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FOOD

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Sweet and savory holiday favorites

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With Christmas just 18 days away, it's time for less talk and more action! Here is a recipe packed issue sure to inspire you to create a toothsome treat that family and friends will request year after year. This versatile collection has something for everyone, for any time of day or evening. So without further ado, let's get started!

Christmas Brunch Casserole

This is the classic Christmas breakfast casserole with the addition of a healthy dose of vegetables. The secret is sauteing the vegetables before adding them to the dish; simply omit any veggies that your gang dislikes. Brunch casserole is a meal in itself, but you can easily dress it up with a simple side of fresh fruit.

1 pound bulk breakfast sausage, mild or spicy
1 medium onion
2 medium tomatoes
8 ounces white mushrooms
1 medium green pepper
6 slices bread, in bite sized pieces
6 eggs, beaten
2 cups milk
1 teaspoon dried mustard
Salt and pepper, optional
1 8-ounce bag shredded mild Cheddar

Spray a 9x13-inch baking pan or large casserole dish with non-stick spray.

In a skillet, brown the sausage and set aside to cool. Drain excess fat from skillet. Dice all of the vegetables into bite sized pieces and saute until tender and the excess juice has evaporated. Let the vegetables cool to room temperature.

Layer the bread evenly in the baking dish. Next, layer the sausage, vegetables and then the cheese over the bread. Whisk together the eggs, milk, dried mustard, salt and pepper, if using. Pour the egg mixture over the casserole evenly; press down gently with a spoon or spatula to ensure the mixture is fully covering the bread. Cover and refrigerate overnight.

Next morning, preheat oven to 350 degrees; uncover the casserole and bake for about 1 hour to 1 hour and 10 minutes, or until the eggs are completely set and the casserole is slightly browned. Serves 8-10.

Hearty Sombrero Snacks

I originally made these loaded tortilla bites with homemade Spanish rice. Here, I've adapted it to use a boxed mix for an easily prepared appetizer that works for casual holiday gatherings, parties, or even Monday night football in front of the telly.

1 lb ground turkey or lean beef
1 6.8-ounce box Spanish rice flavored vermicelli-rice mix
1 14.5-ounce can stewed tomatoes
2 cups water
1 10-ounce bag scoop shaped tortilla chips
1 1/2 cups shredded Colby or Monterey Jack cheese
1 8-ounce carton sour cream or plain Greek yogurt
Sliced black olives, jalapeno peppers, etc. for topping

Brown the meat in a large skillet and drain, if necessary. Add the stewed tomatoes and mash with a potato masher or other utensil to break the meat and tomatoes into small bits. Add the rice mix and water; bring to a boil then reduce heat and simmer 15-20 minutes or until rice is tender and liquid is absorbed.

For each appetizer, scoop a teaspoon of the rice mix into a tortilla chip, then top with the shredded cheese and a dab (1/2 teaspoon) of sour cream. Add other toppings if you wish.

Mini-Caprese Skewers

1 8-ounce package fresh mozzarella pearls
1/2 cup bottled Italian or Greek vinaigrette dressing
1 pint cherry tomatoes
1 bunch fresh basil
Toothpicks

Place the mozzarella pearls in a bowl; pour the bottled dressing over them and stir to coat. Refrigerate at least 3 hours or up to a day ahead. To assemble the appetizers, cut each cherry tomato in half and place 1 half on a toothpick. Next, place a mozzarella pearl on the pick and then a leaf of basil (half a leaf if they are large). Finally, top with the other half of the cherry tomato. Arrange appetizers on a platter; drizzle with a bit of extra dressing, if desired. About 20 servings, as an appetizer.



Laura Hunt Angel photo

Pop veggie packed Christmas Brunch Casserole in the oven and you can spend Christmas morning with family and friends instead of bustling in the kitchen.



Laura Hunt Angel photo

Elegant Hungarian Nut Pastries will add a touch of European glamor to your next gathering.



Laura Hunt Angel photo

These festive little two bite snacks satisfy even the keenest winter appetites.

Hungarian Nut Pastry

I discovered this delectable pastry about 25 years ago when hubby Chuck was stationed — of all places — in Cleveland, Ohio. While living there, we made regular trips to the West Side Market, a huge, European-style exchange with hundreds of vendors selling everything from fresh produce to goats' heads. Among the cheese, bread and meat vendors, I found an elderly Hungarian man selling these wonderful hazelnut pastries, which are a variation on frangipane, an almond pastry cream named in honor of the 15th century Roman botanist, Mutio Frangipani. I happened to find some hazelnuts on a recent

trip, and immediately thought of these pastries. If you can't find hazelnuts, you can obviously use almonds and probably most other types of nuts. The recipe is somewhat complicated but well worth it.

For the pastry:

Spray a 9x13-inch baking pan with non-stick spray.
2 1/2 cups all purpose flour
1/3 cup powdered sugar
1 cup (2 sticks) cold butter, cubed
2 eggs, beaten
A few tablespoons milk, if necessary

For the lightest pastry, you need to sift the dry ingredients, but you can still make this pastry without doing this step. Thoroughly combine the flour and powdered sugar. Add the cold butter cubes and quickly work them into the flour with your

hands in a rubbing motion, until the dough resembles coarse crumbs. Add the eggs and work the dough into a ball. Add a little milk, if necessary, but do not overwork the dough or it will become tough and rubbery. Wrap the pastry in plastic wrap and chill for at least a half hour, then press it into the prepared baking pan and bake at 375 degrees for about 20 minutes, or just until done but not browned.

For the filling:

1 cup apricot jam or spread
3 cups hazelnuts (or unsalted blanched almonds)
1/4 cup butter, melted
1 1/3 cups sugar
4 eggs
2 teaspoons vanilla
1/2 teaspoon salt
6-ounce milk chocolate chips

Warm the apricot jam and spread evenly over the freshly baked pastry; preheat oven to 375 degrees. In a

food processor, grind the nuts until fine; combine the nuts with the remaining ingredients EXCEPT the chocolate chips, and spread over the apricot coated crust. Bake about 35 minutes, or until the filling is set and lightly browned. Cool completely.

When cooled, cut the pastry into 6 large squares, then cut diagonally through the squares to create 12 triangles. Cut diagonally again the opposite way to make 24 triangles. Melt the chocolate chips and drizzle over the tops; place each pastry on waxed paper until chocolate is set. Makes 24 pastries.

Aunt Betty's Blonde Brownies

Most recipes for blondies are made with white or butterscotch chips, but this one is more like a chocolate chip cookie bar. I lost this recipe many years ago, but recently discovered that it is actually an old recipe from the Nestle company. Great with or without the pecans, this large batch bar cookie will become a family favorite.

3 1/2 cups brown sugar
1 1/2 cups margarine, softened
6 eggs, slightly beaten
2 teaspoons vanilla
4 1/2 cups all purpose flour
5 teaspoons baking powder
1 teaspoon salt
1 2-ounce bag semi-sweet chocolate chips
2 cups chopped pecans (optional)

Preheat oven to 350 degrees; grease or spray 2 9x13-inch baking pans.

In a large bowl, cream the brown sugar and butter. Add the eggs and vanilla and blend well. In a separate bowl, combine the flour, baking powder and salt. Add the flour to the creamed mixture half at a time, mixing well with each addition. Stir in the chocolate chips and nuts.

Evenly divide the mixture between the 2 prepared pans. Bake at 350 degrees for about 40 minutes. I get around 50 cookies per batch but yield varies depending on how large a cookie you'd like.