

# Spirited Cooking

USE UNIQUE FLAVORS OF LOCAL LIQUOR TO ADD CHEER TO HOLIDAY DISHES

Alyssa Thayer

**D**URING THE HOLIDAYS WE LIKE TO JAZZ things up and add a little something extra. One way is certainly by mixing up a good Moscow mule or hot toddy. But there's yet another way to enjoy added cheer (without the hangover) and that's through the art of cooking.

Alcohol is a natural amplifier of flavor and aromas. Its molecular composition can bond to both water and fat, allowing it to enhance the sweetness of tomatoes in a vodka sauce and the gamey notes of a venison stew. And it's not just the novel chemical properties that make it a key component of any culinary arsenal—darker liquors boast some of the most complex and unique flavors you can find.

That rich earthy taste is no accident. For craft distillers like Max Pfeffer, Head Distiller of **Manatawny Still Works** in Pottstown, everything they do from selecting the grains to malting, roasting, distilling and aging builds towards that final coveted flavor profile.

Max, a chemical engineering major, postponed getting a “boring job” by enrolling in the Master Brewers Program at UC Davis. He was the lead brewer for Sly Fox Brewing before making the move to hard liquor.

Max says the transition was actually fairly simple, explaining the type of malty whiskey he creates is really just distilled beer. “I was halfway there because I knew how to handle a brewhouse and fermentation. I just had to figure out the distilling and barrel-aging part.”



Distillery barrels at Manatawny Still Works

Eight years later, Max still says he's learning each day. But he's already made quite a mark on the craft distilling scene, with award-winning non-traditional whiskey (a unique blend of barley, wheat, oats and rye) and imaginative flavor combinations (including El Murcielago, whiskey aged in tequila barrels). Max and his team are constantly tinkering and innovating and the result is an impressively deep lineup of best-in-class spirits, ranging from gin and rum to their well-recognized line of grain whiskey.

“We're not just trying to emulate what the big guys are doing, but rather, make our own craft whiskey,” says Max proudly. Not only has Manatawny succeeded in developing quite a following, they have also caught the attention of bakers, chefs, cheesemakers and more. “Chefs just taste something and become inspired,” says Max on how the various partnerships came to be.

Even if you aren't one to sit down with a low ball of whiskey (or even if you are), the deep complex flavors may just be that secret ingredient that puts your glazed ham or peach cobbler right over the top. The trick is figuring out which type of spirit to use, when to add it, and how much to add.

Check out our tips in this article to help you create a deliciously spirited holiday season.

To happier holidays!



Distillery

## Rum Poached Pears

While this dessert may seem simple, the flavors blend together into something rich, sweet and complex. Want to spread the cheer? Make these pears as a delicious food gift. Simply place finished pears into a mason jar with a note on how to warm and enjoy them with ice cream/toppings.



4 pears, just ripe, peeled (we used bosc, but any variety works)  
 ¼ C. brown coconut sugar (can sub with regular brown sugar)  
 ½ tsp. cinnamon  
 ¼ tsp. allspice grated  
 ¼ C. butter  
 ⅓ C. dark rum (highly recommend the new Vanilla Rum from Manatawny Still Works)  
 1 tsp. vanilla extract  
 ¼ C. maple syrup  
 Pinch of salt

### Optional Toppings:

Scoop of vanilla or butter pecan ice cream  
 Drizzle of melted dark chocolate  
 Toasted chopped nuts or crunchy granola

Preheat oven to 375°.

Slice pears in half and remove core. (Whether you remove the stem is up to you. It can look pretty for presentation.) Place core-side-up in a large baking dish.

*Tip:* If pears are rolling around too much, slice a sliver off the back/curved side to allow them to lay flat.

In a small bowl, mix sugar, spices and salt, and set aside. Dice butter into small pieces, and set aside.

Generously sprinkle dry mixture over all of the pears, making sure they get a good coating. Next, distribute small pieces of butter onto the pears (dab if soft).

Add rum, vanilla and maple syrup to a small saucepan and bring to a low simmer. Stir and simmer for 5 minutes. Then spoon or pour liquid over the pears.

Cover with a lid or aluminium foil and bake for 30 minutes or until pears are soft but not mushy (can be up to 45 minutes if using

## Cooking with spirits 101

Here are a few ideas to add some extra cheer for the holidays.

**Flavor Maker** – Alcohol has unique chemical properties that allow it to help bring out the flavors already present in a dish. The first property is its ability to bond to both fat and water, which helps it gather the full power of fat-soluble (spices, herbs, alliums), water-soluble (fruits, vegetables) and alcohol-soluble (tomato enzymes).

**Taig Time** – One of the keys to getting that smooth rich flavor and not an abrasive alcoholic one, is time. It takes a fair bit of time for alcohol to cook out of a dish completely. So if you want the alcohol content to be low, make sure you're adding your booze to recipes that require long simmering or baking.

**Dark vs. Light** – The type of liquor you choose should play nicely with the ingredients of the meal. For example, dark liquor tends to go well with red meats, apples, pears and dried fruit, while light liquors accompany the lighter/brighter notes of seafood, chicken and tropical fruits.

**All Ways!** A little booze can really send the senses soaring in these flavor-filled applications:

- **Marinade or Brine** – Flavors will really pop with the addition of a touch of the right hard liquor. That said, be careful not to add too much or you risk changing the texture of the meat.
- **Deglaze** – Not only does it help de-stick those caramelized delicious bits of aromatics or meat left on the pan, the alcohol, once simmered for a minute or two, is cooked out and the wonderful rich notes of the liquor will marry into your sauce.
- **Poaching/Stewing** – In this preparation, apples and pears soften nicely and drink up the flavors they're cooked in. Plus, the poaching liquid (if sweetened) can be boiled down into a syrup to be drizzled over your final dish.
- **Soaking/Macerating** – For a little extra zing, you can soak sliced fruit or berries without cooking them. This allows them to take on all the flavors without losing the freshness. This preparation carries the full alcohol content of what is added since it's not heated.
- **Spike It** – Of course the obvious option is a spiked cocktail, but that isn't all you can spike—try sorbets, popsicles, custards and more can all get a little extra cheer.
- **Jam It Out** – You can also make some delicious fruit butters using hard liquor (darker liquors tend to do better). Mix in with your fruit of choice and some warm spices and you'll have yourself something deep, rich and gourmet.
- **Vodka Pie Crust** – According to trusted baking sources, a little vodka in your pie crust keeps it moist and easy to work with. No one will ever know your magic trick since it all cooks out and disappears in the baking process.

less ripe pears). Remove cover, baste with juices and return to the oven to cook uncovered for 10 more minutes at 400° or until pears are lightly browned on top.

Serve warm with a scoop of ice cream and your toppings of choice. Serves 4–6.

*Note:* If the sauce is still a little too boozy for your liking, simply add it to a heavy bottomed saucepan and simmer until more alcohol is removed (about 20 minutes), being mindful not to let it burn.

### Apple Brandy Fondue

*There's something magical about a dip and devour meal like fondue for dinner. Customize your dippers to your fancy, and dust off that old fondue pot, It's show time!*



- 1 Tb. extra virgin olive oil
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1 C. dry white wine
- 1 Tb. lemon juice
- 6 oz. Gruyere cheese, shredded
- 4 oz. Emmentaler or baby Swiss cheese, shredded
- 4 oz. Gouda cheese, shredded
- 2 Tb. cornstarch
- ¼ C. apple brandy
- ¼ tsp. grated nutmeg
- Pinch of black pepper

*Cheese note:* It's important to get higher quality cheese for this so it melts well. This is not a place to go low or fat free!

#### Dippers:

- 1-inch cubes of crusty baguette or sourdough bread
- Steamed/Roasted broccoli, carrots, cauliflower or other veggies
- Fresh/sliced apple, pear, bell peppers
- Boiled new potatoes

In a heavy bottom pot, add olive oil and garlic. Saute over medium heat until garlic is soft and fragrant (1–2 minutes). Add wine and lemon juice and bring to a light simmer (medium heat).

Slowly start adding cheese, one handful at a time, continuously stirring and only adding more once the previous handful has melted.

Whisk cornstarch into brandy until dissolved completely and add to cheese mixture. Cook until cheese is melted and smooth.

Top with nutmeg and black pepper.  
Serve warm with an assortment of dipping options.

*Words to the wise:* Don't let the cheese get too hot! If heat is too high, the cheese will scorch and then separate. There's no coming back from that.

#### Other fixes:

- Too thin? Add more cheese.
- Too thick? Add a splash of wine or lemon juice.
- Separating? Add more dissolved cornstarch.
- No fondue pot? Try preparing it on the stovetop and then transferring to a preheated crock pot (set to high).

Serves 6.

### Baked Brie

*Yes, we admit, these recipes are a bit cheese-heavy. But hey, it's the holidays—there are no rules. The sweet and savory creation pairs the unctuous gooeyness of warm brie with the crunch of the walnuts. It will have your guests begging for the recipe. It's your choice whether you want to share it.*



- ½ C. walnuts or pecans, chopped
- 1 Tb. extra virgin olive oil
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 2 Tb. honey/maple whiskey
- 2 tsp. honey
- ½ tsp. fresh rosemary, minced (1 sprig)
- 8-oz. wheel of brie

Preheat oven to 375°.

Start by toasting nuts and setting aside. (You can do this either on stovetop over medium heat, being careful not to burn, or in a single layer in the oven at 375° for 10 minutes.)

Add olive oil to a small saucepan over medium-low heat. Once warm, add garlic and stir until soft and fragrant (1 minute). Add

whiskey and honey and stir until fully combined and warmed (another minute).

Pull from heat and allow to cool.  
Once whiskey mixture has cooled, add chopped nuts and rosemary to it and stir.

Carefully slice the top off the brie, exposing the soft sticky inside. Place the brie cut-side-up in a bake-proof pie dish or skillet and Spoon nut and whiskey mixture over top.

Place in the oven and bake for 10 minutes or until the cheese is warmed through and sauce is bubbling.

Enjoy warm with sliced baguette or crispy flatbreads.

Serves 6–8.

### Apricot Whiskey Meatballs

*These flavorful gems are a simple case of a kicked-up classic. The savory notes pair well with the sweetness of the maple and apricot and are given depth and complexity with the earthy whiskey notes.*



#### Meatballs:

- 2 Tb. extra virgin olive oil
- 1 onion, finely diced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- ½ lb. ground pork
- ½ lb. ground beef (used 90/10, but 80/20 is fine)
- 1 tsp. garlic powder
- ½ tsp black pepper
- ½ tsp. coarse salt
- ⅓ C. bread crumbs
- 1 egg
- 2 Tb. chopped parsley
- 2 Tb. high-heat cooking oil

#### Sauce:

- 1 Tb. olive oil
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- ⅓ C. whiskey

- ½ C. apricot preserves
- ¼ C. maple syrup
- 1 C. ketchup
- 2 Tb. Worcestershire sauce
- 1 tsp. Ancho Chile
- 1 Tb. sherry vinegar (apple cider is good, too)
- Salt and pepper to taste

Preheat oven to 350°.

Saute onion in olive oil over medium-high heat until soft and beginning to brown. Add into a large bowl and allow to cool.

Once onions have cooled, add the rest of the meatball ingredients, except cooking oil, and use your hands to combine well. Shape into small cocktail-size meatballs, and set on a large plate.

Heat cooking oil in saute pan over medium-high heat. Cook meatballs in batches to ensure they brown well. Use tongs to turn and brown on each side (5–7 minutes total). Transfer first batch of browned meatballs to a cookie sheet and repeat browning steps for each of the following batches.

Once all meatballs have been browned, place them into the hot oven for 10 minutes or until cooked through (no pink when cut open).

Begin your sauce in the same saute pan. Turn heat down to medium-low and add oil.

Add minced garlic to warmed oil, stirring until fragrant (about 1 minute).

Next, deglaze with whiskey. Add remaining sauce ingredients, bring heat back up to medium and allow sauce to simmer and the flavors to meld (10 minutes).

Gently add finished meatballs into simmering sauce and toss gently before serving.

Makes about 30 cocktail-sized meatballs. ♦

*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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