



Hillary Levin-St. Louis Post Dispatch/TNS

Black and White Bean Salsa appetizers.

By DANIEL NEMAN
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

It happens all the time: We go to a nice restaurant and begin our meal with an appetizer that is simply amazing.

And then the rest of the meal fails to live up to it.

Maybe chefs try harder with appetizers. Maybe appetizers are where restaurants feel free to experiment with new ideas. Maybe restaurants concentrate on appetizers because they bring in more profit, relative to cost, than entrées.

Or maybe appetizers just catch us diners unaware. They are usually the first thing we eat at a restaurant, so we are impressed by how good they are. While the other dishes may be just as well-crafted, they don't hit us with that same element of surprise.

Personally, I think appetizers are just better than entrées. It's a simple, irrefutable fact, like breakfast is better than dinner.

To test my theory, I made five appetizers that span the spectrum from hors d'oeuvre to first course. And I was right. They are better than entrées.

The first one actually could be served in larger portions as a main course, but the restaurant where I first encountered it — the legendary the Frog and the

Redneck in Richmond, Virginia — made it an appetizer. It's all a matter of perspective.

I'm calling it grits risotto, because it cooks grits the same way you'd cook risotto. And while there are subtle differences between grits and cornmeal, basically what you are doing is making polenta.

In fact, that's what I did; I used cornmeal instead of grits because it's what I had on hand. To this, I added sausage and a healthy amount of shiitake mushrooms sautéed with garlic and shallots, and finished with chicken stock and butter and parmesan cheese.

It takes some effort. It's worth it. Oh, how it's worth it.

On the other hand, grapes rolled in goat cheese was the easiest app I made, and perhaps the most intriguing.

You take seedless grapes and coat them in a thin layer of soft goat cheese, which you then roll in a mixture of toasted walnuts and chopped chives.

That's all there is to it, but its simplicity belies its well-balanced and complex flavors. The sweet pop of the grape is contrasted with the creamy tang of the cheese, which is mollified by the earthy nuts and the soft bite of the chives.

Next up was a salsa, but one without tomatoes.

This one begins with a mixture of black beans and white beans (actually Great Northern). It gains momentum with chopped red bell pepper and red onion, is enlivened with lime juice and garlic and gets a nice kick from a jalapeño. Oregano, chili powder and cumin give it the spice it craves.

To be honest, I've seen prettier dishes. Called black and white bean salsa, the name promises a more appetizing appearance than it delivers. But the taste?

After your first bite, preferably on a tortilla chip, you think, "This isn't bad at all." After your second bite, you think, "This is quite good." After your third bite, you think, "Yes, I am definitely enjoying this."

And after your 96th bite, you think, "Who ate all the salsa and chips? Where did it go?" And you stand there feeling guilty, but inexplicably happy, when you realize what just happened.

Marinated mushrooms are always popular as an appetizer because they manage to be casual and elegant at the same time.

The ones I made lean toward the elegant because they are marinated in a liquid that is largely made up of wine. In other words, don't use a bad wine. It doesn't have to be especially good, but the chefs' rule — don't cook with

wine that you wouldn't drink — is especially important here.

I don't want to give the wrong impression: The mushrooms aren't marinated in wine alone. The mixture also has garlic, thyme, bay leaf, tomato paste and coriander seed in it — it's so much better if you toast your own — and it is finished with olive oil, lemon juice and cilantro.

My last appetizer was equally appetizing: herbed quesadillas. Here we have four elements that sing together in perfect harmony.

It begins with a relatively bland cheese, mozzarella, so it can combine with fresh spices (oregano, marjoram) without overpowering them. This creamy base contrasts with strips of grilled red pepper and red onion.

And you don't even have to grill them, though you can if you want. I didn't. I charred my pepper over the gas flame on my stove, which creates a smoky grilled taste without a grill. And I did the same with my red onion by cutting it into thick slices, like onion rings, and broiling it.

The fourth element is the most important but also the most easily overlooked: the tortilla. When lightly browned and stuffed with melted cheese and savory vegetables, a good tortilla

makes the rest of your meal pale in comparison.

GRITS RISOTTO

Yield: 8 to 10 servings

1 cup stone-ground grits, polenta or coarse cornmeal
4 cups plus 2 tablespoons chicken, fish, veal or vegetable stock, divided

3 tablespoons butter, divided (2 tablespoons cut into small cubes)

Salt, to taste

3 tablespoons olive oil

1 pound fresh shiitake mushrooms

Black pepper, to taste

2 cloves garlic, peeled and minced
2 small shallots or 1 large shallot, peeled and finely diced

12 ounces cooked, high-quality sausage, cut into cubes, see note

6 ounces Parmesan cheese, see note

Note: This recipe makes a restaurant-quality dish, complete with all the calories. To lower the calorie count a bit, use 10 ounces of sausage and 4 ounces of cheese.

1. Heat the grits or cornmeal and 4 cups of the stock in a medium or large pot over medium-high heat. Bring to a gentle simmer and cook, stirring frequently, until all the liquid has been absorbed and the cornmeal is soft, 20 to 35 minutes. Stir in 1 tablespoon of the butter and add salt, if necessary.

2. Meanwhile, remove stems from the mushrooms and discard. Lightly brush any dirt off mushrooms and cut caps into 1/8-inch

slices.

3. Heat a large, heavy pan, preferably cast iron, until it is very hot. Add oil. Add mushrooms and sauté for 30 seconds, sprinkling with salt and pepper to taste while cooking. Add garlic and shallots, but keep stirring so they do not color or burn. After 1 minute, remove from heat and add the remaining 2 tablespoons of stock to stop the cooking. Add the remaining 2 tablespoons of cubed butter and stir constantly until it is melted and thoroughly coats the mushroom mix.

4. Mix the grits or cornmeal, sausage, shiitakes and 3 ounces of the cheese. Spoon onto plates and top with the remaining cheese.

Per serving (based on 8): 383 calories; 29 g fat; 12 g saturated fat; 59 mg cholesterol; 16 g protein; 14 g carbohydrate; 1 g sugar; 1 g fiber; 1,189 mg sodium; 280 mg calcium

Adapted from "The Frog and the Redneck Cookbook" by Jimmy Snead

GRAPES ROLLED IN GOAT CHEESE

Yield: 8 servings

4 ounces goat cheese, room temperature

24 red or green seedless grapes, rinsed and patted dry

1/3 cup finely chopped toasted walnuts

1/4 cup minced chives

Note: These may be prepared up to 6 hours in advance.

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Tracking down a La Grande tycoon

Jay Brooks is responsible for the historic building at 1202 Adams Ave.

By GINNY MAMMEN
For EO Media Group

Crossing Adams Avenue to the south side of the street, the next building to consider is located at 1202 Adams on the southeast corner of Adams and Depot in La Grande. This is currently the office of C B Consolidated.

According to the National Register of Historic Places, the building is known as the J. Brooks Building and was constructed in 1900. The Register also implies that the building was constructed for the Farmers' & Traders' National Bank by saying "the building was occupied by Farmers' & Traders' National Bank."

Research, however, has clouded this construction date, creating an interesting mystery. The National Register also has that "early businesses on this site included a 'Drug/General-Store.'" In 1886 there was a vicious fire that destroyed six blocks of downtown La Grande. The building previously at this location, most likely a wooden one, was destroyed. However, the 1893 Sanborn map indicates there was a bank, sharing

the building with a drug store, at that site. It is possible, but it does not seem logical, that another structure would have been built after the 1886 fire and then replaced in 1900.

What is known is that the current building at 1202 Adams was originally constructed for the Farmers' & Traders' Bank by Jay Brooks, who was a wealthy La Grande businessman and one of the original stakeholders as well as vice president of the bank. The bank was organized in 1890 with a capital of \$60,000. This supports the information leading to the "bank" located on the 1893 Sanborn map as being the Farmers' & Traders'. The name was later changed to United States National Bank.

The current structure with a "bank appearance" has been including a number of times modeled the construction of an addition to expand toward the alley as well as facade facelifts. The building over the years has housed a variety of businesses such as Burgess Menswear, I J Gems, and Mt. Emily Ale House.

The name J. Brooks in the National Register did

not provide a strong clue as to just who this person was. Looking up a name with only an initial and no idea of his date of birth is like looking for a needle in a haystack. I was frustrated but determined, and as more and more clues came to light a person finally emerged who had a fascinating story to share.

J. Brooks was born Jay Brooks in April 1854 in New York. He married his wife, Leah, in 1883 and two years later while living in California their son Milton was born. Jay was a dry goods merchant. In 1893 Jay Brooks was listed in the La Grande City Directory under General Merchandise on Adams Avenue near Depot.

Upon further searching I located something very interesting in La Grande by Bob Bull. It seems that Jay Brooks had arrived in the La Grande area possibly eight to 10 years before 1893 and had set up his dry goods and clothing store, not on the corner of Adams and Depot but "near" there. In fact it was located in the building next door to the corner building. Then there was a surprise. Bull



Fred Hill Collection

reported that it was "in the rear of Jay Brooks' general store that the fire of 1886 was started that spread throughout the downtown."

Tycoon Jay Brooks owned buildings and businesses in Boise, Idaho, Roseburg, and Santa Rosa, California, as well as La Grande. In La Grande he was active in the Commercial Club and with the establishment of the Sugar Factory as well as his own Jay Brooks clothing and dry goods store.

On December 12, 1901, the Idaho Daily Statesman reported that Jay Brooks sold a piece of property with a one-story building on it for "\$540 a front foot, or

\$13,500 for the 25 feet. This is the highest price ever paid for property in this city." (Today's equivalent — \$17,101.80 a front foot.)

In 1902 the Brooks family moved back to California and the clothing and dry good store was liquidated. N.K. West bought out much of the stock from both the La Grande store and the Boise store. In March of 1903 E Andross and Co., undertakers and furniture dealers, moved into the Jay Brooks building next to the bank. Jay Brooks died on April 2, 1942, at age 88.

It is interesting to note that in 1897, when men such as Jay Brooks, J. M. Berry,

J. D. McKennon, John Anthony, W. H. Bohnenkamp, Paul Buzzinni and J. E. Foley (all businessmen who were active in the late 1880s and early 1900s) got together to support the Sugar Factory, The Observer made the comment "For a change our business men are working in perfect harmony and if their efforts to secure the factory is crowned with success they will see the results of pulling together and it will be easier to accomplish the next undertaking."

What was relevant in 1897 still sounds like good advice for today. Keep looking up! Enjoy!