

Sampling Serbia’s version of pizza

By Monica Obradovic
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

ST. LOUIS — For many Balkan women, making the dish is like a reflex. Its technique gets passed down from generation to generation. For my baba, gibanica is a cheese and phyllo-dough creation she lovingly feeds (overfeeds?) her family. For Loryn Nalic of Balkan Treat Box, the same dish is called sirnica, one of the first Balkan recipes she learned. For me, it’s the cheese-filled wonder I’d

always hoped to learn how to make, partly as a way of carrying on my family’s heritage, partly because it’s just so delicious.

Even though my name might seem foreign to some (it’s O-BRAD-o-vic, and it’s Serbian), the food that derives from the culture of it might not. St. Louis has quickly become a haven for Balkan cuisine. With the influx of immigrants over the past 20 years, Balkan foods and restaurants such as the acclaimed Balkan Treat Box

have become a part of St. Louis food culture.

My dad’s family came to the U.S. when he was 8. He later married my Italian mother. Unfortunately, not many of my dad’s Serbian traditions were handed down to my two brothers and me. We don’t speak Serbian (except for curse words — thanks, Uncle Dennis), we don’t go to Serbian church, and we definitely don’t roast a whole pig on a spit in our front yard. But what we do have is gibanica.

Gibanica is to Serbs what pizza is for Americans. It’s a simple dish consisting mostly of eggs, cheese and oil sandwiched between layers of phyllo dough. People eat it for breakfast, lunch, dinner, a snack, to fix hangovers.

Every time my family goes to visit my Serbian grandmother, or Baba, we joke how the whole neighborhood smells like Serbian food. No matter how much my father stresses that “we’re just stopping by,” Baba will

make enough food to feed a small village. There’s never enough gibanica, though.

It’s the first food my family eats at gatherings, and it’s the first food to disappear.

Everything about it evokes nostalgia in me: the gooey, cheesy texture; the crunch of the outside layers. Besides the calories, you can’t go wrong with gibanica.

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CRAVINGS

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Finally, if there were one food that is always likely to cause a snaccident at my house, it is a classic French onion dip. I am powerless against its salty, oniony pull, ideally delivered on a Lays wavy chip, but also on any raw vegetable or even just a spoon. As such, I almost always make a double or triple batch when entertaining, in fear of running out, and then have leftovers calling to me from the fridge.

But if you are facing down a morning-after, and have a half-tub of dip still hanging about? French onion dip pancakes are the perfect thing to turn your day around. It might sound odd, but caramelized onions are naturally sweet, and sour cream brings a similar tang as buttermilk, so these pancakes are actually a perfect blend of sweet and sour and shockingly great with maple syrup. If you have kids, they will love the weird factor. You can also make little silver-dollar sized ones and serve as an appetizer — with more dip!

So, the next time a craving hits, at 4:20 or any other time of day, think a little outside the bag or bucket, and give one of these a try.

DORITOS-STYLE POPOVERS

Prep: 15 minutes
Rest: 1 hour
Bake: 65-70 minutes
Makes: 6 large or 12 small

You can make the popovers a day or two ahead. To reheat, place them on a wire rack over a baking sheet and bake in a 400-degree oven for 6-8 minutes until hot and crisp. The recipe also doubles fine if you are feeding a crowd. If you are a bigger fan of Cool Ranch Doritos than Original, you can brush the tops of the hot popovers with a light coating of melted butter and sprinkle with ranch powder, or serve with a ranch butter made by mixing a packet of ranch dressing powder into a stick of softened unsalted butter. Look for tomato powder and cheddar cheese powder at some spice shops and online.

3 large eggs
2 cups milk, 2% or whole milk (just not skim)
3 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted, cooled slightly
1½ cups all-purpose flour
2 tablespoons cheddar cheese powder
1 tablespoon tomato powder
1 tablespoon chili powder
1 teaspoon garlic powder
1 teaspoon kosher salt
½ teaspoon onion powder
½ teaspoon ground black pepper
Nonhydrogenated vegetable shortening

1. Whisk eggs until light and foamy in a medium bowl. Slowly whisk in milk and butter until incorporated.

2. Combine flour, cheese powder and seasonings in a large bowl. Whisk the milk mixture into the flour mixture until no lumps remain. Transfer batter to a large measuring cup, cover with plastic and let rest at room temperature, 1 hour. (Alternatively, batter can be refrigerated for 1 day. Bring fully to room temperature be-



Abel Uribe/ChicagoTribune-TNS

Fried chicken scones capture the taste of traditional fried chicken.

fore proceeding with baking, at least 4 hours.)

3. Heat oven to 450 with the rack in the lower-middle. Generously smear shortening on the inside of a 6-cups large or 12-cups small popover pan; lightly dust the cups with flour, shaking and tapping to remove any excess. If you don’t have a popover pan, you can use a muffin tin; they just won’t “pop” quite as tall, but they will still be delicious.

4. Whisk the batter vigorously to make sure it is fully combined; pour into popover pan, filling each cup to about ½ inch from the top. (Don’t overfill; you might have a small amount of batter left over.) Bake without opening the oven door until fairly well popped and just beginning to brown, 20-25 minutes, but start checking at 15 minutes. Decrease the oven temperature to 300 degrees without opening the oven door; bake until popovers are golden brown all over, 35 to 40 minutes more.

5. Open the oven door; using a small skewer or the tip of a paring knife, poke a small hole in the top of each popover. Turn the pan if they are not coloring evenly. Close the door; bake until deep golden brown, 5-10 minutes longer. Remove from the oven; rest the popover pan on a wire rack. Poke each popover again with a skewer or knife; let cool, 2-3 minutes. Turn out popovers. Serve hot with the spread or filling of your choice.

Nutrition information per serving (for 6 popovers): 314 calories, 11 g fat, 6 g saturated fat, 117 mg cholesterol, 40 g carbohydrates, 5 g sugar, 13 g protein, 571 mg sodium, 2 g fiber

FRIED CHICKEN SCONES

Prep: 40 minutes
Bake: 12-15 minutes
Makes: 8 scones

1½ cups flour
3 tablespoons chicken bouillon powder (or 9 bouillon cubes, finely ground)
1 tablespoon baking powder
1 teaspoon poultry seasoning
1 teaspoon minced fresh thyme leaves
½ teaspoon ground black pepper
¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper
½ cup chopped crispy chicken skin (optional, see note)

1 cup heavy cream
2 tablespoons rendered chicken fat, melted, cooled

1. Heat oven to 375 degrees; line a baking sheet with parchment paper. In a large mixing bowl, whisk flour, bouillon powder, baking powder, poultry seasoning, thyme, black pepper and cayenne together. Stir in the crispy chicken skin, if using. Make a well in the dry mixture; pour in the cream and melted chicken fat. Using your fingers held in a stiff rakelike shape, blend until barely combined. Knead just enough to have a cohesive, soft dough. Overmixing will yield tough scones.

2. Place dough on a lightly floured surface; pat into a 7-inch round, about 1-inch thick. Cut into 8 wedges (triangles). Place them 1 inch apart on the baking sheet.

3. Bake until golden, 12 to 15 minutes. Transfer scones to a cooling rack. Serve hot with honey, butter and hot sauce.

Or if you want to get meta, serve with fried chicken.

Note: To make crispy chicken skin, spread pieces of chicken skin out flat between two sheets of parchment paper; place between two baking sheets. Bake in a 400-degree oven until deeply golden and completely crispy, 15-25 minutes. Skin should shatter and break instead of bend. Cool completely; chop into pieces and store covered in the fridge for up to a week. If needed, re-crisp in a hot skillet. (Save the chicken fat to use in the scones batter.)

Nutrition information per serving (not including optional chicken skin): 243 calories, 15 g fat, 7 g saturated fat, 36 mg cholesterol, 24 g carbohydrates, 1 g sugar, 3 g protein, 1,170 mg sodium, 1 g fiber

FRENCH ONION PANCAKES

Prep: 15 minutes
Rest: 30 minutes
Cook: 3 to 4 minutes per batch
Makes: 12 large or 24 small pancakes

2 packets (2 ounces each) French onion soup mix
1 cup sour cream
3 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted, cooled slightly
2 cups flour

1 tablespoon sugar
2 ½ teaspoons baking powder
½ teaspoon baking soda
½ teaspoon kosher salt
1 cup buttermilk
2 large eggs, beaten
Vegetable oil
Butter, maple syrup, hot sauce

1. Mix the French onion soup mix into the sour cream until well combined.

1. In a large bowl, whisk all the dry ingredients together until well mixed. Whisk the sour cream mixture, buttermilk and eggs together in a small bowl. Pour the wet mixture into the dry ingredients; stir until almost combined, but there are still some dry spots. Gently mix in the melted butter until just combined; you should still have some lumps, but not see any

streaks of dry flour. Set aside the batter to rest at room temp for at least 30 minutes. Heat oven to 200.

2. Heat a griddle or nonstick skillet over medium high heat. When hot enough for a drop of water to skitter across the surface and evaporate, brush a thin layer of oil on the surface. Drop ½-cup scoops for large cakes or ¼-cup scoops for small on the skillet, leaving plenty of room for them to spread. I usually coax them along with the back of the scoop, since the thick batter will only spread so far on its own. Cook until plenty of bubbles appear on the tops of the pancakes and the edges look dry, about 2 minutes. Flip pancakes over. Don’t press down! (These are extra fluffy cakes; if you press on them, they will get rubbery.) Cook on the second side until golden brown and cooked through, 1 to 2 minutes.

3. Transfer pancakes to a rack over a baking sheet; hold in the warm oven while you make the rest. Serve hot with butter, maple syrup and/or hot sauce.

Nutrition information per pancake (for 24 pancakes): 91 calories, 4 g fat, 2 g saturated fat, 26 mg cholesterol, 11 g carbohydrates, 1 g sugar, 3 g protein, 287 mg sodium, 0 g fiber

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