

March 29, 2005

A Buffet for Mother's Day

Mother's Day has a special place in the hearts of Latinos. Many people believe the holiday was invented by the greeting card industry, but its origins can be traced back to the Romans and the goddess Rhea, who symbolized domesticity. This is the perfect occasion to toast Mami with all sorts of fun beverages and feed her fancy foods she does not have to cook herself. A buffet lunch for Mami, her friends and relatives should be festive and tasty. Here are some recipes that will fill that bill. As part of the buffet, you should serve some simple appetizers, such as Marcona almonds and olives, so as not to detract from the rich main dishes. A big green salad with Romaine lettuce, watercress, sliced cucumbers and avocado cubes, dressed in a snappy vinaigrette would perk things up. Hot French bread (or pan de agua, if you can get it) will help in sopping up the sauces. Felicidades!

Jamon con Salsa de Madeira (Ham Braised in Madeira)

This is a grand recipe befitting a major holiday. I like to serve it with spinach braised in chicken stock, but it also goes well with steamed fresh asparagus, in season during May. A red Bordeaux-Medoc would be the perfect match for this elegant dish.

For the ham

1 cup sliced onions
1 cup carrots, peeled and sliced
2 tablespoons butter
2 tablespoons olive oil
One 8-10 pound cooked ham, skinned and trimmed of excess fat
2 cups Madeira
3 cups beef stock or canned beef bouillon
6 parsley sprigs
1 bay leaf
½ teaspoon thyme
Powdered sugar in a shaker

For the sauce

3 tablespoons arrowroot
2 tablespoons white wine
½ pound sliced mushrooms sautéed in 2 tablespoons butter and 1 tablespoon olive oil
3 tablespoons softened butter

1. Preheat oven to 325 degrees. In a roaster pan, cook the onions and carrots on top of the stove until lightly browned, for about 10 minutes.
2. Place the ham in the roaster, fattiest side up. Pour in Madeira, stock and add the herbs. Bring to a simmer on top of the stove and put the cover over the roaster;
3. Place the covered roaster in the oven and bake, very slowly, for 2 to 2 ½ hours, basting every 20 minutes with the cooking liquid. The ham will be done when a sharp-pronged fork will pierce its thickest part easily.
4. When the ham is done, drain it and set the cooking liquid aside. To glaze it, dust the top and sides with powdered sugar and place it on a rack in the roasting pan. Heat oven to 450 degrees, and let it brown lightly for 10-15 minutes. Let the ham sit at room temperature for 20-30 minutes before carving.

5. Degrease the baking liquid and place in a saucepan on top of the stove. Strain it into another saucepan. In a separate small bowl, blend the arrowroot with the white wine and beat it into the hot braising liquid. Stir in the sautéed mushrooms. Simmer for 5 minutes. Set aside until ready to serve.
6. Reheat sauce when ready to serve. Off heat, beat in the softened butter by bits, and pour the sauce into a warmed sauceboat. Serve alongside the sliced ham.

Yield: 16 to 20 servings

Pollo Marengo (Chicken Marengo)

Legend has it that Napoleon's cook invented this dish to celebrate the victory of the Battle of Marengo. This recipe is a Spanish version of the dish, which adds the pimiento stuffed olives for extra piquancy. Serve it with lots of fluffy white rice and more of the same Merlot you serve with the ham.

2 two pound fryers cut into 8 pieces each
 ½ cup flour
 Salt and pepper to taste
 ¼ cup olive oil
 ¼ cup butter
 3 ripe tomatoes, peeled, quartered and seeded
 2 garlic cloves, minced
 1 tablespoon flour
 1 cup chicken broth
 ½ cup white wine
 Pinch cayenne pepper
 ½ pound sliced mushrooms
 12 pimiento-stuffed olives
 ¼ pound smoked ham, cut in strips
 6 slices French bread, cut in ½ inch thick rounds
 2 tablespoons melted butter
 2 tablespoons olive oil

1. Dust the chicken pieces with ½ cup flour. Add salt and pepper to taste.
2. In a large skillet, combine ¼ cup oil and ¼ cup butter and heat. Saute chicken pieces slowly until golden. Remove chicken pieces to a casserole with a cover. Set aside.
3. To the chicken drippings in the skillet, add tomatoes and garlic clove. Saute at low heat without burning the garlic for about 10 minutes, Add flour and mix well. When the mixture begins to bubble, remove from heat.
4. In a separate bowl, combine chicken broth, wine and cayenne. Add slowly to tomato mixture in skillet, stirring slowly to dissolve the flour. Return to moderate heat. Cook, stirring, until the mixture thickens. Add sauteed mushrooms and olives. Mix well and pour over chicken in casserole. Cover and cook over low heat on top of the stove for 30 minutes.
5. While the chicken is cooking, pan fry the ham strips in a skillet and drain fat.
6. Uncover the casserole, place the ham strips on top of the chicken and cook, covered, for another 15 minutes.
7. In the meantime, brush bread with melted butter and olive oil on both sides. Place bread on a cookie sheet and dry in oven at 200 degrees, until golden brown on both sides. Arrange the bread standing upright around the edge of the casserole and serve.

Yield: 6 to 8 servings

Arroz con Pollo a lo Machado (Chicken with rice and cream of asparagus soup)

I am constantly reading and trying recipes, both for my book and for this column. In the Baltimore Sun I ran across this fantastic recipe, which originated in Cuba. Named after Cuban playwright Eduardo Machado's uncle, the recipe contains half a can of cream of asparagus soup. I rushed to try it, and was delighted by its results. Although I am not fond of canned soups, the cream of asparagus blends into the other flavors and rounds them out. Here it is, with a few Puerto Rican touches of my own. It is ideal for a Mother's Day buffet, and may steal the limelight from the ham. Some may want to drink white wine with this dish. A good option would be to have some Spanish Albarino handy.

2 fryer chickens, cut into parts and seasoned with Goya's Adobo™

Olive oil for frying

4 cloves garlic, finely minced

1 large onion, finely chopped

1 large green pepper, finely chopped

1 can of beer

1 small (4 ounces) can tomato sauce

½ can cream of asparagus soup, undiluted

2 large pinches saffron

2 cups medium grain white rice

4 cups chicken broth

1 bunch fresh asparagus, with stems removed

1 large jar chopped pimientos

1 box frozen peas, thawed

1. Season the chicken parts with adobo. In a large Dutch oven or caldero, heat about ¼ inch of olive oil. Brown the chicken on all sides, then remove from the pan to a plate. Set aside.
2. Sauté the garlic, onion and pepper in the Dutch oven or caldero until soft, but not browned.
3. Add the beer and loosen any brown bits that might still be on the bottom of the pot. Stir in the tomato sauce and the asparagus soup.
4. Return the chicken to the pot, and cook, uncovered, until close to done, 12-15 minutes. Add the saffron, rice and broth, and mix with a wooden spoon. When the liquid comes to a boil, add the fresh asparagus, half the pimientos and half the peas.
5. Reduce heat, cover and cook until the rice is done, with most of the liquid absorbed, about 20-25 minutes. Sprinkle the remaining pimientos and peas over the top, check for seasoning and serve. The rice will be slightly wet.

Yield: 8 servings

Caribbean Shrimp Curry

If you want to serve several dishes at Mom's buffet lunch, you are going to want some contrasts. This shrimp dish came to Puerto Rico by way of Trinidad, and you might want to adjust the pepper—or you might not. Serve with fluffy white rice and mango chutney. As to what beverage to serve with curry, there are many choices, including beer. I would either serve a big Zinfandel with lots of fruit, or Champagne. Viva Mami!

1 ½ teaspoons coriander seeds
1 ½ teaspoon cumin seeds
1 ½ teaspoons brown mustard seeds
1 ½ teaspoons whole black peppercorns
½ teaspoons crushed hot red pepper flakes
2 bay leaves
3 tablespoons vegetable oil
3 tablespoons unsalted butter
2 large onions, finely chopped
3 cloves garlic, crushed
1 tablespoon fresh ginger root, finely chopped
4 medium tomatoes, peeled and chopped, or 2 cups chopped, drained canned tomatoes
2 tablespoons freshly squeezed lime juice
Salt
2 pounds large, raw shrimp, peeled and deveined

1. In a mortar, or in an electric blender, pulverize the coriander, cumin and mustard seeds with the peppercorns, hot pepper flakes and bay leaves. Set aside.
2. Heat the oil and butter in a large, heavy skillet and sauté the onions until lightly browned. Add the garlic, ginger root and the ground spices, and cook, stirring, for 2 or 3 minutes longer.
3. Add the tomatoes and lime juice. Season to taste with salt, cover and cook for 30 minutes over very low heat and stirring with a wooden spoon every 5 minutes. If necessary, add a little chicken stock or water. The sauce should be thick.
4. Add the shrimp, and cook, covered, for about 5 minutes, or until the shrimp are firm and pink. Be careful not to overcook the shrimp. Serve immediately.

Yield: Serves 6-8

Desserts

Here are two desserts to choose from for Mami's special day. Of course, if you are having a lot of people over, you might want to serve both. The coconut bread pudding is something you can make the day before, which is an attractive possibility when you are doing a lot of cooking.

Budin de Coco (Coconut Bread Pudding)

A luscious dessert, the *budin* provides a fitting finale to a memorable celebration. Challah bread is easily available at most supermarkets, but brioche/croissants are a good alternative. Extra Dry Champagne or a Muscat would be what I would serve with this.

6 large eggs
1 1/8 cups sugar, more for topping dish
2 cups heavy cream
1 13 1/2 ounce coconut milk (not coconut cream)
2 tablespoons dark rum (*Barrilito*™ is my favorite)
10 slices challah (egg bread) or sliced brioche/croissants, 1/3 inch thick
1/2 cup golden raisins
1/2 cup dried currants
1/4 cup toasted slivered almonds

1. In bowl of an electric mixer fitter with a whisk attachment, combine eggs and 1 1/8 cups of sugar. Mix until smooth. In a small pan, bring cream to a boil. With mixer running at medium-low speed, slowly add hot cream. Add coconut milk and rum and mix again until smooth. Allow mixture to rest at room temperature for an hour.
2. Heat oven to 350 degrees. Fill a kettle with water and place over high heat to bring to a boil. In an 8 1/2- by-12 inch baking dish, arrange bread slices so they overlap in 2 columns. Add raisins, currants and almonds. Pour custard evenly over top, and press down lightly with a spatula. Place dish in a large, deep pan (a roasting pan, for example). Pour in boiling water so that it comes about halfway up the sides of baking dish. Bake until custard is set, 30-35 minutes.
3. Sprinkle liberally with sugar, and caramelize it by placing it under a broiler for 2-3 minutes. Serve, scooping out individual portions.

Yield: 8 servings

Merengon

This is modern variation of a traditional Spanish recipe. A a meringe shell is filled with fresh fruit and whipped cream instead of the classic *natilla* or egg custard. It is ideal after a heavy meal, since it is light and refreshing. I am suggesting a fruit combination I love, but you should experiment and create your own, which could include sherbets, gelati or any other goodies you fancy. Should you serve a dessert wine or champagne with this joyful concoction? Extra dry champagne would be my choice, but a glass of Robert Pecota's sunny Muscat would be glorious too.

For the shell (Can be cooked the day before saved, on a plate, covered with plastic wrap and kept in a cool, dry place. Do not refrigerate.)

Nonstick cooking spray for baking sheet

6 large egg whites at room temperature
1 1/2 cups sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1 teaspoon cornstarch
1 teaspoon white cider vinegar

For the topping

1 1/2 cups whipping cream, whipped until stiff peaks form
2 kiwis, peeled and sliced
8 ounces strawberries, de-stemmed and sliced

8 ounces raspberries, blackberries, blueberries or cubed mangoes and pineapple (total 8 ounces of mixed fruit, or a single fruit, not to exceed 8 ounces)

Pulp of 2 passion fruits

2 tablespoons of Passion fruit liqueur *Alize™*

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper and cover with cooking spray.
2. In a large mixing bowl using an electric mixer on high, whisk egg whites until soft peaks form. Gradually add sugar, 1 tablespoon at a time, until it has dissolved. Using a spatula, gently fold in vanilla, cornstarch and vinegar.
3. With the spatula, mound the mixture onto a baking sheet in a shape that is 7 inches long and 4 inches wide. Shape evenly with a spatula or the flat side of a knife, smoothing the top and sides. Use a metal spoon to make a small indentation in the center and create a bowl effect.
4. Bake on the lower rack of your oven for 10 minutes. Reduce oven temperature to 275 degrees and continue baking for one hour. Do not open the oven or use a fan while cooking. Turn off heat and let the meringue cool for at least 1 hour with the oven door slightly ajar. When ready to serve, carefully slide the meringue into a serving plate. Top with whipped cream and arrange the fruit decoratively. Drizzle with passion fruit pulp mixed with *Alize™*

Yield: 10-12 servings