

Chef shares tips for gravy with a twist

BY KATHLEEN PIERCE
BDN STAFF

PORTLAND — For many, gravy is a mystery, something grandma whipped out with effortless ease. If her recipe got lost in translation, you may be wondering how to impart the flavorful essence of turkey into all aspects of your Thanksgiving feast.

Spoiler alert: This is not your grandmother's gravy.

Inside the Portland Harbor Hotel, executive chef Tim Pierre Labonte broke down the importance of the Thanksgiving staple and why it should not be left to the last minute.

"When people walk into the home, they smell it first," he said. "That's when they start salivating."

This may be a newflash to children of the 1970s, but the all-utility sauce shouldn't be dark

brown and taste like the refrigerator. After all, it's the culinary essence that unites Thanksgiving's diverse side dishes.

In 2015, "it doesn't have to be traditional," said Labonte.

Sophisticated palates can handle and secretly crave "gravy with a twist."

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This chef suggested "throwing some roasted garlic or fresh chopped rosemary, citrus, or maybe even a little goat cheese at the end."

"Those are the things that I feel people get excited about," he said.

Such ingredients are less measured than inspired and guided by the reigning palate of the preparer. Taste as it unfolds and add accordingly.

But first, the basics.

"You start by making a roux, which is equal parts butter and flour," said Labonte. You can use cornstarch, or other thickeners, "but in my opinion, butter always tastes better."

Whisk butter in a pan over high heat, then add flour.

"The cooking part is crucial in the making of the roux, cook it longer to get rid of the flour taste," he said.

Next comes the stock: Gravy's most important ingredient.

Pro tip

Gravy should be made the day you plan to use it. You can prepare a dark poultry stock up to three days in advance. To achieve a darker stock, roast poultry bones and vegetables to a dark amber before proceeding to a basic stock production method. If

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KATHLEEN PIERCE | BDN
Gravy is poured onto mashed potatoes at the Portland Harbor Hotel recently.

What's behind Maine Course?

When artist Eric Zelz came to me with the idea for this column — to create an illustrated food feature every week — I immediately fell in love with the concept. And since summer 2014, we've created dozens and dozens of recipe and illustration pairings.

Last week, when we were talking about this week's piece, I decided to do something a little different. Instead of just deciding on a recipe and mulling over concepts together, I challenged Eric to choose an ingredient that I would craft a recipe around.

His response? "How about cranberries?!"

Being so close to the holidays, I immediately thought about appetizers and pictured sugared cranberries, which I have seen everywhere lately. I've cooked with fresh cranberries dozens of times — not just making a variety of cranberry-based sauces, but baking them into desserts of all kinds and even whirling them with fresh ingredients for a tart, spicy salsa.

Too tart to be eaten alone, I wasn't sure they'd taste very good even covered in sugar.

But, hey, how would I know if I didn't try? Those sparkly little balls intrigued me.

After reading up on them a bit, I discovered that they are shockingly easy to make. You start by making a simple syrup — just sugar, water and vanilla, in this case. Then you soak the berries in it overnight. It tempers the tartness while also giving the sugar for the outside something to cling to. The next day, you drain, toss with sugar and use them however you like.

When I tried them, I discovered that they're sweet-tart balls of fruity goodness. And absolutely perfect for pairing with a savory spread with a hint of sweetness, which is exactly what the Sage Ricotta Spread is.

Consider making this crostini for your holiday celebration. It's easy, but no one needs to know that.

Earthy sage-flavored ricotta cheese is spread on thin crostini toasts and topped with those craveable sweet-tart sugared cranberries. It's a symphony of flavors, so easy and looks impressive to boot. You just can't go wrong.

While, yes, these take a little planning and require two days of work, the process itself couldn't be simpler.

That's also how I feel about this column and its illustration. When Eric suggested it, my only concern was finding the time — both myself and him — to work on this each week. Could we really create something so special each week, and find time in our schedules for it?

We did, and we do.

It takes a little planning. There needs to be both a recipe that can



SARAH WALKER CARON



SAGE RICOTTA CROSTINI WITH SUGARED CRANBERRIES

SERVES 8

INGREDIENTS FOR SUGARED CRANBERRIES

- 1/2 cup water
- 1 cup sugar, divided
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- 1/4 lb cranberries
- 1 loaf French bread, cut diagonally into 1/4-inch slices

INGREDIENTS FOR SAGE RICOTTA SPREAD

- 1/2 cup ricotta cheese
- 2 tbsp parmesan cheese
- 2 tsp finely chopped fresh sage
- 1 tsp salt
- 1/2 tsp pepper

DIRECTIONS

1. 1 Day Ahead: Start by making the syrup: Combine the water and 1/2 cup sugar in a small saucepan. Heat gently over medium heat, stirring constantly, until the sugar is completely dissolved. Do not let it come to a boil. Stir in the vanilla extract and remove from heat. Place the cranberries in a small bowl. Cover with syrup mixture. Use foil to both cover the bowl and press the cranberries gently into the syrup. Chill overnight.
2. Drain the cranberries (syrup can be reserved and used to sweeten drinks, if desired). Place the remaining 1/2 cup sugar in a shallow dish that will allow the cranberries to remain in a single layer. Toss the cranberries with the sugar and then chill for at least 1 hour. Toss again and use as desired.
3. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Brush bread slices with olive oil on both sides. Bake for about 10 minutes, until crispy.
4. In a mixing bowl, stir together the ricotta, parmesan, sage, salt and pepper until well combined.
5. Spread a little of the ricotta mixture on each of the bread slices. Top with 2-3 of the cranberries. Arrange on a platter.
6. Serve immediately.



RECIPE: SARAH WALKER CARON
ART: ERIC ZELZ

be created, tested and perfected in a week, and a concept for the illustration. That doesn't take too long — we've at times come to concepts in mere seconds.

Then comes the creation. I get into the kitchen and Eric starts sketching, painting and everything else that goes into the artistic portion of this.

It sounds like a lot but the process really is so easy. It helps a lot that Eric and I get along so well and can talk through concepts,

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Start your bird with a spicy rub

Years ago, long before I ever heard anything about spicy rubs for meat, I cooked alongside Kerine Spence, a wonderful cook from Jamaica who held sway in the kitchen of a local bed and breakfast.

Kerine never roasted a chicken without first sprinkling spices and herbs all over the bird and massaging them into the skin.

Once the chicken was all sliced up into portions, it was hard to detect the extra flavor in the slivers of crisp skin.

You'd have to snag a larger scrap of skin for that. Instead, what I noticed was that the juices in the roasting pan out of which we made gravy was so much tastier than what plain roasted chicken produced.

These days we can buy ready-made rubs for all kinds of meat, but I don't bother when I usually have the most common spices in them in my spice rack. I merely adopted Kerine's combination and I use it on chicken and on my Thanksgiving turkey, too. Then just to make sure that the gravy has richly flavored broth to add to the flour and turkey juices, I add some extra seasoning to the giblets bubbling away in a pan of water.

I am a fairly relentless baster; it is how I keep the turkey moist and turn the skin a rich golden brown



SANDY OLIVER
TASTE BUDS

Kerine lined up her jars of all spice, nutmeg, ground celery seed, thyme, paprika, salt and the black pepper grinder. She never measured; she sprinkled, and sprinkled all sides of the bird, gently rubbing the spices on the surface. Then she merely roasted for the necessary amount of time.

I don't recall her stuffing chickens, but she'd stick an onion or two inside the bird. I might skip stuffing for everyday roasted chicken but never on Thanksgiving.

I no longer recall where I picked up the worthwhile idea of adding a rib of celery or the leafy tops, an onion with a clove or two stuck in it, a carrot cut up, a clove of garlic plus a bay leaf to the water in which I boil the giblets for gravy. I've been doing it quite a while now and I use that broth as a starter for basting juices which collect in the roasting pan. I am a fairly relentless baster; it is how I keep the turkey moist and turn the skin a rich golden brown.

After the roasting is done, I make gravy by straining the broth into the pan juices thickened with a bit of flour. I prefer to make the gravy in the roasting pan even if I have to put it over two burners. Adding chopped giblets to gravy is a matter of family preference. You can always divide your gravy into two boats and add chopped giblets to one in case you have pro-giblet partisans in the same room with people who

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