



Virginia's Sampler Menu



Starters and Nibbles

Black Pepper Cheese Shortbread



Salads and Slaws

Arugula with Country Ham and Pecans



Main Course

Mama's BBQ Chicken



Side Dish

Parmesan Potatoes



Desserts

Mama's Pecan Tassies





Black Pepper Cheese Shortbread

MAKES ABOUT 4 DOZEN

This aromatic shortbread is a twist on Dede's cheese straws, a Southern classic I have enjoyed my entire life. It is very appropriately spiced, too, as he loved black pepper. The French have a tradition of nibbles such as this with an *apéritif* before dinner. The word is derived from the Latin verb *aperire*, which means "to open." An *apéritif* is served before a meal to stimulate the appetite, contrasting with *digestifs*, which are served at the end of a meal to aid digestion. Dede never had an *apéritif* in his life.

1½ cups all-purpose flour
1 tablespoon freshly ground black pepper, or to taste
½ teaspoon fine sea salt
Pinch of cayenne pepper, or to taste
½ cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, at room temperature
8 ounces sharp white Cheddar cheese, at room temperature, grated

Position the oven racks in the top and bottom third of the oven. Preheat the oven to 375°F. Butter two baking sheets or line them with silicone baking liners or parchment paper.

Combine the flour, black pepper, salt, and cayenne in a food processor fitted with a metal blade and pulse to combine. Add the butter and cheese and process until smooth. Cover the work bowl with plastic wrap and set aside to rest for about 15 minutes.

Transfer the dough to a clean work surface. To shape the dough, work it in your hands; it should be soft and pliable (like Play-Doh). Shape the dough into two equal cylinders and wrap tightly in plastic wrap. Transfer to the refrigerator and chill until firm, about 30 minutes. Then, working with 1 cylinder at a

time, using a utility knife, cut into ¼-inch-thick slices and place 1 inch apart on the prepared baking sheet. Repeat with remaining dough.

Bake the shortbreads, rotating the baking sheets once, until lightly browned on the edges, about 20 minutes. Remove the baking sheets to a rack to cool slightly. Using an offset or slotted spatula, remove the individual shortbreads to a rack and cool completely.

Making Ahead Store the savory shortbread at room temperature in an airtight container between sheets of waxed paper. They will keep for 2 to 3 weeks.

Brilliant: Short Recipe

Pecan Garnish

It's all about accessorizing. To lift our simple cheese nibble to Brilliant, garnish with pecans (pictured on page 24). Prepare the dough as directed in the Basic recipe. Roll the edges of each cylinder in 1 cup chopped pecans to coat. Then, when you are ready to bake, slice the shortbread and place on the prepared baking sheets. Top each slice with a perfect pecan half. Bake as directed.

Arugula with Country Ham and Pecans

SERVES 4 TO 6

This salad is a great example of sour, salty, bitter, sweet, and savory. Right out of the gate, we're hitting all our marks. The essential element that makes this basic recipe shine is country ham. Since ancient times, humans have cured pork, and people have loved the pig. Dry-curing the hind legs of pigs is one of the oldest ways of preserving meat. Ham pairs beautifully with sweet, spicy, and creamy foods; those flavors and textures counteract the meat's saltiness, which can range from mild to assertive. In my opinion, anything with country ham has a leg up on the competition.

8 cups arugula, dandelion, or frisée (about 6 ounces)
3 tablespoons apple cider vinegar
1/2 teaspoon firmly packed light brown sugar
Coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper
2 tablespoons canola oil
3 thin slices country ham, cut into lardons (see sidebar)
1/2 onion, preferably Vidalia, thinly sliced
1 small clove garlic, finely chopped
1/2 cup crumbled aged white Cheddar cheese
(about 2 ounces)
1/4 cup chopped pecans

Place the greens in large bowl. Set aside. Stir together the vinegar, brown sugar, salt, and pepper in small bowl until the sugar dissolves. Set aside.

Heat the oil in a skillet over medium-high heat. Add the ham and cook, stirring occasionally, until crisp, 5 to 7 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the ham to a plate lined with paper towels.

Add the onion to the skillet and cook over medium heat, stirring frequently, until translucent, 3 to 5 minutes; add the garlic and cook until fragrant, 45 to 60 seconds. Add the vinegar mixture, then remove from the heat. Working quickly, scrape the bottom of the skillet with a wooden spoon to loosen any yummy browned bits. Set aside to cool just slightly.

Pour the warm dressing over the reserved greens, add the ham, and toss gently with tongs until the arugula is slightly wilted. Taste and adjust for seasoning with salt and pepper. Divide among chilled serving plates. Sprinkle over the cheese and pecans. Season with freshly ground black pepper and serve immediately.

Brilliant: Short Recipe

Crispy Deep-Fried Eggs

Green eggs and ham? How about Greens with Egg and Ham to take this Basic salad to Brilliant?

Bring 4 large eggs to room temperature. Line a plate with paper towels and set aside. In a small, heavy saucepan, pour in about 1 1/2 cups peanut oil to fill half full. Heat over medium heat until it reads 350°F on a deep-fry thermometer. Working with 1 egg at a time, break the egg into a small ramekin, and then slowly and carefully slide it into the hot oil. It will spit and sizzle. Cook until the egg is crunchy on the outside and the yolk is still runny, about 1 1/2 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, lift the egg out of the oil and transfer to the prepared plate. Season with finishing salt (see page 50) and freshly ground black pepper. Repeat with the remaining eggs. Serve immediately atop the wilted salad.

Lardon

A matchstick-size piece of bacon is called a lardon. Strictly speaking, however, lardons are long strips of fat sewn into lean meat with a larding needle (*lardoire*) to keep the meat moist and flavorful during cooking. I find it easier to cut the meat into lardons before cooking, instead of cooking strips of bacon whole, then crumbling.





Mama's BBQ Chicken

SERVES 4 TO 6

You know how it is when you are itching for summer to start. You are ready for it. It buzzes in your brain like a hungry mosquito zeroing in for a feast on a naked expanse of skin. Warm weather, sunshine, and swimming. Porches, fishing, and lying on the grass by the river. I love summer food. Okra. Lady peas and butter beans. Tomatoes. Summer squash. Corn. Garrison Keillor is rumored to have said, "Sex is good, but not as good as fresh sweet corn." Well, fresh sweet corn *is* really good. Simple. Uncomplicated. Satisfying.

Regardless of your opinion of sex and corn, I am sure you can agree summer does mean grilling. I love to grill throughout the year, but in the summer, it's just practical to keep the heat out of the kitchen. Burgers and brats are brilliant, steaks and seafood are stupendous, but perhaps my absolute fave? The cheap and cheerful pedestrian chicken. Chicken can be absolutely sublime on the grill: smoky and charred, yet tender and juicy (pictured on page 102). It can also be drier than chalk and just about as tasty, too. The trick is if you pierce the meat with the tip of a knife and the juices run clear, it's done. If the juices run pink? It's underdone. If there are no juices? Ahem.

4 quarts tepid water
3/4 cup coarse kosher salt
1/3 cup firmly packed light brown sugar
2 cups ice cubes
1 (4-pound) chicken, cut into 8 pieces, or 6 bone-in skin-on breasts or thighs
Coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper
Mama's Barbecue Sauce (see page 120), warmed

Combine the water, salt, and brown sugar in a large plastic container and stir to dissolve. Add ice to chill, then add the chicken; cover and marinate in the refrigerator for 4 to 6 hours.

Prepare a charcoal fire using about 6 pounds of charcoal and burn until the coals are completely covered with a thin coating of light gray ash, 20 to 30 minutes. Spread the coals evenly over the grill bottom, position the grill rack above the coals, and heat until medium-hot (when you can hold your hand 5 inches above the grill surface for no longer than 3 or 4 seconds). Or, for a gas grill, turn on all burners to high, close the lid, and heat until very hot, 10 to 15 minutes.

Meanwhile, remove the chicken from the marinade and rinse under cool running water. Pat dry with paper towels, season with pepper, and set aside.

Using a wad of paper towels or an old cloth and a pair of tongs, apply some canola oil to the grill grate. Place the chicken on the grill, leaving plenty of space between each piece. Grill until seared, 1 to 2 minutes per side for legs and thighs, and 3 or so minutes for breasts. Move the chicken to where the heat is medium-low or lower the heat in a gas grill to medium. Continue to grill, turning occasionally, until the juices run clear when pierced, 12 to 18 minutes. During the last 5 to 7 minutes of cooking, brush the chicken with the barbecue sauce. (Any sooner and the sauce will burn.)

Remove the chicken pieces from the grill as soon as they are done and transfer to a warmed platter. Give them a final brush of sauce for flavor and serve immediately with additional sauce on the side.

CONTINUED

Mama's Barbecue Sauce

Make a batch, then separate out a cup or so for brushing on the chicken. Don't dip your brush in the big pot, then dab it on half-cooked chicken and then serve that same sauce on the side. Eew. That's just bad food safety and asking for a tummy ache.

- 1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter
- 1 onion, preferably Vidalia, very finely chopped
- 2½ cups ketchup
- 2 cups apple cider or distilled white vinegar
- ½ cup Worcestershire sauce
- ¼ cup Dijon mustard
- 2 tablespoons firmly packed dark brown sugar
- Juice of 2 lemons
- 2 tablespoons freshly ground black pepper, or to taste
- Coarse salt

In a saucepan, melt the butter over medium heat; add the onion and simmer until soft and melted, 5 to 7 minutes. Add the ketchup, vinegar, Worcestershire sauce, mustard, brown sugar, lemon juice, and pepper.

Bring to a boil, decrease the heat to low, and simmer until the flavors have smoothed and mellowed, at least 10 and up to 30 minutes. Taste and adjust for seasoning with salt and pepper. Store in an airtight container in the refrigerator. It will last for months.

Brilliant: Presentation

Chicken Barbecue Salad

The first time I saw "barbecue salad" listed on a menu, I was in Alabama on the way to the Southern Foodways Alliance conference in Oxford, Mississippi. It made me chuckle. Only a Southerner would heap a mountain of barbecue on a bed of lettuce and consider that a salad. Dubious, I ordered one, and it was really, really good. The warm meat slightly wilted the greens and yet still there was a lovely crunch. The way to transform this Basic recipe into Brilliant is to transform it into a salad. Remove all the bones and skin from the chicken and pull, not chop, into bite-size pieces. Toss with just enough warmed barbecue sauce to make it wet, but not sopping. For the salad greens, thinly slice 1 head romaine lettuce and place in a bowl. Work with what's in season such as green onions, thinly sliced raw okra, tomato wedges, shredded carrot, or radishes. Top with the chicken and serve immediately.

Parmesan Potatoes

SERVES 4

Mama tells the story of Aunt Lee offering to bring homemade potato chips to a school function. This was long before the age of food processors, so the potatoes had to be thinly sliced by hand. A mandoline may seem like a fancy gourmet appliance, but Meme actually had one she had purchased at the county fair when Mama was a little girl. Meme had made those chips before, but this time was one too many, so she delegated the task to Aunt Lee. Mama says that was the last time Aunt Lee offered homemade potato chips for parties.

You won't find this recipe nearly that labor-intensive. Serve this as a side dish at supper or for breakfast. It's just buttery and cheesy enough without being overly rich like many potato gratins.

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted, plus more if needed
- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 pounds Yukon gold potatoes
- Coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper
- ¼ cup finely grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese (about 1 ounce)
- 1 teaspoon chopped fresh thyme

Preheat the oven to 450°F.

Combine 1 tablespoon of the butter and the oil in a large bowl. Thinly slice the potatoes with a chef's knife or on a mandoline and place in the bowl as you slice, without rinsing. (The potato starch will help bind them, instead of adding lots of cream or cheese.) Season with salt and pepper and toss to combine.

Heat the remaining 1 tablespoon butter in a 10-inch heavy, ovenproof skillet over medium-high heat. Place about one-third of the potatoes in one slightly overlapping layer in the skillet.

Toss the remaining potatoes with the cheese and thyme. Season with salt and pepper. Spread evenly over the first layer of potatoes in the skillet, pressing with a spatula. Cook for 3 minutes over medium heat, then transfer the skillet to the oven and roast, uncovered, until the potatoes are tender and the top is starting to brown, 20 to 25 minutes. Brush with additional butter, if desired.

Place on a rack to cool slightly. Invert onto a cutting board, cut into wedges, and serve.

Brilliant: Short Recipe

Pithiviers Savoyarde

Pithivier is a fancy word for an enclosed pie. Think "hot pocket." I once worked in the French alpine region of Savoie, where the hearty dishes are dubbed *savoyarde* style and often include potatoes, cheese, and ham.

Preheat the oven to 375°F. Line a rimmed baking sheet with a silicone baking liner or parchment paper. Whisk together 1 large egg and 1 tablespoon water in a small bowl. Set aside. Using a cookie cutter, cut out four 4-inch rounds of potatoes from the skillet. Set aside. On a lightly floured work surface, roll out 1 pound Quick Puff Pastry (page 19) or 1 (14-ounce) box store-bought puff pastry ⅛ inch thick. Using a 5-inch cookie cutter or a plate as a guide, cut out 8 pastry circles. Place on the prepared baking sheet. Refrigerate or freeze until firm, about 15 minutes. Meanwhile, using a 4-inch cookie cutter, cut out 4 circles from 4 slices of thinly sliced country ham, prosciutto, Serrano ham, or even deli ham. Remove one of the pastry circles. Brush with Dijon mustard. Top with a disk of potatoes, then a slice of ham. Scatter 1 tablespoon grated Gruyère on top. Brush the outer edges of the pastry circle with an egg wash made from 1 large egg and 2 tablespoons cold water. Top with a second pastry circle and press to seal. Brush the top with more egg wash. Scallop the sealed edges with the backside of a knife. Repeat with remaining ingredients. Bake until a rich golden brown, 20 to 25 minutes. Makes 4. Serve immediately or at room temperature.



Mama's Pecan Tassies

MAKES 2 DOZEN

I've used the same pecan company, Pearson, for more than a decade. For many years, Mary Pearson and I never met, but we talked often on the phone. Funny thing is, she actually lives right down the street from my cousin. When we finally did meet, sweet Mary grabbed my cheeks and said, "You are real!"

These petite pies are a holiday staple and keep well in an airtight container for a week or so (pictured on page 232). To bring out their flavor after they've been in storage for a few days, simply pop them in a 350°F oven for a few minutes, and they will taste freshly baked.

Crust

- 1/2 cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, at room temperature
- 1 (3-ounce) package cream cheese, at room temperature
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1/4 teaspoon fine sea salt

Filling

- 1 large egg
- 3/4 cup firmly packed dark brown sugar
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter, melted
- 1/2 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- 1/8 teaspoon fine sea salt
- 1/2 cup chopped pecans
- 2 dozen perfect pecan halves, for decoration

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Set out a nonstick mini muffin tin or grease a standard mini muffin tin.

To make the crust, in a heavy-duty mixer fitted with the paddle attachment, cream together the butter and cream cheese on medium speed until smooth. Add the flour and salt and continue to beat on low speed until a dough forms. Divide the dough equally into 24 balls, each about the size of a gumball. Press the balls of dough into the muffin cups, using your thumb to press the dough against the sides to form a shell. Set aside.

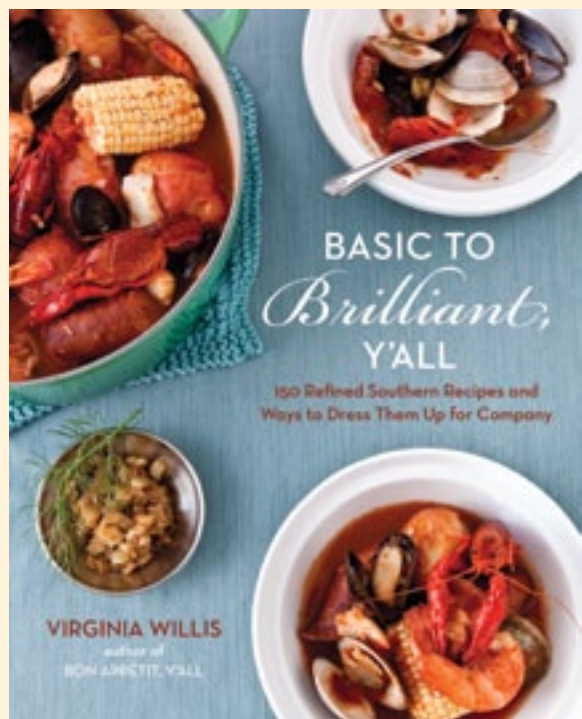
To make the filling, combine the egg, brown sugar, butter, vanilla, and salt in a bowl. Sprinkle 1/2 to 1 teaspoon nuts into each shell. Top with a teaspoon of the egg mixture. Place a pecan half in the center.

Bake for 15 minutes. Then decrease the temperature to 325°F and bake until set, 10 to 15 minutes more. Remove to a rack to cool.

Brilliant: Technique Bourbon-Soaked Pecans

I generally like my bourbon in a glass with ice, but it does belong in the kitchen, as well. Smoky, sweet bourbon enhances the flavor of the rich, fatty pecans, taking a simple home-style holiday favorite to Brilliant.

Place the pecans in a bowl, cover with 3/4 cup bourbon, and let soak for at least 30 minutes. Drain the bourbon-soaked pecans through a fine-mesh sieve, reserving the bourbon for another use. (See first sentence.) Preheat the oven to 350°F. Spread out the nuts in a single layer on a rimmed baking sheet and toast, shaking once or twice, until toasted and fragrant, about 5 minutes. Watch closely to avoid burning the nuts. Proceed with the recipe. Sip and savor.



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Some of the recipes in this book include raw eggs, meat, or fish. When these foods are consumed raw, there is always the risk that bacteria, which is killed by proper cooking, may be present. For this reason, when serving these foods raw, always buy certified salmonella-free eggs and the freshest meat and fish available from a reliable grocer, storing them in the refrigerator until they are served. Because of the health risks associated with the consumption of bacteria that can be present in raw eggs, meat, and fish, these foods should not be consumed by infants, small children, pregnant women, the elderly, or any persons who may be immunocompromised.

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