

Food as Art

FOOD PRESENTATION IS ARTFULLY CRAFTED AT LIFE'S PATINA CO. MERCANTILE & CAFE

Courtney H. Diener-Stokes



Lemon poppyseed cake with candied violets at Life's Patina



Meg Venno in her garden



The restored Jenny Lind House

THE FIRST TIME MEG VENNO, owner of **Life's Patina Co.**, went to Europe in 2006, she saw food in a different light: as art. "I was so blown away," she said. "Between the charcuteries in Italy and the pastries in France, everything was fresh, local fare, and they were eating what was coming out of each season."

During that trip, which marked her 20th wedding anniversary, Venno and her husband indulged in sweet treats and savory delicacies from cafes, bakeries, restaurants and bistros — a highlight of the visit. During their many meals, Venno was struck by the unstuffy approach to the food's thoughtful presentation, giving meaning to the expression "eat with your eyes." "It wasn't fancy or fussy," she said.

Extra touches to dishes — sprigs of freshly grown herbs, candied wildflowers and exposed preserves in layer cakes — caught her eye. Served in rustic bowls or on vintage French country plates — a nod to the roots of the culinary culture — the food's presentation elicited emotion and feeling in the dining experiences.

Inspired by these experiences, this self-described foodie had a revelation upon her return home, although it was years before she could act on it. When Venno wanted to add a food component to her

growing lifestyle business at Life's Patina, "I thought, this is what I want to do here in America. To make everything beautiful with an eclectic and European feel that's timeless and doesn't follow the trends."

And so she did. From the moment you walk up the stairs of the historic Jenny Lind House in Chester Springs that Venno spent five years restoring, you're immersed in her aesthetic. You immediately notice **Mercantile & Cafe** is a homage to traditional designs of the past. "We're in an art village, so our approach is in keeping with, 'food is art, life is art.'"

The cafe's reclaimed wood display cases are filled with pastries, scones, cookies and cakes, like a stunning mini lemon poppyseed cake with strawberry thyme jam in the center, topped with candied violets. The locally sourced, seasonal menu on the chalkboard describes soups, salads, quiches and tartines, such as their avocado tartine topped with feta, pickled onions and other textural surprises, all artfully presented. And all served on blue and white Delft dishware, along with vintage silverware reminiscent of meals during Venno's Europe trip.

"We can celebrate every day and elevate things a little more by paying attention to the small details," Venno added.

Read on for a taste, and look, at artful presentation for your meals.

Creamy Mushroom Soup with Basil Oil

This delightfully rich and creamy soup featuring four types of mushrooms is punctuated with a drizzle of green-hued basil oil and freshly cracked pepper. Pairs perfectly with oversized herbed croutons.

Serves 4 to 6



- 3 T. unsalted butter (1 T. reserved)
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 shallot, finely chopped
- 4 oz. cremini mushrooms, chopped
- 4 oz. white button mushrooms, chopped
- 4 oz. portobello mushrooms, chopped
- 1 T. all-purpose flour
- 2 T. porcini mushroom powder
- 3 C. chicken stock
- 1 C. whole milk
- ½ C. half and half
- ⅛ C. apple cider vinegar
- ¼ tsp. fine sea salt or to taste
- ¼ tsp. ground black pepper or to taste

Melt 2 tablespoons butter in a large pot, such as a Dutch oven, over medium-high heat.

Add the garlic and shallot. Cook for 1 minute, until they begin to soften. Add mushrooms and cook for about 10 minutes, until tender and browned.

Add the remaining 1 tablespoon of butter to the pot. Once melted, sprinkle in flour and mushroom powder and whisk. Reduce heat to medium.

Add the stock, a little at a time, then the milk and half and half, whisking out clumps between each addition. Increase the heat to medium-high and allow the soup to simmer for 8 to 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. (The soup will thicken slightly to become a creamy consistency.)

Transfer the soup to a blender and mix until roughly blended to achieve a part smooth and part chunky texture.

Pour back into your cooking pot and let cook for 3 to 4 minutes.

Next add vinegar, salt and pepper.

Garnish with basil oil (homemade or store-bought) by making a circular motion over soup. Or you can use chopped parsley or chives. Top with freshly cracked pepper. Add croutons, if desired.

Refrigerate leftovers in a jar with a sealable lid for up to two days.

Avocado Tartine with Feta, Pickled Onions and Spiced Seeds

While there are many steps involved in this recipe, the pickled onions, chili oil and spiced seeds can be made in advance and leftovers stored for later use. The flavor and textural combination of this high-bar avocado toast is unmatched and worth every step of this recipe! The herbs Life's Patina uses on this avocado tartine are grown at Venno's Malvern home, Willowbrook Farm.

Serves 2



For the pickled onions:

- ½ C. apple cider vinegar
- 1 T. sugar
- ¼ tsp. kosher salt
- 1 C. water
- 1 red onion, thinly sliced

For the chili oil:

- ¼ C. red pepper flakes, heaping
- ¼ tsp. salt
- 2 C. canola oil

For the spiced seeds:

- 1 C. pepitas
- ½ C. sunflower seeds
- ¼ C. black and white sesame seed mix
- 1 tsp. smoked paprika
- ½ tsp. salt

¼ tsp. cayenne
½ T. canola oil
1½ T. honey

For the avocado mash:

2 avocados
Juice of ½ lemon
Pinch of salt
Pinch of pepper
¼ C. feta cheese (reserved to sprinkle of top during assembly)

To make the pickled onions:

In a medium bowl, whisk the apple cider vinegar, sugar, kosher salt and water until the sugar and salt dissolve.

Place the sliced red onion in a sterilized Mason jar with a tight-fitting lid. Pour vinegar mixture over onions and let sit at room temperature for one hour. Refrigerate leftovers for up to two weeks.

To make the chili oil:

In a medium bowl, add pepper flakes and salt and stir to combine. Set aside. Pour oil in a small saucepan and cook on medium-low heat until hot (about 2 to 3 minutes). Pour the hot oil over the pepper flake and salt mixture. Steep for 30 to 60 minutes.

Completely cool before transferring to a sterilized Mason jar with a lid. Seal tightly and store at room temperature for up to three months. Since the oil is stored at room temperature, it's particularly important to use a clean utensil when spooning the mixture out of the jar to ensure the oil stays safe to consume.

To make the spiced seeds:

Preheat oven to 325°.

In a medium bowl, place all ingredients and stir to combine.

Spread evenly on a parchment-lined cookie sheet and bake for 18 minutes. Stir and bake another 2 minutes. Stir one last time and cook a final 2 minutes.

To make the avocado mash:

Cut each avocado in half lengthwise. Remove the seed and scoop out contents of avocado into a small bowl. Mash until medium-smooth.

Add lemon juice, salt and pepper, and stir to combine.

To assemble the avocado tartine:

Toast a large piece of sourdough bread.

Add a heaping scoop of avocado mash and spread evenly over toast.

Sprinkle lightly with feta crumbles. Add a few pieces of drained pickled onions.

Sprinkle lightly with fresh herbs, such as parsley and dill, or with microgreens.

Place seeds in a tiny bowl on the serving plate for each person to add when ready to enjoy. Finalize with a drizzle of chili oil on top.

Roasted Carrots on a Bed of Whipped Feta and Yogurt with a Vinaigrette Drizzle

This side dish, inspired by a recipe in Country Living, is a unique take on carrots merged with earthy coriander, making it the perfect accompa-

niment to any protein. The freshly chopped mint in the vinaigrette adds the perfect pop of color.

Serves 4 to 6



For the roasted carrots:

1½ lbs. carrots, peeled and ends trimmed (cut in half or thirds, lengthwise, if using very large carrots)
2 tsp. coriander
1 tsp. garlic powder
1 T. olive oil
Salt and pepper, to taste

For the feta yogurt sauce:

4 oz. feta, crumbled
¼ C. plain Greek yogurt
2 T. milk
Pepper to taste

For the vinaigrette:

¼ red onion, diced
2 T. fresh mint, chopped
2 T. white wine vinegar
2 T. olive oil

To make the carrots:

Preheat oven to 450°. Line a cookie sheet with a baking mat or parchment paper.

Toss together carrots, coriander, garlic powder, olive oil, salt and pepper. Spread out on baking sheet.

Roast carrots, tossing once, until tender, about 20 minutes.

To make the feta yogurt sauce:

In a food processor, puree feta, yogurt, milk and pepper.

To make the vinaigrette:

In a separate, small bowl, stir together red onion, mint, white wine vinegar and olive oil.

Let stand for about 10 minutes so the red onion starts to pickle.

To assemble:

To serve, spread the feta mixture on a platter. Top with warm carrots and drizzle with vinaigrette.

Refrigerate leftovers in an airtight container for up to two days.

Tips and Tricks for Artful Presentation

The culinary team that collaborates with Veno at Life's Patina and creates each seasonal menu includes chef Michael Dorris; pastry chef Lindsay Robinson; and sous chef and pastry sous chef Maren Liberman. Together, they work on recipes to excite the palate and also develop ways to artfully present each item.

Try some of these easy pro tips at home to elevate the presentation of everything that comes out of your kitchen.

Texture: Adding a crunchy topping or a spicy oil can serve as an attractive visual, as well as offer a tasty, unexpected textural experience.

Height: Vary heights of different food items on the plate to better accentuate them and make the plate look more interesting through creative stacking and placement. Avoid too much space between items on the plate. Using tiny bowls for sauces on each plate can add another dimension to the presentation.

Arrangement: Place items purposefully on a plate. Don't crowd them, but let them complement one another. Consider smaller portions with some negative space on the plate to accentuate each one. Finish with a garnish or sprinkle of fresh herbs from your garden.

Color: Think about contrasting colors that will make each component of your meal pop. Select different-colored vegetables, meats and starches that work well together and give each a chance to shine.

Dishware: What you serve your food on can impact the overall look of the meal. Vintage dishware can evoke a nostalgic mood or an eclectic vibe to your meal. Put your special dishware in regular rotation to elevate the presentation of your hard work.

Lind Trail Cookies

This signature cookie, named after the Jenny Lind House that Meg Veno restored to open Mercantile & Cafe, is so packed with hearty goodies that it makes the perfect snack when you're on the go and need some substantial grab-and-go fuel. Pairs perfectly with a latte if you've got some time to savor this sweet treat.

Makes 6 jumbo cookies

1 stick butter, room temperature
½ C. dark brown sugar, packed
½ C. granulated sugar
¼ C. peanut butter
1 egg



1½ tsp. vanilla extract
1 C. all-purpose flour
½ tsp. baking soda
¼ tsp. salt
¼ tsp. cinnamon
1¼ C. oats
¼ C. raisins
¼ C. dried cranberries
¼ C. pumpkin seeds
1 T. flax seeds
1 C. pecans
¼ C. white chocolate chips

Preheat oven to 350°. In a standard mixer with a paddle on medium speed, cream the butter, sugars, peanut butter, egg and vanilla extract.

Turn mixer to slow speed and add the flour, baking soda and salt. Mix until the dough is formed, and then add the remaining ingredients. Once dough is mixed and all the ingredients are incorporated, turn mixer off.

On a sheet tray lined with parchment paper, scoop out the dough with a 3-oz. scooper and form into a ball. Gently press down onto the pan.

Bake for 12 to 15 minutes until the bottom is golden brown.

After fully baked, remove from pan and allow to cool. Store leftovers in an airtight container at room temperature for up to five days. ♦

Courtney Diener-Stokes is an award-winning journalist, author, food writer, photographer and food stylist. Most recently she co-authored the Kimberton Whole Foods Cookbook and Farmhouse Manna: Nourishing Recipes and Rituals for Head, Heart, Hands & Soul. She lives in the Oley Valley countryside with her husband, three children, two Babydoll Southdown sheep, a flock of bantam chickens and a Bernedoodle named Daisy.



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