

DINNER FOR TWO

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In the 1949 movie, “A Letter to Three Wives,” the character played by Connie Gilchrist says to the character played by Thelma Ritter: “Can’t we have some peace in this house, even on New Year’s Eve?” To which Ritter’s character replies: You got it mixed up with Christmas. New Year’s Eve is when people go back to killing each other.”

This may explain some of the rotten New Year’s in my past. At its best, it tends to feel forced, a night of revelry which, like the senior prom, can’t really fulfill its own promise of “fun.”

But it doesn’t explain some of my BEST New Year’s Eves. These were spent in the company of just one other person. In grade school, my “best friend” Judy and I would sleep over at each other’s houses and stay away past midnight to watch Guy Lombardo. As a young adult, my friend Mary and I would get together for dinner. Now married, my husband and I make a point of spending New Year’s at home.

But that doesn’t mean the evening can’t involve celebration. With Judy, our “treats” were M & Ms and Coca Cola; Mary and I made oyster stew and spinach salad; and my husband and I often opt for shrimp or salmon and champagne. Dinner “a deux” can be as elaborate or as simple as you choose, but it is almost always more satisfying than a rowdy cocktail bash.

The place to start planning is “**Two for Tonight: Pure Romance from L’Auberge Chez Francois,**” by **Jacques E. Haeringer (Bartleby Press, 2004)**. Haeringer is the chef at the auberge, a country inn in Great Falls, VA known for its romantic setting and fine food.

Below is a recipe for crabmeat in potato crust that will make you feel like a professional chef. Serve it as an appetizer (with a steak or lamb chops as the main course) or double the recipe and serve it as the entree for a late-night supper with a simple salad of mixed greens and vinaigrette. The espresso mousse can be made ahead and is a perfect ending to the meal.

“Love begins in the kitchen!” is the phrase with which Haeringer autographs his books. It’s not a bad place to start. And New Year’s Eve is just the time to begin.



Seasoned crabmeat in a thin potato crust makes for an elegant New Year’s Eve supper for two.

Photo credit: Photograph by Dean Ray for “Two for Tonight: Pure Romance from L’Auberge Chez Francois,” by Jacques E. Haeringer (Bartleby Press, 2004)

CRABMEAT IN A POTATO CRUST

For the crab:

6 ounces jumbo lump crabmeat (see note)
2 tablespoons unsalted butter
1 teaspoon finely minced shallots
1/2 teaspoon finely chopped dill
1/2 teaspoon lemon juice
sea salt and freshly ground pepper

For the crust (see note):

1 large Russet potato, peeled
1/3 cup extra-virgin olive oil
sea salt and freshly ground pepper

For the coulis (puree):

1 large red or yellow bell pepper (see note)
1/2 teaspoon olive oil
sea salt and freshly ground pepper

Prepare the crabmeat: Carefully remove any pieces of shell. Melt the butter in a small sauté pan. When it begins to brown, add the shallots, cook a few seconds, then add the crabmeat and a pinch of salt and pepper. Toss gently and add the dill and lemon juice. Set aside and cool.

Prepare the crust: Preheat the oven to 375 degrees. Lightly coat the bottom of a cookie sheet with some of the olive oil. Line a plate with paper towels.

Using a very sharp knife or vegetable slicer, cut 8 to 10 paper-thin lengthwise slices of potato. Reserve the remaining potato for another use. Place the slices on the prepared cookie sheet and brush them generously with the olive oil, leaving a spoonful for oiling the ramekins.

Bake in the preheated oven for 3 to 4 minutes, until the slices are translucent. Using a spatula, carefully transfer the potato slices onto the paper towels to drain. Season with salt and pepper and set aside. Set the oiled baking sheet aside as well, you will use it again. Increase the oven heat to 400 degrees.

Brush two (6 ounces) ramekins with the remaining olive oil and line each with 4 or 5 of the potato slices. The slices must overlap and extend over the edge of the molds.

Fill each prepared ramekin with the seasoned crabmeat, and fold the potatoes over the top to make a closed crust. Bake for 10 minutes. Remove from the oven and invert the ramekins onto the oiled baking sheet. Bake for 8 to 10 more minutes, until golden brown.

Make the coulis: While the crabmeat is baking, coat the outside of the bell pepper lightly with oil and blacken the skin of the pepper all around by toasting it over an open gas flame, or passing it under a broiler, turning frequently. Dip the pepper in a small bowl of cold water to loosen the skin, and peel the skin off. Cut the pepper in half and remove the stems and seeds. Place the pepper in a blender or food processor and puree. Season with salt and pepper and refrigerate.

To serve: Using a spatula, transfer the inverted ramekins from the baking sheet to the serving plate. Remove the ramekins. Drizzle the coulis around the plate and serve warm.

Note: I could not find “jumbo” lump crabmeat and just used the “lump crabmeat” sold in a plastic deli container at the fish counter of the supermarket. If you don’t want to make the potato crust (which is actually quite easy), thaw a few sheets of frozen, packaged phyllo dough, cut it into pieces large enough to line and overlap the ramekins, brush each sheet with melted butter and use to make a crust. Bake as directed. You can also use a jar of roasted red peppers, drained, for the coulis, instead of roasting your own bell peppers.

Yield: 2 appetizer servings

Recipe from “Two For Tonight: Pure Romance from L’Auberge Chez Francois,” by Jacques E. Haeringer (Bartleby Press, 2004)

ESPRESSO MOUSSE

1/2 cup freshly brewed espresso coffee (see note)
1 and 1/2 tablespoons honey
1/2 teaspoon unflavored gelatin
1 tablespoon water
pinch of salt
1 cup heavy whipping cream
pinch of cinnamon or cocoa powder (optional)

Place the espresso in a small saucepan, place over high heat, bring to a lively simmer and cook for about 5 minutes, or until it is reduced to 1/3 cup to concentrate the flavor. Allow to cool and refrigerate until chilled.

Place the honey, gelatin, water and salt in a small mixing bowl or the top of a double boiler. Allow the gelatin to soften for 5 minutes and set the bowl or pan over a pot of simmering water. Heat for 1 to 2 minutes until the gelatin melts. Whisk thoroughly. Remove from heat and add the reduced espresso and mix completely. Cover and refrigerate to chill.

Whip the heavy cream in a medium bowl and, using a rubber spatula, fold into the chilled espresso mixture. Pipe or spoon the mousse into large wine glasses, dessert dishes or coffee cups. Cover loosely and chill up to several hours. Top the mousse with a pinch of cinnamon or cocoa powder, if desired.

Note: You don’t need a fancy machine to make espresso: stovetop espresso makers are inexpensive, and often sold in supermarkets. If you don’t have one, use 2 cups regular brewed coffee and simmer it until reduced to 1/3 cup. Decaffeinated coffee may also be substituted.

Yield: 2 large or 4 small servings

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