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Fall for Nuts

At the end of every holiday or celebratory meal, my grandfather would place a basket of mixed nuts — almonds, hazelnuts, walnuts, pecans, and Brazil nuts — in the center of the table along with some decorative metal nutcrackers. Thinking back on this tradition, I suppose that my grandfather considered the nuts a palate cleanser/digestive as well as a way to extend the conversations and stories beyond the antipasti, pasta, meats, and desserts. As we are in the midst of nut harvesting season with the holidays quickly approaching, I offer several nut dishes in this October issue. (The quantities below are intended to serve two, with the exception of the cookies, of course.)

APPETIZER: PEANUTS EGGPLANT AND PEANUT SPRING ROLLS

INGREDIENTS

1 pint fairy tale eggplant or 1 Sicilian eggplant
Extra virgin olive oil
1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
6 to 8 spring roll wrappers (I recommend Blue Dragon brand.)
Salted, roasted shelled peanuts
2 scallions, thinly sliced
Red pepper flakes

DIRECTIONS


Slice the eggplant into strips. Heat several tablespoons of olive oil over medium high heat. Add the eggplant and vinegar and cook until browned and tender, stirring frequently. Remove the eggplant from the heat and let cool in a colander to drain any liquid. Prepare the wrappers according to the package instructions; this will involve placing each wrapper in water for several seconds until soft. For each wrapper, place a spoonful of eggplant in the center. Add as many peanuts, scallions, and red pepper flakes as you desire. Fold over the bottom and sides, then roll. Repeat and serve immediately with some duck sauce for dipping.

DESSERT: PINE NUTS PIGNOLI COOKIES

INGREDIENTS

1 8 ounce can almond paste
½ cup sugar
½ cup confectioner's sugar
¼ cup flour
2 - 3 medium egg whites slightly beaten
1½ cups pine nuts

DIRECTIONS

In a food processor, break up the almond paste into small pieces and mix in the sugars and flour. Once the mixture is finely ground, add the egg whites a little at a time until the dough comes together. Let the dough rest 15 minutes. Wet your hands, scrape a small spoonful and roll in the nuts. Bake 20 - 25 minutes at 300 degrees on parchment lined cookie sheets. 

MAIN COURSE: PISTACHIOS AND CHESTNUTS QUAIL WITH PISTACHIO STUFFING

INGREDIENTS

4 semi-boneless quail
½ cup dried cranberries, blueberries, and cherries
¼ cup salted, roasted shelled pistachios
2 tablespoons panko breadcrumbs
Extra virgin olive oil
Juice of one lemon
Sea salt
Fresh ground pepper

DIRECTIONS

Preheat the oven to 425 degrees. In a small bowl, mix the dried berries, pistachios, breadcrumbs, and a tablespoon of olive oil. Stuff the quail with the berry and nut mixture and place in a baking dish. Drizzle with additional olive oil and lemon juice, and season with salt and pepper to taste. Bake for about 20 minutes until the quail are golden brown.

BRUSSELS SPROUTS WITH CHESTNUTS

INGREDIENTS

1 pint brussels sprouts, stem ends cut off and sliced in half (or in thirds, depending on size)
Extra virgin olive oil
Sea salt
Fresh ground pepper
5 slices crystallized ginger, sliced in thin strips
6 to 8 roasted chestnuts, sliced in half (You can purchase these in a jar from Williams-Sonoma or your local grocery store.)

DIRECTIONS

In a large nonstick pan, heat several tablespoons of olive oil over medium heat. Add the brussels sprouts and season with salt and pepper. Stir in the ginger and chestnuts. Cook over medium high heat until the brussels sprouts are browned and caramelized, which will take about 12 to 15 minutes. Serve alongside the quail.