

The Star-Ledger

Feels like home: Winter dishes reflect childhood wishes and comfort at the table

Wednesday, March 05, 2008

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FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

What exactly does winter taste like?

When some of the region's most creative chefs contemplated that question, their answers ran the gamut from slow-braised short ribs and homemade soup to the solace of creamy polenta. But everybody agreed on one thing: winter food is comforting, it's strictly seasonal and in some way or another, it reminds you of home.

As a kid growing up in South Orange, Tom Carlin, chef/owner of the Gladstone Tavern, loved to play ice hockey. "Those were the days when the big pond in town stayed frozen all winter. We'd be skating outside for hours -- something kids can't do anymore." Although he was a picky eater as a kid, he grew up to love honest, straightforward American fare. "In winter, we serve a lot of braised and slow cooked dishes," he said. "I think that kind of food strikes a comfort chord with our guests."

Gladstone Tavern, in Gladstone, Somerset County, is a circa 1847 landmark building that was originally a farmhouse. When the weather chills, specials like lamb shank, slow-cooked crispy duck, brisket and pork shank are top sellers. "I like them for the same reason they're good to make at home. After the prep work, you leave them alone to cook for hours. You can make them ahead of time. And they taste better every time you heat them up."

Braising, a cooking method that involves browning meat or vegetables, then adding liquid and cooking long and slow until tender, is a very forgiving way to cook, said Carlin. "It's not like baking, when everything has to be precise. A little more or less of this or that, and you're still good." Another advantage of braising is it renders even the cheapest cuts of meat falling-off-the bone tender.

Frigid winters in his hometown of Albany, New York always meant a pot of soup on the stove, remembers Aram Mardigian, executive chef at Wolfgang Puck American Grille at the Borgata in Atlantic City. A product of an Armenian father and a Sicilian mother, Mardigian was exposed to the hearty dishes of both cultures. Although he's cooked for plenty of celebrities since first starting with Puck at Spago in Hollywood 14 years ago, including preparing lavish post-Oscar feasts, serving soup to his guests is still satisfying.

"We use all kinds of seasonal winter vegetables in our soups, puree of celery root, parsnip, pumpkin -- but I think the soup that really screams winter is lentil soup." He gives this rib-sticking fave added Italian oomph with the addition of pancetta, in the broth as well as for a garnish, and chopped broccoli rabe, for added color and nutrition.

"I think of most recipes as a guideline," he said. "For this soup, if it seems too thick, just add a little more chicken broth. No matter what you do to it, it's always going to taste really good."

Beyond the basic soup and grilled cheese, meat loaf and mac and cheese of his Hazlet childhood, chef David Burke loves slow cooked meats, with short ribs a favorite. Burke, who spends his time between davidburke & donatella in Manhattan and the Fromagerie, in Rumson, is also fond of serving game during cold weather months.

Burke, an avowed tinkerer in the kitchen, purchased the Fromagerie last year, the same restaurant where he worked part time as a high school student.

"I try to 'sex up' the basic recipes," said the Fort Lee resident. "Fiddling with the dish a little to make it better." Roasting turnips with jasmine tea and honey, creating flavored gnocchi or spaetzle, combining cabbage with dried fruit are all ways to enhance the basic goodness of braised venison or roasted duck. "I like to think of combinations. My nickname was 'Imagine If' when I was in high school. I started every sentence with 'Imagine if...' instead of just accepting things the way they were."

This is the guy that dreamed up the smoking limo -- a cold weather addition to his Manhattan restaurant. Burke invites up to 18 guests to smoke in a stretch limo parked out front, instead of freezing in front of the restaurant. "It's cold out there. This keeps everybody happy."

Although chef Giovanni Atzori didn't experience cold winters growing up in Rome, he did ski in the nearby Dolomite Mountains, known for their frigid temperatures.

Atzori, executive chef at Undici, a swank Italian restaurant in a Tuscan villa setting in downtown Rumson, thinks peasant food when the mercury plummets. "Polenta -- always a food for poor people, but so delicious. It gives you energy to make a little walk. At home, it's served on a wooden board, the board you use to make fresh dough. Then put braised meat out, and everybody eats."

Undici offers an inviting showcase for Atzori's considerable talents. The chef insists on only the finest ingredients, from the tomatoes he uses in his sauce to the Caputo Italian flour that goes into all the homemade pastas and the imported meats from Salumeria Biellesse in Manhattan. "That doesn't mean I don't like things simple, I do," he said. "For everything needs to be the best."

One of his favorite ways to serve polenta is with a ragu of wild mushrooms, cooked with tomatoes into a deeply flavorful sauce. "Polenta is good because it soaks up flavor. Whatever you miss, you can eat with bread."

When Drew and Rosemary Gabbe opened the The Fruited Plain five years ago, they were trading high profile careers in Manhattan for a better lifestyle to raise their twin daughters, now six years old. The Fruited Plain in Montville, which is both a caterer and a place for gourmet takeaway and limited seating at dinner, offers warming dishes like pot pies, slow braised salmon, classic French cassoulet, and a dish from Rosemary Gabbe's childhood, German Sauerbraten.

"I recall eating this when I was a little girl in Verona," said Gabbe whose career includes stints at Lespinasse and Le Bernardin in Manhattan. "It was passed down from my grandmother on my mom's side." Swedish/German on her mom's side and Sicilian on her dad's, Gabbe grew up in a household full of food. "My dad cooked, and he came from a big family," she recalled.

Coming into a warm house that smells of something delicious cooking on the stove -- that's a winter memory that Gabbe has, and one she wants to share with her own family, and her guests at The Fruited Plain. "Slow cooking food just smells like home."