balance the cocktails. (Hint: Anything with puff pastry will do the trick!) "Come to think of it," laughs Teiser, "people love anything with puff pastry, period."

For serving, make sure appetizers are the right size. More than two bites and you'll need to offer small plates—and that defeats the idea of easy apps! Teiser prefers pretty picks and small Chinese soup spoons or high-quality flavored edible spoons.

Instead of placing all apps on the dining room table, arrange them in two or three areas to keep the party traffic moving. Also, put the food out in stages—especially if you'll be having a longish cocktail hour or if apps are the main event. Not only will guests who are fashionably late get their fair share, but dishes will avoid that long-in-the-tooth look.

Hope all of your holiday gatherings come with delicious things in small packages!

Moroccan Chicken Skewers

Za'atar is a traditional Middle Eastern spice blend that includes sumac, thyme, white sesame seeds and salt. Kaffir lime leaves are used in many Thai and Southeast Asian dishes. You can find both ingredients at specialty spice stores and gourmet groceries. Recipe courtesy of Susan Teiser, Chef/Owner, Montrachet Fine Foods and Centerville Café.

For the skewers:

15 skewers with boneless, skinless chicken breast threaded on them (approximately 1 lb.)

3 Tb. za'atar

For the dipping sauce:

$\frac{3}{4}$ C. plain Greek yogurt, NOT nonfat

$\frac{1}{4}$ C. sour cream

1 tsp. dried kaffir lime leaves

1 tsp. fresh lime zest

Salt and white pepper to taste

Optional:

Honey or agave

$\frac{1}{2}$ C. finely grated seedless cucumber

1 tsp. fresh mint

Coat chicken skewers with za'atar. Cover with plastic wrap and let rest overnight in refrigerator.

Mix yogurt, sour cream, lime leaves and zest together. Check for taste. It should be cool and refreshing. Add salt and white pepper to taste. Refrigerate at least overnight to let flavors blend.

Adjust seasoning before serving, adding a teaspoon of honey or agave if desired. Stir in mint and cucumber if using.

Preheat oven to 375°. Place chicken skewers on a non-stick baking sheet. Bake 12–15 minutes until just cooked through (not pink).

Tent with foil for 2–3 minutes before serving to allow juices to balance. Serve with sauce on the side.

Makes 15 skewers.

Ricotta Filled Figs with Prosciutto

These look like exotic flowers. You can use a high-quality thinly sliced salami in place of the prosciutto, but definitely use light cream cheese since regular is too dense in texture. Recipe courtesy of Susan Teiser.



Easy Party Tricks

If you're choosing easy appetizers, make everything else easy too! Susan Teiser has some hard-and-fast rules and helpful hints for stress-free entertaining.

- Build up an appetizer stash. Lots of appetizers can be made in advance, frozen and popped in the oven the day of the party. For a twist on holiday cookie baking days and exchanges, why not throw an appetizer-assembly party? You'll get to see your pals and walk away with a variety of savory bites.

- Never test drive a recipe the day of the party. Nothing causes party panic more than ditching a failed dish and running to the market five minutes before guests arrive.

- Place the bar outside of the kitchen, preferably away from the crowd. Party traffic will keep flowing, and you'll be free to dash in and out of the kitchen to replenish food.

- Stop working an hour before your guests ring the bell. Just say, as Susan does, "What's done is done!" and pour yourself a glass of wine and turn on your favorite music. You can always ask your friends for a little help when they arrive.

1 C. whole milk ricotta, at room temperature

1 C. light cream cheese

1 Tb. honey

$\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. vanilla

12 fresh figs, preferably purple/black ones

6 slices prosciutto

Optional:

Balsamic vinegar

Mix ricotta, cream cheese, honey and vanilla. Refrigerate.

Cut figs into four segments so they look like flowers. Do not cut all the way through!

Cut prosciutto into half slices, gather edges to look like a flower and gently place in the center of each fig. Figs can be refrigerated overnight at this stage, with paper towels underneath to absorb moisture.

Use a pastry bag fitted with a small star tip to pipe some of the ricotta mixture into the center of each prosciutto "flower." If you don't have a pastry bag, simply spoon a tablespoon of mixture into each flower.

For "extra credit," place figs under broiler for 2 minutes after you've filled them with cheese. Drizzle with a little balsamic vinegar.

Makes 12 appetizers.

Brie and Raspberry in Puff Pastry

These little bites disappear fast! Recipe courtesy of Susan Teiser.

1 sheet frozen puff pastry, defrosted overnight in refrigerator

2 tsp. seedless raspberry jam or other seedless jam, such as apricot or fig

$\frac{1}{4}$ lb. brie cheese, cut into 12 pieces

1 egg, beaten in a small cup

Gently unroll the pastry onto a lightly floured board or counter. Dust top with flour. Roll out to increase its size by about 20-30%.

Cut into small squares (about 2") or cut into rounds with a cookie cutter.

Spray a mini-muffin tin well with non-stick baking spray. Place one piece puff pastry in each well. Paint with beaten egg. Place tiny amount of jam in the bottom of each piece, then cover with a piece of brie. Fold edges of pastry over the brie. Paint with a little more egg.

Puffs can be frozen like this for up to one month. Remove from freezer and bake in muffin tins, going directly from freezer to preheated hot oven (375–400°). Bake 10–12 minutes and serve.

Makes 12 appetizers.



Bill's Queso Dip

Whenever my husband Bill brings this hot dip to a gathering, it's always a hit. It's very casual—perfect for watching Thanksgiving Day Bowl games. You can make it a few days ahead of time and reheat over low. Keep warm in a small Crockpot or fondue pot. Serve with tortilla chips.



Retro Appetizers

Pigs in a blanket have been disappearing from party platters ever since Betty Crocker introduced them in her 1957 *Cookbook for Kids*. Deviled eggs are a perennial crowd favorite. Check out this list of apps that captured the American palate from the 1950s–1980s. Some were instant hits and have stood the test of time. Others? Not so much. Which ones do you remember? Which ones would you rather forget?

1950s ...

- ~ California Dip (aka Lipton Onion Soup Dip Mix)
- ~ Steak tartare balls
- ~ Rumaki (bacon wrapped bites of chicken liver and water chestnuts)

1960s ...

- ~ Sweet and sour meatballs (grape jelly anyone?)
- ~ Marinated shrimp
- ~ Celery and tomatoes stuffed with everything imaginable
- ~ Sausage-cheese cocktail balls (Oh the wonders of Bisquick)

1970s ...

- ~ Loaded potato skins
- ~ Buffalo wings
- ~ Cheese balls and logs rolled in nuts
- ~ Mini quiches (loved by real men everywhere)
- ~ Cheese Whiz or melted Velveeta topped with olives on Ritz crackers (minus the olives, a beloved after-school snack)

1980s ...

- ~ Artichoke dip
- ~ Tex-Mex and Seven-layer dip
- ~ New potatoes topped with caviar (a la *The Silver Palate*)
- ~ Snow peas stuffed with St. Andre cheese (vintage Martha Stewart)

16 oz. Mexican-style shredded cheese blend
15 oz. Southwestern style diced tomatoes and green chiles
½–1 C. sliced jalapeno peppers
1, 1-oz. package taco seasoning mix
10-oz. package cooked sausage crumbles
Sriracha to taste

In a large saucepan, mix all ingredients except sriracha and heat over medium-low heat until cheese melts. Stir often.

Add sriracha to taste.

Makes about 3–4 C.

Shrimp Ceviche

The basic idea behind ceviche is that the citrus juice “cooks” the seafood. Use the highest quality shrimp you can find. You can also substitute tuna, salmon or halibut.

1 lb. medium shrimp, peeled, deveined, tails removed
½ C. lime juice
Zest of 1 lime
1½ tsp. salt



2 tsp. soy sauce
Few grinds of black pepper
2 Tb. minced scallions
Splash of olive oil
Optional:
Cilantro
Endive leaves (or plaitain strips)
½ avocado diced

Cut the shrimp into small dice.

Mix together lime juice, zest, salt, soy sauce and pepper in a glass or other non-reactive bowl. Mix in shrimp and scallions. Cover and allow to sit for 10–20 minutes in refrigerator or until shrimp is opaque. If too much liquid, pour off a little. Stir in a splash of olive oil and cilantro if using.

Spoon into endive leaves or small Chinese spoons and garnish with avocado. You can also place ceviche in a bowl over ice and allow guests to spoon it onto large plaitain chips.

Makes approximately 2 cups. ♦

Laura traces her love of all things culinary to the first time she leafed through her mother's Betty Crocker's Cooky Book—which still occupies a place of honor among her 700+ cookbooks. A passionate supporter of local food, she co-founded a farmers market, judges area food contests, and anticipates restaurant openings with the excitement most people reserve for winning a Mega Millions jackpot.



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