

Delectable Delights with Holly Herrick

The Wonder of Winter Comfort Foods

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Photo by Brie Williams

John Zucker, chef/owner of Cru Café, says of his mac and cheese creation: “We love to prepare things that people enjoy so much.” John also says hand grating the cheese is essential to maintaining the proper texture because pre-grated products usually contain corn starch.

Often compared to Julie Andrews in appearance throughout my life, I have developed a youthful fondness for “brown paper packages wrapped up with strings” and “whiskers on kittens”; I’ve even devised limp efforts at twirling about an imaginary Austrian mountain.

I know the lyrics to all of the songs in *The Sound of Music* (one of my favorite movies) by heart, and have (like Julie and the rest of us) a personal list of favorite things.

Call me crazy, but one of them is winter in the Lowcountry. I revel in long, misty walks along deserted beaches on grey, cold mornings. I ache for the calm after the storm of the hectic holiday season once the calendar page turns toward the relative serenity of January. Then, I spend many a decadent weekend afternoon with a tasty book savored on my sofa; my dog curled cozily at my feet and a fire crackling warmly in the background. These quiet, introspective and soul-nurturing settings beg for slow-cooked, sensual scents

simmering throughout the day, rendering meals that will eventually become dinner and memories of easy days, well-spent and well-lived.

It's on winsome, winter days like these that I often indulge in one of my favorite winter activities and braise some kind of meat; perhaps a classic beef Bourguignon, Osso Buco, or whatever concoction evolves when my pantry, creativity and culinary cravings converge in the kitchen (see Home at The Range with Holly).

Another one of my absolute favorite things whenever my body and soul needs relief from life's occasional "bee sting" is to indulge in some of the Lowcountry restaurants' best comfort foods. Here are some of the top contenders with recipes provided so that you can create them in your kitchen.

Cru Café Four Cheese Macaroni

Serves 6-8

- 8 cups heavy cream, reduced to 4 cups
- 1 pound dried orecchiette pasta
- 1 cup pepper jack cheese, hand grated
- 1 cup aged cheddar cheese, hand grated
- 1 cup Fontina cheese, hand grated
- 1 cup mozzarella cheese, hand grated
- ¼ cup olive oil

For final cooking:

- ½ cup pepper jack cheese, hand grated
- ½ cup aged cheddar cheese, hand grated
- ½ cup Fontina cheese, hand grated
- ½ cup mozzarella cheese, hand grated

- Salt and pepper to taste

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Reduce cream to approximately 4 cups by simmering over medium heat in a medium-size sauce pan. Bring several cups of well-salted water up to a boil over high heat and cook the pasta until just al dente. Cool down rapidly in cold water then drain well. Coat the pasta lightly in olive oil to prevent sticking. Set aside. Grate all the cheese, keeping them in separate piles. Once the cream is reduced, whisk in the four 1-cup quantities of cheeses. Heat over low heat until the cheese is fully melted. Set aside. In a big mixing bowl, combine the remaining cheese, pasta and cheese sauce. Add salt and pepper to taste and mix well without breaking up the pasta. Pour into a casserole pan and bake until lightly brown on top – about 20-25 minutes.

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Photo by Brie Williams

Deceptively simple to make, Hominy Grill chef/owner Robert Stehling admits he “stole” the recipe from a restaurant he worked for in New York before opening his nationally lauded restaurant here in Charleston. “It was a big seller there, so I brought it along,” he jokes.

Hominy Grill Chocolate Pudding

Serves 6 (approximate)

- 8 ounces dark, Belgian bittersweet chocolate

- ½ cup sugar
- 6 egg yolks
- 4 cups heavy cream
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- ½ teaspoon salt

Chop chocolate, reserve in large bowl. Separately, whisk ¼ cup sugar into egg yolks. Mix the remaining sugar with cream and vanilla in a medium saucepan and bring to a boil. Pour a little hot cream into the bowl with egg yolks and whisk, then pour the remainder over the chocolate, stirring with a spatula until smooth. Add the egg mixture and salt and then strain into a pitcher. Refrigerate to cool.

Pour into 2/3 cup ramekins, place ramekins in a shallow baking pan half-filled with water (water bath) and cook at 300 degrees for about an hour. Chill for at least 3 hours before serving. To serve, top with a fat dollop of freshly whipped cream.

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Photo by Brie Williams

Sweet and Soulful Pork and Apple Stew

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Serves 6

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- 2 pounds Boston Butt pork shoulder, cut into 2-inch cubes
- Salt and fresh ground pepper to taste
- 1 teaspoon dried sage leaves
- 1 medium onion, peeled, halved and thinly sliced
- 2 celery stalks, cleaned and cut thinly
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 2 cups fresh apple cider
- 1 cup water or chicken stock
- 2 Winesap apples, peeled, cored and cut into ½-inch chunks
- 3 sprigs fresh rosemary bound with a string

In a large Dutch oven or Crock-Pot, heat the olive oil and butter over high heat until bubbling. Add the pork and sage and season generously with salt and pepper. Brown the pork well on all sides, stirring occasionally, until the meat is colored a deep, golden brown. Remove the meat from the pan and set aside. Reduce the heat to medium. Add the onion, celery and garlic and cook until just translucent and softened (about 5 minutes), stirring occasionally.

Return the browned pork to the pan. Dust with the flour. Stir to coat and cook through about 3 minutes. Add the cider to deglaze the brown bits from the bottom of the pan. Stir to release all of the browned edges from the pan. Add enough stock or water to cover by a little over half. Add the apples and rosemary. Bring to a boil and reduce to a very low

simmer over low heat. Cover loosely with a lid and cook until very tender and thickened, about 3-4 hours. Remove the rosemary bunch and taste to verify seasonings before serving.

Tip: Don't substitute processed cider for fresh. It just doesn't deliver the same results. If you'd like to add a last minute pungency-punch, stir in 2 tablespoons of Dijon mustard just before serving.

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Home at The Range with Holly

Braising has many advantages, perhaps the most pressing being its simplicity and its frugality. The technique when braising, no matter what you're cooking, is always the same. You start with a cut of meat, usually from a large, tough muscle group, deglaze it with wine or stock, cover it about halfway up with additional liquid, and simmer it very, very slowly until the meat is fall-apart fork tender.

Vegetables and seasonings are added along the way, and the house is infused with heartwarming aromas that will remind you to stir gently with love as the day wears on. As an added bonus, preparing a big pot of braised meat (vegetables can also be used) is usually extremely cost-efficient because the cuts commonly prepared this way – shoulder, rump roasts, short ribs, bottom round, chuck eye roasts, pot roasts, legs, and to a lesser extent, shanks – cost significantly less than their exclusive tenderloin and ribeye cousin cuts.

You can't beat that! Whether prepared on the stove or in the oven in an enamel-lined cast iron pot like my trusty Le Creuset Dutch Oven or in a Crock-Pot, you simply can't top braised dishes as the ultimate winter comfort food, especially if you serve them with comfort food staple sides like mashed potatoes or good ole' Southern-style grits. Both go exceptionally well with the recipe below.



Photo by Brie Williams

Nirlep Lamb Saag

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Serves 6

For the greens:

- 6 cups fresh mustard greens, cleaned and tough stems removed
- 6 cups fresh spinach, cleaned and tough stems removed
- 4 cups water
- 1 jalapeno pepper, finely chopped
- Salt to taste

For the lamb:

- 5 tablespoons vegetable oil

- 4 teaspoons fresh ginger, peeled and finely chopped
- 2 tablespoons cumin seed
- 2 cups onions, peeled, halved and finely sliced
- 4 cloves garlic
- 2 pods green cardamom
- 2 tablespoons coriander powder
- 1 tablespoon meat masala (available at Nirlep or specialty shops)
- 1 tablespoon garm masala (available at Nirlep or specialty shops)
- 1 tablespoon cumin powder
- 1½ pounds boneless lamb shoulder cut into 1-inch cubes
- 4 tablespoons plain yogurt
- 1 teaspoon ground turmeric
- 1 teaspoon salt

For the greens, in a large pot, combine greens, spinach, water, jalapeno and salt. Bring to a boil, reduce to a simmer. Stir and cook until the water has cooked off completely. Season and adjust to taste.

For the lamb, in a large pot, heat the oil over medium-high heat. Add the ginger, cumin seed, onions, garlic, cardamom, coriander powder, meat masala, garm masala, and cumin powder. Stir and heat through to release the flavors of the spices and soften the onion and garlic. Add the lamb and the yogurt; stir to brown, about 5 minutes. Reduce the heat to low, cover and cook for about 25 minutes, stirring every 5 minutes. Add turmeric and additional salt if needed. To finish, stir lamb into the prepared spinach and greens and heat through. If desired, add ½ cup whole cream. Serve over rice.

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