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Simply lavish: Caterers divulge their top tips and crowd-pleasing recipes

Tara Duggan, Chronicle Staff Writer
Wednesday, December 5, 2007

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When you talk to a professional party planner about the latest in holiday entertaining, you often get what sounds like a mixed message. Luxury ingredients are definitely in, but people also are asking for homey foods for their parties. Guests are more interested in food and cooking than ever before, yet the menu shouldn't be the only focus of the party.



"The pendulum is kind of right in the middle between the '80s excess and when it went back to real homey comfort food," says Michael Jennings of Small Potatoes Catering in San Francisco.

It may sound contradictory, but it is possible to throw holiday parties that are both glamorous and welcoming, with delicious foods that don't require spending all your time in the kitchen, say Bay Area caterers.

The trick is to combine lavish and homespun, homemade and store-bought, and to have lots of fun while doing it.

To help with your party planning, we've gathered hors d'oeuvres and small-bites recipes from five local caterers that feature seasonal ingredients. All can be made partly or entirely in advance.

We've paired them with ideas for quality purchased foods or easy side dishes to round out the menu. Pick one or two recipes, do as much ahead as you can, then fill out the buffet table with charcuterie, farmstead cheeses and piles of local nuts, dates and olives purchased at your local deli, cheese store or farmers' market.

"People fret about having enough variety," says Berkeley caterer Hugh Groman. "If you choose things from the heart that are really quality, you'll be fine - one special cocktail, just a few different dishes."

Although these recipes may be more time-consuming on the front end, caterers say that mini servings are the way to go.

"The days of the big shrimp bowls and dipping into the same cocktail sauce and slicing into the same big cake - those parties were beautiful - but that's a trend that's gone," says Steve Denison, president of McCall Catering in San Francisco. Instead, he says, "Everything should be in individual pieces. One, two, two and a half bites. Intense flavors, fresh and authentic."

To accompany today's hors d'oeuvres recipes, Napa caterer Elaine Bell suggests making

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a big batch of up-market macaroni and cheese, scooping it into ramekins and microwaving right before serving in the individual cups.

"People still really like things that are creative and put a new twist on things from their past," says Bell. Guests also respond really well to the miniature aspect, such as serving soup or risotto in hollowed-out mini white pumpkins.

Jennings of Small Potatoes likes to serve small salads in individual bowls, rather than present a huge "trough" of salad on the buffet.

"The salad gets messy on the plate, it spills and the buffet gets messy," says Jennings. His sushi salad features salmon, tuna tartare, Asian vegetables, grapes, herbs, about a half cup of greens and wasabi dressing, and is served in a small bowl with chopsticks.

"Most of the fish is in the bottom, and you bring it up through the layers," says Jennings. You can assemble the ingredients in bowls, refrigerate, then add dressing from a squeeze bottle at the last minute.

Another trend that caterers have noticed is a general fascination with ingredients and how food is prepared.

"People are really interested in cooking and what's local. People who didn't use to cook do now," says Jennifer Spiegel of Fork & Spoon Productions in San Francisco. "They like to see the action."

In response, most caterers have what are called action stations. Fork & Spoon sets up a Vietnamese noodle station where guests can request either hot broth or vinaigrette to add to a tangle of rice noodles, meat and vegetables. Elaine Bell Catering creates a slider bar with choices ranging from lamb to turkey to scallop burgers on mini homemade buns. Small Potatoes offers a mashed potato bar with toppings like braised short ribs, sauteed chanterelles or caviar.

Such presentations tend to be too elaborate for home entertaining, but you can tweak the idea to work at home. For example, make crepes in advance or purchase them pre-made or frozen, then heat them and have guests add fillings set up around a kitchen bar.

When entertaining at home, Elaine Bell often invites guests who like to cook to come early, have a glass of wine and help with last-minute preparation and plating. After all, the host has already done the hard part, which is the planning, shopping and prepping.

"People really like to feel like they have some connection to the kitchen, even though they may not have a lot of time to do that at home," says Bell. "If they're put in an environment where they can get involved, it's really fun."

Although caterers say they are getting lots of client requests for luxury ingredients like caviar, they'd actually rather serve homey food at their own parties, such as meat loaf, roast pork loin, soups and one-pot dishes.

"We cook relatively simple food at home," says Spiegel. "It's about the people and the conversation and the great wine."

Part of the reason for that is to keep the focus of the event on your friends and family.

"People want to come to your house to see you. If you're running around to get the party going and doing the food, people feel awkward," says Denison of McCall.

To prevent that, be organized so there's enough time to put on the finishing touches before most of the guests arrive. Shop in advance, cook ahead and clean as you go. And don't worry too much about decorating.

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"People ask me about how to decorate their home," says Denison. "I say, 'With a welcoming smile at the front door.' You can never have enough candles. Turn off the overhead lights. Don't put an ending time on the invitation. Make people feel welcome."

If you don't have much money for flowers, use greenery, such as dramatic magnolia tree branches, suggests Spiegel.

"Candlelight, music, a bunch of magnolias and a little lipstick, and you're good to go," she says.

The caterers

Here are the caterers who contributed to today's story. They work throughout the Bay Area.

Elaine Bell Catering. (707) 603-1400 or www.elainebellcatering.com

Fork & Spoon Productions. (415) 552-7130 or www.forkandspoonproductions.com

Hugh Groman Catering. Also operates Greenleaf Platters, a high-end party platter delivery service. (510) 647-5165 or hughgromancatering.com and www.greenleafplatters.com.

McCall Catering. (415) 552-8550 or www.danmccall.com

Small Potatoes. (415) 585-0557 or www.tinyspuds.com

How much food and drink to serve

When planning a menu, first think about what kind of party it's going to be. If it's strictly a cocktail party, such as from 5 to 7 p.m. or 6 to 7:30 p.m., caterers usually advise four to five pieces of food per person per hour. That means small items consisting of about two bites each.

However, if the party time ranges anywhere from 5 or 6 p.m. to 8 or 9 p.m., people will be expecting a light dinner. In that case, you need to serve about 15-20 pieces total per person, including a few dessert bites.

The recipes in this story are meant to serve 12-15 people, with around two pieces per person, but they can easily be adapted for smaller or larger parties.

Caterers say that people tend to drink more during the holidays. When just serving wine, it's good to count on a half bottle per person, usually more white than red.

Plan on one to two cocktails per person, per hour, at 1 ounce of alcohol each. Try offering just one house cocktail and give it a special name. Have pomegranate lemonade ready and guests can add a splash of vodka, if they like. Or offer a Moscow Mule, a simple combination of ginger beer, bitters, lime and vodka.

- Tara Duggan

Entertaining menu ideas

The hors d'oeuvres below combine well with one another because each is a different variety - crostini, pastry, sandwich, finger food and spoon bite - and each has a different main ingredient. The Warm Prosciutto-Wrapped Dates are particularly easy to make and adaptable to the other dishes.

Here are some additional ideas from caterers for purchased or easy-to-prepare foods to

round out the menu:

Filet Mignon with Horseradish Cream on Rosemary Biscuits *or*

Chestnut Crostini with Chanterelle Mushroom Duxelle

Add-ons: Make a big batch of homemade macaroni and cheese and portion it into ramekins that can be reheated right before serving. Try different flavor combinations such as white truffle oil with cremini mushrooms or sharp cheddar cheese with walnuts.

Head to a deli or cheese shop for charcuterie, salumi and prosciutto, which tends to be less expensive than cheese because it's thinly sliced and rich, which means people eat less of it. Add olives, roasted peppers or other antipasti, breadsticks and cornichons.

Smoked Whiskey Shrimp in Chinese Soup Spoons

Add-ons: Serve purchased sushi, or prepare nori rolls just filled with sushi rice or cucumber, slice thinly and top each slice with smoked salmon or other fish.

Prepare Asian rice noodles and place in bowls. Put flavorful broth in a hot pot and vinaigrette in a pitcher, and put out bowls of cooked pork, shrimp and vegetables. Guests can add meat and vegetables to their bowl, then hot broth to make soup, or vinaigrette to make a salad.

Squash Tagine in Puff Pastry with Cinnamon Harissa Creme Fraiche

Add-ons: Head to a Middle Eastern market for prepared meze, dips, feta cheese, olives and flat breads.

Warm Prosciutto-Wrapped Dates Filled with Toasted Almonds, Gorgonzola & Chevre

Add-ons: Create small salads in individual bowls with hearty greens and other flavor-packed ingredients, such as arugula with dates and Parmesan shavings. At the last minute, drizzle each bowl with sherry vinaigrette from a squeeze bottle.

Chocolate Peppermint Ganache S'mores

Add-ons: Purchase mini cupcakes in flavors other than chocolate.

- Tara Duggan

Chestnut Crostini with Chanterelle Mushroom Duxelle

Makes 24 crostini

This is wintery, luxurious hors d'oeuvre comes from Fork and Spoon Catering. You will probably have chestnut puree leftover to spread on sandwiches. Make the chestnut puree up to 2 days ahead; bring to room temperature before serving. The bread toasts can be made 1 day ahead and cooled completely before tightly wrapping; keep at room temperature. Prepare the mushrooms up to 1 hour before serving; keep at room temperature. Assemble the crostini right before your party starts.

- The chestnut puree:
- 1/2 small yellow onion, diced
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 8 ounces vacuum-packed whole roasted chestnuts (1 1/2 cups), roughly chopped (see Note)

- 1/4 cup dry sherry or brandy
- 3/4 cup chicken or vegetable stock
- 1/3 cup heavy cream
- -- Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
- The chanterelles:
 - 2 shallots, finely diced
 - 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
 - 1 tablespoon olive oil
 - 1/4 pound chanterelle mushrooms, sliced, or favorite mushroom of your choice
 - 1/4 cup white wine
 - 2 tablespoons chopped mixed herbs such as thyme, parsley and chives, plus some to garnish
- 1/4 cup grated Pecorino cheese
- The crostini:
 - 1 sweet baguette
 - 2 to 3 tablespoons olive oil

For the chestnut puree: In a medium pan, saute onion in butter and olive oil over moderately low heat, until tender and lightly brown, about 5 minutes.

Add chestnuts and deglaze pan with sherry then cook until slightly reduced.

When sherry has cooked down, add stock and cream and let reduce by three-quarters or until liquid is just barely covering chestnuts and onions, about 8 minutes.

Puree the mixture in a blender or food processor until smooth and season with kosher salt and ground pepper to taste.

For the chanterelles: In a medium pan, saute the shallots in butter and olive oil until translucent. Add mushrooms and saute over high heat until tender.

Deglaze pan with white wine and reduce until liquid is almost evaporated.

Let mushroom slightly cool and roughly chop, add herbs and Pecorino. Season with kosher salt and freshly ground pepper to taste.

For the crostini: Preheat the oven to 375°. Slice the baguette 1/4-inch thick on the bias until you get 24 slices; you won't need the entire baguette. Place in a large bowl and drizzle with olive oil, tossing to distribute, and season with kosher salt and pepper. Spread out crostini in 1 layer on a baking sheet and toast until golden brown, 12 minutes.

To assemble: Spread 1 scant tablespoon of the chestnut puree on each crostini and top with 1 teaspoon of the chanterelle mushrooms.

Sprinkle with herbs and serve.

Note: Vacuum-packed chestnuts are available at Whole Foods, Molly Stone's and most gourmet cooking stores.

Per serving: 80 calories, 1 g protein, 8 g carbohydrate, 4 g fat (1 g saturated), 5 mg cholesterol, 49 mg sodium, 1 g fiber.

Warm Prosciutto-Wrapped Dates Filled with Toasted Almonds, Gorgonzola & Chevre

Makes 24 dates

This recipe comes from chef Alex Alcantara of Small Potatoes Catering. Each bite is

crispy, crunchy, sweet and salty all at once.

- 3 tablespoons whole almonds or slivered almonds
- 3 tablespoons fresh chevre
- 2 tablespoons Gorgonzola dolce or other creamy blue cheese
- 24 dates, pitted and split to open on one side
- 4 ounces prosciutto, sliced into 3/4-by-3-inch strips

Instructions: Preheat the oven or toaster oven to 350°. Place the almonds on a baking sheet and toast for 10 minutes. Let cool, then chop coarsely.

Blend the chevre and Gorgonzola, then mix in the almonds.

Using a teaspoon or a pastry bag fitted with a very wide tip, fill each date with a teaspoon of the cheese mixture.

Wrap each date in the prosciutto so it just goes around the date once. Cover and refrigerate for up to 3 days ahead.

When ready to serve, preheat the oven to 350°. Place the dates on a baking pan and warm in the oven until the cheese melts slightly and the prosciutto starts to crisp, 5-7 minutes. Serve immediately.

Per date: 50 calories, 2 g protein, 6 g carbohydrate, 2 g fat (1 g saturated), 5 mg cholesterol, 148 mg sodium, 1 g fiber.

Squash Tagine in Puff Pastry with Cinnamon Harissa Creme Fraiche

Makes 25-30 pastries

These tiny half circle pastry bites have an intensely flavored filling of butternut squash sauteed with toasted spices and tossed with lemon and olives. The recipe comes from Josip Martinovic, chef de cuisine of McCall Catering, who serves an even smaller version. The filling and sauce can be made up to 1 day ahead. You can bake the pastries 1-2 hours ahead then quickly reheat them in the oven.

- The filling:
 - 1 tablespoon sunflower or vegetable oil
 - 1/2 cup 1/4-inch diced yellow onion
 - 1 pound butternut squash, peeled and cut into 1/2 inch cubes (about 2 cups)
 - 1 tablespoon brown sugar
 - 1 teaspoon cumin, toasted and ground in coffee grinder
 - 1 teaspoon coriander, toasted and ground in coffee grinder
 - 1/4 teaspoon cardamom, toasted and ground in coffee grinder
 - 1/4 teaspoon ground ginger
 - 2 tablespoons red wine
 - 1 tablespoon pure honey
 - 2 teaspoons lemon zest
 - 1 tablespoon lemon juice
 - 1 tablespoon slivered almonds, toasted
 - 1 teaspoon finely chopped green olives
 - -- Salt and pepper to taste
- The pastries:
 - -- Two 9-ounce sheet frozen puff pastry, thawed according to package directions
 - 1 egg yolk, lightly beaten
- The dipping sauce:
 - 1/4 cup creme fraiche

- 1/4 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon mild harissa paste (see Note)

For the filling: Heat the oil in a saute pan over medium heat and saute onions until softened, about 5 minutes. Add the butternut squash then stir in the brown sugar, cumin, coriander, cardamom and ginger. Cook until the squash is tender to the bite, stirring often, 12-15 minutes.

Deglaze the pan with the red wine and add the honey, lemon zest and juice, almonds and olives. Cook until the juices have thickened, about 3 minutes, then season to taste with salt and pepper. Allow to cool completely at room temperature, then chill until cold, about 30 minutes.

For the pastries: Preheat the oven to 375°.

Roll out each sheet of pastry dough on a lightly floured surface to 10 by 15 inch rectangles, then cut each into 15 three-inch rounds. Place 1 tablespoon filling into each round. Trace half of the edge of the circle with water, then fold the dough over into half moon shapes. Press around the edges with a fork to seal the pastry. Brush the top of each pastry with the egg yolk.

Place the pastries on an ungreased baking sheet and bake until puffed and lightly golden brown, about 15 minutes.

For the dipping sauce: Mix together all the ingredients and season if necessary.

Note: Harissa paste can be found at specialty markets such as Whole Foods.

Per pastry: 80 calories, 1 g protein, 8 g carbohydrate, 5 g fat (1 g saturated), 7 mg cholesterol, 41 mg sodium, 1 g fiber.

Filet Mignon with Horseradish Cream on Rosemary Biscuits

Makes 24 small sandwiches

From Hugh Groman Catering. You can prepare the horseradish cream up to one week ahead. The sandwiches can be made up to three hours ahead.

- The horseradish cream:
 - 1/2 cup sour cream
 - 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
 - 3 tablespoons peeled and finely grated horseradish root (about 1/2 ounce horseradish root) or substitute prepared horseradish
 - -- Salt and pepper to taste
- The rosemary biscuits:
 - 1/2 pound cold butter + 4 tablespoons melted butter to brush the scones
 - 4 cups + 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
 - 1 teaspoon salt
 - 2 tablespoons baking powder
 - 2 tablespoons sugar
 - 1 tablespoon finely chopped fresh rosemary
 - 1 1/3 cups whole milk
- The sandwiches:
 - 1 1/2 pounds filet mignon, or two 2-inch thick steaks
 - -- Vegetable oil
 - 2 ounces baby arugula, sliced fine

For the horseradish cream: Combine ingredients in a small bowl, cover and refrigerate until ready to use.

For the rosemary biscuits: Preheat oven to 400°. Dice cold butter, spread on a plate and chill in the freezer for 15 minutes. Combine flour, salt, baking powder, sugar and rosemary in food processor and pulse to combine thoroughly. Add cold butter and pulse until butter is the size of small peas. Pulse in milk until the mixture forms a dough.

Place the dough on a lightly floured surface. Divide the dough into 4 equal pieces and gently pat each into a round disc 1/2 inch thick. Cut each circle into 6 wedges. Place on a baking sheet and bake until just done and barely golden, 10-12 minutes. Brush each wedge generously with melted butter and let cool.

To assemble the sandwiches: Preheat the oven to 375°. Season the meat well with salt and pepper to taste. Heat a heavy-bottomed medium skillet over medium-high heat. When very hot, add enough vegetable oil to coat the bottom. When the oil is hot, add the meat and sear 3-4 minutes on one side. Flip over, place in the oven and roast until the meat reaches 128° in the thickest part, 5-8 minutes. Remove from the oven, tent with foil and rest at least 10 minutes, then slice thinly.

Split the biscuits. Spread the top of each with horseradish cream, then place the filet mignon and baby arugula on the bottom and close to form sandwiches.

Per sandwich: 230 calories, 9 g protein, 19 g carbohydrate, 13 g fat (8 g saturated), 47 mg cholesterol, 189 mg sodium, 1 g fiber.

Chocolate Peppermint Ganache S'mores

Makes 24 s'mores

This recipe comes from Fork & Spoon Catering, which serves 1-inch square s'mores; we made them a little larger for ease of preparation. You will need a kitchen torch, such as the kind for making creme brulee. The ganache needs to refrigerate overnight and can be made two days ahead. The s'mores can be assembled a few hours ahead, then finished with the kitchen torch before serving.

- The chocolate peppermint ganache
- -- Butter or baking spray for the pan
- 6 ounces bittersweet chocolate, chopped
- 1/2 cup heavy cream
- 1 1/2 tablespoons butter
- 1/4 cup chopped peppermint sticks or peppermint bark, smashed with a rolling pin or meat mallet
- The s'mores:
 - 8 graham crackers, plus extras in case they break (about 1/2 box)
 - 6 to 12 large marshmallows, preferably handmade, cut or torn in quarters or in half into 1/4-inch thick pieces (see Note)

For the ganache: Grease an 8-by-8-inch pan well with butter or baking spray. Place the chocolate in a medium bowl.

In a small heavy saucepan, bring cream and butter just to a soft simmer. Turn off the heat and pour over the chocolate. Let rest until melted. Use a rubber spatula to stir the mixture until all of the pieces are melted and combined.

Pour the chocolate mixture evenly into the prepared pan and sprinkle with chopped

peppermint pieces. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate the ganache overnight.

Cut ganache into 1-by-2-inch rectangles. Using an offset spatula, gently lift each piece out of the pan. You will have extra pieces in case some break.

For the s'mores: Cut each graham cracker into quarters along the perforations, using a sharp knife. Again, you'll probably lose some due to breakage.

Place a piece of ganache on a graham cracker and top with a piece of marshmallow. Light a blow torch and "burn" until marshmallow is lightly brown and slightly melted. Serve immediately.

Note: Handmade marshmallows are available at specialty grocers like Andronico's and Draeger's.

Per s'more: 70 calories, 1 g protein, 10 g carbohydrate, 4 g fat (2 g saturated), 7 mg cholesterol, 24 mg sodium, 0 fiber.

Smoked Whiskey Shrimp in Chinese Soupspoons

Makes 30 hors d'oeuvres

Elaine Bell Catering provided this recipe, which is served in porcelain Chinese soupspoons. You could also serve the shrimp in demitasse cups or even on crackers or rounds of cucumbers. The shrimp can be smoked and both sauces can be made several hours ahead and refrigerated. The dish can be assembled up to 1 hour ahead; chill in the refrigerator until serving.

- The shrimp
- 1/4 cup kosher salt
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 2 tablespoons pickling spice
- 2 teaspoons minced garlic
- 1 quart water
- 8 ounces large shrimp, completely peeled and deveined
- The whiskey sauce
- 1/4 cup olive oil
- 2 tablespoons bourbon
- 2 tablespoons lime juice
- 1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
- 1 1/2 teaspoons Tabasco sauce
- 1 teaspoon honey
- 3 tablespoons diced tomatoes in juice
- 1/2 shallot, finely chopped
- 2 teaspoons chopped cilantro
- 2 teaspoons minced garlic
- -- Salt and pepper to taste
- The horseradish cream
- 3 tablespoons creme fraiche
- 1 tablespoon prepared horseradish
- 1/2 teaspoon lemon juice
- Finishing the dish
- 1 cup small wood chips (see Note)
- 7 thin slices of English cucumber (unpeeled), each cut into 8 triangles

For the shrimp: Dissolve the salt, sugar, pickling spice and garlic in water. Add

shrimp and brine for 30 minutes. Remove from brine and pat dry.

For the whiskey sauce: Place all ingredients in a blender and puree until smooth, then season to taste. If you like, add more bourbon and/or Tabasco.

For the horseradish cream: Whisk the ingredients together and season with salt and pepper to taste.

To smoke the shrimp: You'll need a heavy-bottomed Dutch oven - preferably one you don't mind getting a bit darkened - with a tight-fitting lid and a rack that will fit inside, such as a steaming rack. Line the bottom of the pot with a double layer of heavy foil that lies smoothly on and comes up its sides about 1 inch. Spread the wood chips over the foil. Place the rack in the pot. Lightly cover pot with a layer of foil and replace the lid. Turn the range's vent hood on high and open any windows.

Preheat the covered pot over medium heat. When smoke begins to sneak out of the pot, after about 5-10 minutes, carefully open the lid. Using tongs, place shrimp onto the rack. Re-cover pot with the foil and crimp down the edges this time, then replace the lid. Turn heat down to the lowest setting and smoke until cooked through, 5-8 minutes. To check, turn off the heat and remove pan from the burner. Carefully remove the lid and foil and check the shrimp; they should be curled and no longer translucent, on either side. Remove to a plate and re-cover the pot to contain the smoke or move it outdoors. Allow smoking mixture to cool before throwing it away.

To assemble: Slice the smoked shrimp into small coins, starting from the head and working your way to the tail. Toss with whiskey sauce and season to taste with salt.

On each soup spoon, fan out three slices (try to match the slices that you cut) of shrimp toward the end of the spoon and top with about 1/4 teaspoon of the horseradish cream. Garnish with 2 cucumber triangles and serve.

Note: Remove the large wood chips from the bag and use the smaller pieces and sawdust at the bottom, which take less time to smoke.

Per serving: 30 calories, 1 g protein, 1 g carbohydrate, 2 g fat (0 saturated), 10 mg cholesterol, 17 mg sodium, 0 fiber.

The calories and other nutrients absorbed from brines vary and are difficult to estimate. Variables include the type of food, brining time and amount of surface area. Therefore, the brine is not included in this analysis.

E-mail Tara Duggan at tduggan@sfgchronicle.com.

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