

Easy investments pay huge dividends of flavor

By DANIEL NEMAN

St. Louis Post-Dispatch

For dinner last night, I whipped up a simple little shrimp dish. And then I made it a simple little exceptional shrimp dish.

The basics were shrimp, white wine, onion, garlic, mushrooms and lemon juice, all cooked in a mixture of olive oil and butter.

The exception was preserved lemon.

Suddenly, an ordinary weeknight meal (OK, maybe not an ordinary weeknight meal) was elevated to Olympian heights. Each little piece of preserved lemon was like a mini hand grenade of bright flavor giving a special pop to the more subdued shrimp.

I could only make it because I had a fresh jar of preserved lemons in the fridge.

They were easy to make, and it didn't take much time at all. It cost me less than five bucks, all told — it's just lemons and salt — and now I have a game-changing condiment to add to seafood, chicken, vegetarian dishes and even red meat (in the right recipes) for the next six months to a year.

What I'm talking about here is what economists call ROI: Return on investment. A small culinary investment yields big culinary returns.

And it wasn't just the preserved lemons. When I said I sautéed the shrimp and other ingredients in a mixture of olive oil and butter, what I really meant was a mixture of olive oil and ghee. Ghee is butter with the milk solids removed, so you can get it quite hot — say, for stir-frying shrimp — without it burning.

It's easy to make. Simply melt butter gently and pour most of it into a jar. The milk solids are the white bits at the bottom; stop pouring before they go into



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Preserved lemons can exceed your expectations.

the jar as well.

It doesn't even have to be refrigerated, because the milk solids are the part that can spoil. It takes maybe five minutes to make, and the investment pays delicious dividends for months to come.

Two days before I made the shrimp, I made a dish of braised sirloin tips, which I served on basmati rice. Once again, the hearty braised beef was praiseworthy — I praised myself for making it — and notable.

And then I made it manifestly special with the addition of a single wedge of demi-glace.

I had made the demi-glace a couple of months earlier, keeping it in the freezer and parsimoniously

doling it out ever since, whenever I wanted to send a meal into the exosphere.

I am more frugal with my demi-glace because, frankly, the investment in both time and money is considerably higher than with preserved lemons or ghee. But the payoff is far greater, too.

Demi-glace is easy to make, but it consumes a lot of time. Basically, you roast veal bones and then simmer them slowly in a very large amount of water, along with a few aromatics for extra flavor. The next day — it's a two-day recipe — you simmer the liquid for more hours and hours until it has reduced and concentrated its flavor from about eight quarts or more all the way down to a quart and a half.

It's a quart and a half of pure gold. I cut mine into 12 wedges — it has so much natural gelatin in it that you can cut it once it cools — and freeze them until the time comes to take a dish that is already good and turn it into something truly spectacular.

It is the best return on investment that I know.

PRESERVED LEMONS

Yield: varies

Lemons (see note)
Salt, preferably coarse
1 bay leaf, optional
1/2 teaspoon coriander seeds, optional
1 dried chili, optional
1 cinnamon stick, optional
Note: Smaller lemons are best

for this recipe, and Meyer lemons, in season, are ideal. I fit 10 Meyer lemons into a 38-ounce jar.

1. Wash lemons. Cut off the stem, if attached. Slice lengthwise from the other end of the lemon, stopping about 1-inch from the bottom; then make another downward slice, so you've incised the lemon with an X shape.

2. Pack coarse salt into the lemon where you made the incisions. Don't be skippy with the salt: use about 1 tablespoon per lemon.

3. Put the salt-filled lemons in a clean, large glass jar with a tight-fitting lid. Add a few coriander seeds, a bay leaf, a dried chili and a cinnamon stick if you want, or a combination of any of them. Press the lemons very firmly in the jar to get the juices flowing. Cover and let stand overnight.

4. The next day do the same, pressing the lemons down, encouraging them to release more juice as they start to soften. Repeat for 2 to 3 days until the lemons are completely covered with liquid. If necessary, add freshly squeezed lemon juice to cover them completely.

5. Store for 1 month, until the preserved lemons are soft. At this point they are ready to be used. Use or keep preserved lemons in the refrigerator for at least 6 months. Rinse before using to remove excess salt.

6. To use, remove lemons from the liquid and rinse. Split in half and scrape out the pulp. Slice the lemon peels into thin strips or cut into small dices. You may wish to press the pulp through a sieve to obtain the juice, which can be used for flavoring as well. Discard the pulp.

— Recipe from David Lebovitz

DEMI-GLACE

Yield: 12 servings

10 pounds veal bones, or equal parts veal, beef and chicken bones
1 pound carrots, washed and unpeeled, cut into 2-inch pieces
1 1/2 pounds unpeeled onions, cut into 1-inch pieces
3 large ripe tomatoes, coarsely chopped

1 large leek, cut lengthwise in half
3 celery ribs, cut in pieces
2 bay leaves
1/2 teaspoon dried thyme
1/2 teaspoon black peppercorns
Note: Veal bones can be purchased from some butcher shops (grocery store butchers often cannot get them). They may need to be pre-ordered.

1. Preheat oven to 425 degrees. Place the pieces of bone in a large roasting pan and brown in the oven for 1 1/2 hours, turning once, halfway through. Add carrots and onions to the bones, and continue roasting 30 more minutes.

2. Using a slotted spoon, remove the bones and vegetables from the roasting pan and transfer to a large stock pot (at least 12 quarts). Pour out and discard the accumulated fat in the roasting pan. Add water to the roasting pan about 1/2-inch deep, bring to a boil and use a metal spatula to scrape up the brown bits from the bottom of the pan and melt the solidified juices.

3. Add this liquid to the stock pot and fill it with water. Slowly bring to a boil; then reduce heat to a low simmer with just a few bubbles breaking the surface at any time. If your heating element is too hot for a low simmer, move the stock pot so it only covers a part of the heating element. Simmer for 1 hour, using a strainer or spoon to remove the foam that rises to the surface.

4. Add the tomatoes, leeks, celery, bay leaves, thyme and peppercorns. Bring to a boil again, then reduce temperature to a low simmer. Simmer for a generous 10 hours. As the liquid evaporates, periodically add water to keep it at about the same level.

5. Using a chinoise or a fine-mesh sieve, strain out the bones and vegetables. Place the stock in a clean pot and boil down until it reduces to 1 1/2 quarts (6 cups) of liquid. Let cool, then pour into a bowl and refrigerate overnight.

6. Skim all fat off the top, then remove gelled demi-glace from bowl. Slice into 12 wedges (each will be 1/2 cup). Wrap each wedge with plastic wrap, place all in a sealable plastic bag and store in freezer for up to 1 year.

Making snacks — for dinner

By BEN MIMS

Los Angeles Times

Cooking a meal is great, but have you assembled a bunch of your favorite things on a plate and called that a meal instead? Of course you have, because everyone does this. (And I'm not talking about those over-the-top charcuterie boards or "adult Lunchables" that are fun to gawk at.) No one does it as masterfully as Lukas Volger, who takes compiling snacks for a meal to a high art. As a friend of Volger's, I've witnessed firsthand his lavish snack platters. They may seem casually thrown together but they're anything but.

Slices of meat, some cheese, a mustard or jam is there, sure, but so are delicately dressed vegetables, crunchy nut mixes or warm olive-marinated beans — Volger takes composing snack platters to a whole new level. So it's no surprise that he's written the book on the subject: "Snacks for Dinner" (Harper Wave, 2022). His book contains all his wisdom and experience for how to compose a winning platter, made with crunchy, fresh and nutritious snacks in mind, not just a pile of meat and cheese like those charcuterie boards.

Crudité's sit next to toasted bread, a lentil-car-

rot-date salad and fresh boiled eggs in one platter, while another pairs the raw crunchy veggies with fresh ricotta, fried chickpeas and bowls of gazpacho made with watermelon. Blanched spring asparagus, marinated in a mustard vinaigrette, are superb to keep in the fridge for when the snacking urge takes over. Set a few spears on a plate, add some cheese, toasted sourdough and a bowl of olives or beans, and you'll soon get the hang of Volger's brilliance.

ORANGE AND MUSTARD-MARINATED ASPARAGUS

Time: 30 minutes

Yields: Serves 4 to 6

By Lukas Volger

I remember what a revelation it was to my mom when she learned to cook asparagus for just 4 minutes. (She'd set a timer — the 4 minutes was sacrosanct.) As a kid, she dreaded seeing it on her plate because it was always cooked to stringy, pale-green mush. But when just tender, and not at all mushy, and vibrantly green, it's such a pleasing, juicy vegetable. Cooked this way, it's always been one of my favorites. This method of marinating is one I particularly like for super-fresh, springtime asparagus, but even in the off-season, it does wonders to make it interesting and delicious

when it's not exactly at its peak. You'll cook it immediately, shock in cold water, then combine with this zesty marinade. The hot, sweet mustard gives the marinade distinction — I love it with my Stovetop Maple-Ale Mustard (see recipe below) — but you can use Dijon or any other hot or horseradish mustard if that's what you've got on hand. — Lukas Volger

1 pound asparagus spears
1 orange
2 teaspoons sweet hot mustard, such as Stovetop Maple-Ale Mustard (see recipe below), or Dijon mustard
2 teaspoons fresh thyme leaves, or 1/2 teaspoon dried
1/4 teaspoon kosher salt
2 tablespoons olive oil

1. Remove the woody ends of the asparagus by bending them in half and letting the ends snap off. Compost the tough ends or reserve them for another use. Wash the asparagus thoroughly by swishing it around in a bowl of water — grit can often be trapped in the tips and little petals along the sides. Set aside the asparagus, rinse out the bowl and prepare an ice bath.

2. In a pot (or a saucepan that's wide enough for the asparagus to lie flat), add about a 1/2 inch of water and bring to a simmer. Fit the pot with a steamer insert, then add the asparagus and cook until just tender — 2 to 3 minutes for skinny spears and 3 to 5 minutes for larger ones. Avoid overcooking them. Transfer to the ice bath to halt the cooking, then drain and blot dry with a kitchen towel.

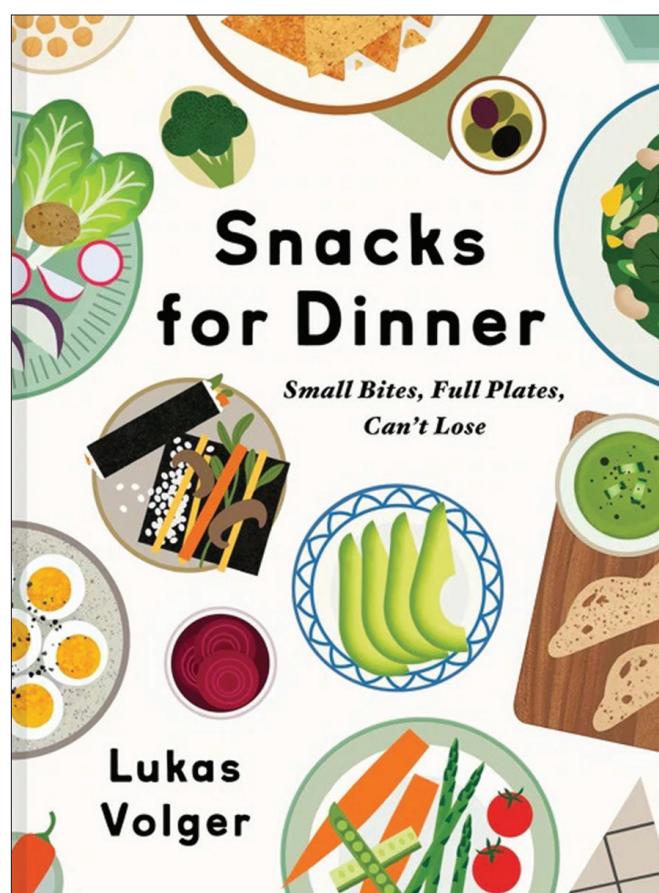
3. To prepare the dressing, zest the orange and add to a mixing bowl, then squeeze in 2 tablespoons of its juice. Add the mustard, thyme leaves and salt and whisk to combine. Whisk in the oil in a steady stream. Add the asparagus, stir to coat, and then store in an airtight container in the fridge for up to 4 days.

STOVETOP MAPLE-ALE MUSTARD

1/4 cup mustard powder
1/4 cup apple cider vinegar
1/2 cup brown ale
1/4 cup pure maple syrup
2 egg yolks
1/2 teaspoon kosher salt

1. In a wide, heat-safe bowl, stir together the mustard powder and vinegar. Let stand for at least 30 minutes and up to an hour. Pour the beer into a tall measuring glass to allow some of the carbonation to burn off while the mustard powder hydrates. Add the beer, maple syrup, egg yolks and salt to the mustard and whisk until smooth.

2. Fill a saucepan with about an inch of water and bring to a simmer. Create a double boiler situation by placing the bowl directly over the saucepan, allowing the steam generated by the water to heat the bowl beneath it. Make sure that the bottom of the bowl does not touch the water — if it does, simply pour out some of the water. Cook the mustard over the simmering water, scraping the sides and bottom of the bowl often with a flexible spatula, until



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"Snacks for Dinner," by Lukas Volger.

thickened to the consistency of hollandaise sauce, about 15 minutes. Remove from the heat and transfer the mustard to a container or jar. Allow to cool, then store in

the refrigerator for up to 3 weeks in an airtight container.

— Reprinted by permission from "Snacks For Dinner" by Lukas Volger (Harper Wave, 2022).



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