

Much Ado About Brunch

HOW THIS WONDERFUL WEEK-END PASTIME SATIATES MORE THAN JUST OUR PALATES.

Alyssa Thayer

MONTHS OF MORNING MONOTONY HAVE US craving something festive and indulgent. And in many ways, brunch fits the bill. From its humble origins as a post-church tradition, it has evolved into a mainstay of metropolitan culinary culture.

But no matter whether it's enjoyed in Sunday best, or alongside bottomless mimosas, the pillars of this pastime remain firmly intact: sumptuous staples, (read: eggs, bacon, and syrupy short stacks), good company (thanks to COVID it may be virtual), and a luxurious timeframe (thanks to its late start and easy pace).



The key to a great brunch according to Chef Davidson is great ingredients.



Executive Chef
James Davidson
in the kitchen

One of the top local brunch destinations is **Autograph Brasserie** in Wayne, which serves up approachable dishes with a side of whimsy. “In the sycamore room, there is a tree growing straight through the middle of the room,” says Executive Chef James Davidson, as he describes the space, which touts unique decor and an expansive patio.

Autograph is part of the Fearless Restaurant Group, whose portfolio includes hallmarks such as White Dog Cafe and Moshulu. Chef Davidson says people feel taken care of there, noting it is not uncommon for patrons to request a specific server, room, or celebrity portrait to sit under (of which there are 1000 hanging).

Originally hailing from the famous steakhouses of Boston, Chef Davidson was mentored by culinary greats including James Beard award-winner Lydia Shire. “She told me to make each plate like I was cooking for someone I love,” he recalls fondly. To this day, he uses that philosophy to help him and his team stay motivated. “I want my guys to understand—this (meal) is important for someone, it could be their graduation or birthday, and we should be thankful they chose us.”

While Chef Davidson is admittedly a steak and eggs guy, he's got all the classics on his brunch menu—from eggs Benedict to buttermilk waffles. His philosophy on food is simple: straightforward, good quality ingredients, done well. And his aim is to make each dish cohesive, flavorful and fresh. “That's what people want to eat,” he says confidently.

Whether you're creating your own memorable morning or letting the pros at Autograph curate it for you, the important thing is to allow yourself a moment, to sip, savor and break the routine.

Follow the tips below and recipes to make yourself feel like a pampered guest, even if you know you'll be the one doing the dishes.

Recipes

Note, all of these recipes are for 1 hearty serving, but Chef Davidson recommends pairing and sharing them. You can also choose to brighten the meal up by adding a side salad or fresh fruit parfait.

Keys to Egg-celence:

“Eggs are like grandma’s gravy- everyone has an opinion of what they should be,” says Chef Davidson. That being said, there are some basic tips and tricks to help you achieve oozy greatness.

The Perfect Poach:

*Start with one at a time until you are more experienced.
Bring your water to a slight simmer- you don’t want it boiling.
A little vinegar helps the white firm faster, but don’t go overboard!
Pre-cracking eggs into a small bowl or ramekin makes it easier to lower them gently into the water.
Creating a swirling motion in the water before adding the egg, helps the eggwhite form around the yolk- “you don’t want a whirlpool though,” he warns.
Once cooked (usually after about 2 minutes), remove from water and drain completely using a slotted spoon- the less it is touched and/or transferred the better.*

The Down-Low on Sunny Side Ups:

Traditionally, sunny side up eggs are only cooked on one side. If you choose to flip it briefly but keep the yolk runny, it’s over easy, leave it in longer, the yoke firms a bit to become over medium.

Fabulous Fried Eggs:

*Keep your pan over low to medium heat (not high).
Use clarified butter or oil.
Once you crack eggs into the pan, leave them alone.
His parting words on eggs—after cooking, salt them! It brings out the flavor.

Avocado Toast

This delectable dish pairs the crisp texture of toast with the unctuous creaminess of egg and avocado. It simple, stylish and simply divine.



Brunch Basics

Although it can be difficult to duplicate the “je ne sais quoi” of a snazzy brunch spot, there are a few things you can do to elevate the experience:

Stylish Settings: Whether you are going boozy or sticking with mocktails, having elegant stemware and dishes makes all the difference.

Pro Plating: They say you eat with your eyes first, so take the time to make it visually pleasing, fan out your sliced avocado, dust the top of sweet treats, slice and stack your breakfast sammie.

Resist the List: One thing about leaving your home (which for many is also our office and school), is you leave behind the lengthy todo list- whatever you do, don’t let it come to the table.

Prime Procurement: Don’t skimp on your ingredients- if you are making french toast, go to the bakery for fresh brioche or challah, select seasonal produce, and opt for fresh-squeezed juice.

Feast of Flavors: Satisfy your taste buds by selecting a menu with a balance of sweet and savory dishes.

The main thing, Chef Davidson says, is to just have fun and to not take ourselves too seriously. “In a room filled with people you love, who cares how well you poached your egg.”

- 1 lime, juiced
- Salt and Pepper
- 1 slice sourdough bread, about 1/3 inch thick
- 2 eggs
- 1 sprig fresh tarragon (thinly sliced), substitute any favorite fresh herbs such as chives or thyme

Carefully slice, pit and scoop out avocado into a small bowl. Use a fork to smash it down, adding in the lime juice, salt, and pepper to taste.
Note: Acid in this case from the lime gives great tangy flavor, and keeps the mixture from browning as quickly.

Toast sourdough bread. Spread mashed avocado across toast. Poach 2 eggs (see tips above) and drain well using a slotted spoon before setting atop the avocado. Sprinkle tarragon leaves over top and drizzle olive oil.

Makes 1 large toast.

Optional extra: some folks like to up the ante with a few layers of smoked salmon between the avocado and eggs.

Bacon Hash

Many people make the mistake of throwing out rendered bacon fat after cooking, but as this hash proves, that stuff is liquid gold! Use it to elevate any saute or roast.

- ½ C. thick-cut bacon strips, sliced across for smaller quarter-inch strips
- ½ white onion, diced

- ½ red bell pepper, diced
- 4 red bliss potatoes, fork-tender (quartered, boiled in salted water approx. 5 min and drained)
- 2 eggs
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Old Bay seasoning to taste
- Queso Fresco, grated (for garnish)
- Scallion, sliced thinly (for garnish)



In a saute pan, fry bacon until crisp. Remove to a plate lined with paper towels, saving the bacon fat in the pan. To the bacon fat, add the onions and peppers. Cook over medium heat until soft and slightly browned (3 minutes).

Add potatoes and saute until crisp (1 minute If drained well). Add bacon pieces back into pan and sprinkle with old bay seasoning to your liking. Toss to coat.

Transfer to a plate and top with 2 sunny side up eggs (see tips above). Sprinkle queso fresco and scallion over top.

Makes 1 large serving.

Tip: Not using your bacon fat right away? Chef Davidson recommends keeping it in the freezer for future use (it can last at least a few months). He guarantees it will make any potato dish better- mashed potatoes, scalloped potatoes, you name it.

Breakfast BLT

Just add eggs to make this lunchtime classic into a brunch show stopper. Cutting it on the diagonal at the end isn’t just for looks- it ensures the richness of the yolk seeps perfectly into each bite.

- 4 slices thick-cut bacon
- 2 slices thick-cut brioche
- 2 T. mayonnaise
- 4 slices thick-cut tomato
- 1 leaf of green lettuce
- 4 slices avocado
- 2 eggs



Cook bacon in a skillet over medium heat until browned and crispy. Transfer to a plate covered in a paper towel to soak up extra oil.

Toast brioche. Spread both pieces with mayonnaise. On one piece, top with bacon, tomato, lettuce, and avocado.

Pan fry eggs sunny side up and place on top (bonus if you do it in the bacon grease). Place the other piece of bread on top. Cut diagonally, making sure the yolks run out. Enjoy right away!

Makes 1 sandwich.

Hash Browns

For this recipe, you are basically making one giant potato pancake—this can be an individual portion if having alone with eggs, or it can be split and shared as a great brunch side. Once again, feel free to add a spoonful of your rendered bacon fat to take it to the next level.



- 1 large potato
- ½ medium white onion
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 1 T. lemon juice
- 2–3 T. clarified butter or canola oil ghee
- Sea salt (to garnish)



Heat a non-stick pan over medium heat. Peel and shred onion and potato into a bowl (can also use shredding blade on a food processor).

Note: Grate the onion first to slow oxidation.

Season with salt, pepper, and lemon juice.

Heat butter or oil in the pan, enough to evenly coat the bottom. Using clean hands or a tea towel, squeeze the potato mixture until as much liquid as possible is removed. The less moisture you have, the less it will splatter.

Arrange the mixture in the pan carefully since butter/oil is hot (potato mixture should be about ¼-½ inch thick). Using a rubber spatula, shape and smooth edges into a round shape.

Saute over medium heat until bottom is browned 3-4 minutes on both sides. Carefully slide the spatula underneath the hash brown and flip it over. Continue to saute until browned and cooked through the middle. Move to plate, sprinkle with sea salt, and enjoy.

Makes 2 side-servings. ♦

Alyssa Thayer found her love of food at an early age, frolicking around her mother's organic farm and eating her weight in berries and snap peas each summer. She is a self-proclaimed urban farm girl, whose mission is to bring inspired ideas to life, passionate people together, and good food to every table.



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