



DID RAD-CAN GO TOO FAR?

Brendan Kelly blogs on Radio-Canada's satirical revue on New Year's Eve. Read him at montrealgazette.com/showbiz



WINE QUESTIONS ANSWERED

Bill Zacharkiw answers your meal-pairing questions and more at montrealgazette.com/life/food-wine

ARTS & LIFE

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PHOTOS: DAVE SIDAWAY THE GAZETTE

Chef Elliott Cohen's braised chicken, vegetables and herbs can be easily prepared in advance.



The richness of goat cheese and the tartness of cranberry are combined in these phyllo purses.

ENTERTAINING IS EASIEST at the end of the work week, when a family-style meal will comfort your guests

SUSAN SCHWARTZ
THE GAZETTE

There's something about entertaining on a Saturday night that demands words like elaborate or ambitious – dinner parties defined by a flexing and stretching of one's culinary muscles that risks crossing the line into over-reaching.

We take on more than we can comfortably handle, many of us; we try too hard – even though we know in our hearts and minds that simple meals are the most appreciated, that when we invite people to sit around our tables we would really rather be with them than fussing about the kitchen, alone and frantic.

Friday night dinner, on the other hand, is something else entirely. It's simpler, for one. Most of us have worked all week, and so the expectations of others are not as exalted. Guests usually offer to help with the cooking, pitch in setting the table – even with the cleanup, as Bonnie Stern observes in her newest cookbook, *Friday Night Dinners* (Random House Canada, \$50, 2008). Friday nights, we're less wrapped up, somehow, in trying to get everything just so.

And now, during these early days of the new year, weeks of rich and fancy holiday food and overconsumption behind us, seems like the ideal time to consider simpler dinners.

For Stern and for many other Jews, Friday night dinner is often a special meal, celebrated with family and dear friends to usher in the Jewish Sabbath, Shabbat. But bidding adieu to the work week and welcoming the weekend is a perfect time for *anyone* to share a meal with family and friends, as she observes in the introduction to her lovely new book, her 13th.

"I used to think everything had to be perfect when guests came over, but I have found that people appreciate and feel honoured to be part of the family more than anything else," writes Stern, who has operated a Toronto-based cooking school for more than 30 years and who writes regular columns for the *National Post* and *Reader's Digest*.

Please see CASUAL FRIDAYS, Page D3

Casual Fridays



Cohen grilled pineapple slices for dessert.

One slick move: profiting from icy sidewalks



BILL BROWNSTEIN
on new winter sports

"Any seasoned marathoner can whip around dry sidewalks."

Citizens can attempt to navigate Montreal's perma-frosted sidewalks, preferably with steel studs affixed to their galoshes; to sulk and moan; if feeling particularly charitable, to salt them on our own; to make off with chief city snowman Marcel Tremblay's nifty fur cap; or to hightail it to Bora Bora. We can choose to fight (to little avail), or we can simply profit from the sidewalks.

Personally, I believe the best way to profit would be to stage an international ice-dancing competition. Any pro figure-skater can execute a triple salchow on a freshly Zambonied indoor rink.

But let 'em try performing (intentionally, that is) even a single lutz on our sidewalks.

Please see WINTER, Page D5

PLAYBOY ON FILM

Hugh Hefner's passion: Hollywood

Biographical movie is nearing production

GEOFF BOUCHER
LOS ANGELES TIMES

HOLLYWOOD – "You've caught me with my pants on," Hugh Hefner said with a sad smirk.

There are days (or entire decades) when the founder of the Playboy empire greets the mid-day sun in silk pyjamas and a robe, but on this particular December afternoon, well, he just wasn't in the mood.

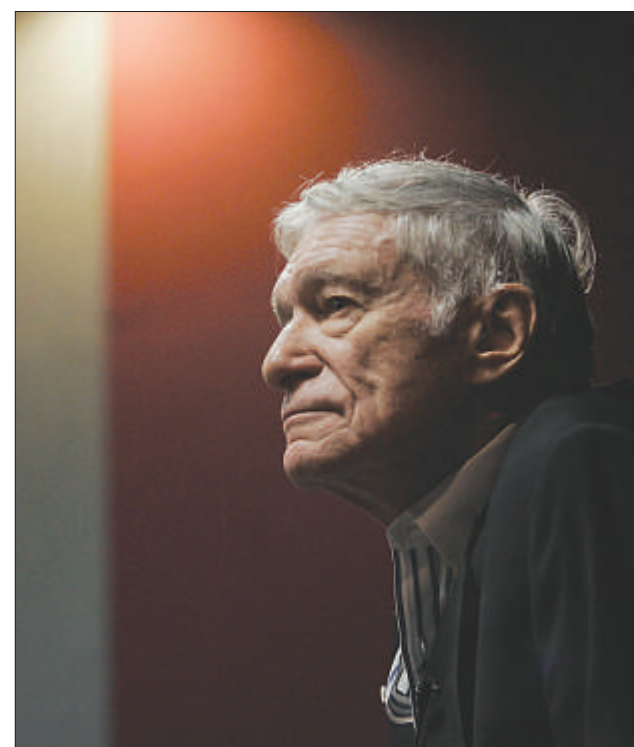
Hefner had arrived back at his 29-room mansion after attending

the funeral of Bettie Page, the pin-up queen, and he was still wearing his mourner's jacket as he sat and sipped from a bottle of Diet Pepsi in the hush of a downstairs library.

Hefner considered Page a friend and fellow pioneer of sorts on the old frontier of American sex culture.

Now, like so many others in Hefner's long journey, she is gone.

Please see HEFNER, Page D5



GARY FRIEDMAN LOS ANGELES TIMES

Hugh Hefner indulges his love of the cinema by lecturing at a University of Southern California film class.

CASUAL FRIDAYS

‘It’s not the food you serve that’s important. It’s the people around the table’

CONTINUED FROM D1

“Most people don’t cook family meals; to have a good old-fashioned home-cooked meal is special for them,” she said during a recent conversation on the Montreal stop of her book tour. “Whatever you put on the table, people think you’re a genius.”

Sure, it takes some planning and preparation, but it’s eminently doable, say Stern and others who shared tips about simple entertaining – Friday night or any night of the week.

Montreal chef and cooking teacher Shawna Goodman-Sone described her philosophy during a holiday entertaining class last month at the Cavendish Loblaws. “The more you do in advance, the better. That way, the more time you have for your guests.”

Write yourself a kind of road map of what to do when, she counselled. “Start with what takes the longest.”

And don’t leave too much for the 11th hour. “The day of the party you should have 20 per cent left to do – no more,” said Elliott Cohen, a Montreal personal chef, caterer and cooking instructor:

The problem is that people don’t always know how to spread the meal preparation over time, to break it up into manageable parts so that they don’t find themselves overwhelmed, wearing sweat pants in a messy kitchen, half an hour before their guests are due.

People learn the skill in cooking school or cooking classes, said Cohen – and he believes it’s an important one for home cooks to know: to look at a menu, and figure out how to proceed.

Soup, for instance, “is a no-brainer.”

“If it’s a new dish, try it once before serving it to company. Any recipe is easier the second time.”

BONNIE STERN

You could be sitting down to a Friday-night dinner that begins with a beautiful yellow-golden roasted butternut squash soup or a hearty pea soup you made and froze last month. How neat is that?

“The first thing I do when I look at a recipe is think how I can stagger the preparation,” Cohen said. “Even a crême brûlée, the day before, you can separate your eggs and keep them in the fridge and portion out the sugar and cream so, the day of, all you have to do is combine your ingredients.”

He recently did a cooking class for the Congregation Shaar Hashomayim sisterhood at which he prepared a simple – and divine – braised chicken dish with fresh vegetables and herbs he subsequently prepared for us. (See recipe and video.) It’s dead easy – and it tastes even better when it’s made a day or two in advance and reheated just before serving.

“There is always something you can do in advance,” he said. “If you can apply that philosophy to the five or six things you are preparing for your dinner, then the day of the dinner you have a lot less to do... and you can be with your guests.”

Always cook dishes you know when you’re cooking for company, suggests Stern, and then serve them, family-style, on pretty platters – even if it’s meat loaf or shepherd’s pie. “If it’s a new dish, try it once before serving it to company. Any recipe is easier the second time.”

Remember that not everything has to be made from scratch: It’s perfectly acceptable to boil frozen peas and serve them, for instance. For a chocolate pecan pie she prepared for the class, Goodman-Sone used a prepared pie crust. (See recipe online at montrealgazette.com/life) Remember to transfer it from the foil pan to one of your own, ideally one with a detachable bottom: Nothing says store-bought like a tin foil pan.

Consider preparing only the dishes you enjoy making – and contracting out the others, she suggests. If you hate to wash lettuce or cut fruit, for instance, consider farming out those tasks: If guests ask what they can bring, tell them a salad or a platter of fruit.

We get caught up with everything being fresh, travelling directly from stove to table, “but it doesn’t have to be so,” said Goodman-Sone. A dinner she served to guests the other night featured soup and meatballs she had stocked in the freezer.

“We are too hard on ourselves,” she said. “My mother once gave me very good advice: ‘It’s not the food you serve that’s important,’” she said. “It’s the people around the table.”

People tend to plan based on what they want to make – and not on the time they have, Stern said. “There shouldn’t be more than one thing you have to worry about at the last minute.” Much as you might love, say, stir fries, you can’t get three of them on the table for company. One, fine. With steamed rice and a salad, there’s dinner.

For Debbie Friedman, a busy working mother of two teenage boys, Friday night

dinner with the family, which sometimes includes extended family, is important. Growing up, Friday night was always family night for her – as it was for her husband.

“I still wanted to keep the tradition,” she said. “But working, it’s not so easy. So I plan ahead and try and think of simple things that are good.”

Sometimes that’s a shepherd’s pie with sweet potatoes “that everyone seems to love.” Or a lasagna she prepares on Thursday – and serves with a nice big salad and garlic bread she picks up on Friday. Or she’ll buy fresh pizza dough and keep it in the freezer: She’ll cut up the vegetables in advance and the kids get to choose their own toppings. “It smells so good – and it’s so easy,” said Friedman, director of the trauma program at the Montreal Children’s Hospital.

“And there are easy desserts: hot chocolate chip cookies right out of the oven or an apple crisp or chocolate fondue. My whole issue is time,” she said. “I think a lot of it is thinking about it ahead of time and doing something that doesn’t take a lot of effort; it’s important to have stuff handy in the house as well.

“As a working mother, I want to feel there is a routine – even though things sometimes get crazy. I want the kids to respect Friday night: I think it’s important.”

It’s important to remember also that less is often enough. Stern, for instance, generally tends not to serve a sit-down first course when she entertains; she prefers something like soup in shooter glasses when guests arrive – or a simple appetizer such as roasted cauliflower with tahina, a dip made from sesame seeds, to have with drinks.

She likes to serve appetizers in the kitchen: If that’s where you are when guests arrive, assign them dinner-related tasks. “Most people love to help.”

And when her guests do sit down, it’s to the main course. “That way, you’re not in the kitchen as much,” she said. She prefers serving family-style on platters and having guests help themselves to plating the food, restaurant-style, on individual plates. “I don’t feel at home that I should be trying to imitate a restaurant,” Stern said.

Look for ways to make life easier for yourself. If you’ll be eating in the dining room and it’s not a room you use every day, set the table the night before or even two days earlier – so you can enjoy the process, suggests Goodman-Sone. Maybe buy flowers and set out candles.

But don’t think you need to base yourself on magazine features depicting perfect table settings and elaborate menus. “I don’t think it’s realistic,” she said. “It just panics people – and puts them under a lot of pressure.”

I asked Stern whether, during decades of cooking for family and friends, she could recall a disastrous meal or an egregious mistake in the kitchen.

She reflected a moment. “Not mistakes,” she replied, “but trying to be too intricate. Too complicated.

“Simple is really good.”

Elliott Cohen works as a personal chef, caterer and cooking instructor who gives group and private classes and also teaches at the Cavendish Loblaws store. Visit www.ecca.ca.

Shawna Goodman-Sone, editor of the bestselling cookbook *Panache*, gives monthly cooking classes at the Cavendish, Kirkland and Pierrefonds Loblaws stores. She also consults on how people can organize themselves to entertain and will customize cooking classes for individuals or families. Email her at chefshawna@hotmail.com.

To register for their classes at Loblaws stores, go to www.loblaws.ca, click on Montreal, then the individual store, and then click on the link to Cooking School.

For more on Bonnie Stern, visit www.bonniestern.com.

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ED KAISER CANWEST NEWS SERVICE

Bonnie Stern’s advice is to plan a Friday night meal around the time available to prepare it. Don’t leave more than one thing to the last minute, she says.



DAVE SIDAWAY THE GAZETTE

Chicken pieces are first seared, then cooked with fresh herbs and vegetables that have been sautéed.

Flexible and forgiving

MAIN DISHES CAN BE PREPARED IN ADVANCE

A touch of summer for dessert: grilled pineapple

SUSAN SCHWARTZ
THE GAZETTE

montrealgazette.com/life

VIDEO AND MORE

Join us online, where we feature Elliott Cohen demonstrating the preparation of the three dishes here. Also, additional recipes for simple, elegant meals.

What distinguishes these recipes, which come from Elliott Cohen, a Montreal-based personal chef, caterer and cooking instructor, is that they’re flexible and forgiving – in other words, pretty difficult to screw up. So just go with it. Relax. It’s Friday night – at least in your mind.

Braised Chicken with Vegetables and Fresh Herbs

Serves 4

This fragrant, rustic and simple meal in a pot is perfect comfort food on a cold winter night. It is easily prepared a day or two or three in advance. Sage is a wonderful herb with poultry – and sage and thyme work well together. But if you like rosemary, say, or lavender, then by all means use them. This recipe can be doubled. Use dense vegetables, such as butternut squash and turnip – and cut them into pieces of the same approximate size so cooking time will be comparable. Cohen used commercial broth for this recipe – Campbell’s brand low-sodium chicken broth – but has no qualms. The chicken, vegetables and herbs impart a great deal of flavour.

“I have transferred this commercial product into something magnificent,” he said.

1 whole chicken, about 3 pounds (1.5 kilo), skin on, cut into 6 to 8 pieces, preferably bone-in, parts of your choice (see Note)

Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste
3 to 4 cups (750 mL to 1 L) your favourite vegetables, cut into one-inch (2.5 cm) pieces – such as onions, carrots, butternut squash, turnips, parsnips, celery root (also called celeriac)
½ bunch, total, of fresh thyme, sage and/or rosemary
1 L (4 cups) low-sodium chicken broth

Rinse chicken and pat dry. Season with salt and pepper. Sear on medium heat, skin side down, in a heavy-bottom non-stick pan with a 12-inch (30 cm) diameter, or two smaller pans, until browned – about two minutes or so – and then turn and repeat until browned on second side. Remove chicken from pan, leaving one to 2 tablespoons (15 to 30 mL) chicken fat, and sauté vegetables briefly with salt and pepper on medium-high heat, until lightly golden. Return chicken to pan, add broth – there should be enough broth in pan to cover the chicken by at least one half – and fresh herbs and bring to a boil. Reduce to simmer and cook, covered – if there is no pan cover, cover loosely, and carefully, because the pan is hot, with foil – until chicken is cooked, about 40 minutes. Test one of the biggest pieces: the dish is ready when a piece of chicken is pierced with a fork and juices run clear. Place chicken in a shallow serving bowl and spoon vegetables and broth over it. Garnish with a sprig of fresh herbs and serve.

The vegetables can be cut up in advance and the chicken seared a day or two before. Or the entire dish can be prepared in advance, then cooled to room temperature, placed in a casserole dish or a glass baking dish, covered with plastic wrap and refrigerated.

To serve, bring dish to room temperature, remove plastic wrap and reheat, covered with foil, in a 350F (180 C) oven

for 30 to 40 minutes. Or, if you prefer, reheat on top of the stove in a vessel that comfortably holds the ingredients, bringing the liquid to a steady simmer and then cooking for about 20 minutes. If there seems to be too much liquid, you need not reheat it all. Conversely, should you want more liquid, add a bit more broth to the dish as it reheats.

Serve in individual shallow bowls decorated with a sprig of thyme, or if you prefer family-style service, in a larger, similarly garnished, shallow bowl.

Note: Legs and thighs reheat better than breast meat; dark meat contains more fat and will remain more moist.

Cranberry and Goat Cheese Phyllo Purses

Makes 35 to 40 purses

These small pouches, or purses, of phyllo dough filled with goat cheese and cranberry jam look as good as they taste. Many people are intimidated by phyllo, Cohen acknowledges. “But you don’t have to be afraid of it,” he says, and his simple preparation shows why (see video).

The richness of goat cheese and the tartness of cranberry makes for an appealing combination; a splash of port for another flavour note. But this dish would work with other fillings, too – plain goat cheese, for instance, or feta mixed with a pound (500 g) of fresh spinach sautéed with olive oil, salt and pepper; then squeezed dry.

Buy two packages of phyllo – in case one doesn’t unfold properly when it’s defrosted.

6 sheets phyllo dough, defrosted
½ cup (8 tablespoons or 1 stick) unsalted butter, melted
8 ounces (250 g) goat cheese flavoured with cranberry (see Note)
1 tablespoon (15 mL) port, or to taste

Combine the goat cheese and port in a food processor and process until combined, about 15 seconds. Place in a small bowl, cover with plastic wrap and keep in the refrigerator until ready to assemble purses; this can be done up to three days in advance.

But, if you are assembling the purses immediately, place mixture in freezer after processing for 15 minutes to firm it up so it is easier to work with.

Meanwhile, melt butter on low heat. Remove mixture from freezer and, using a one teaspoon (5 mL) measuring spoon, portion it into 35 to 40 balls. This step can be done the day before. Place cheese balls in a single layer on a cookie sheet, in a pie plate or on a dinner plate, cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate.

Remove phyllo from fridge. On a clean work surface, lay out one sheet, long side facing you and, with a two-inch (5-cm)-wide basting brush, brush it lightly with melted butter, making sure to cover the edges. Place a second sheet of phyllo on top of the first and also brush lightly with butter. Using a sharp knife, cut the sheets into three

lengths and then cut each length crosswise into fifths to make a total of 15 sections, each about 4-by-3½ inches (10-by-9 cm). Place a teaspoon of the filling in the centre of each phyllo square. One square at a time, quickly gather the corners of the phyllo over the filling and twist gently, tapping the bottom gently against your hand to ensure a flat bottom until you form what looks like a small pouch, or purse. Place the purses on a buttered sheet pan and make the rest of the purses with the remaining phyllo, butter, and filling. Lightly brush the outside of each purse with butter.

(At this point, you may freeze the purses by placing the sheet pan in the freezer for about an hour and then, once purses are frozen, transferring them to a clear plastic bag with a zippered lock: that way, they won’t stick to each other and they can remain in the freezer safely for up to three months.)

To cook immediately, place buttered sheet pan of purses on a rack in the lower third of a 350F (180C) oven and bake until golden, about 20 minutes. Let cool 10 minutes, then serve.

Purses can go directly from freezer to the oven on a buttered sheet pan: just leave them in there 10 to 15 minutes longer than if they weren’t frozen – a total of 30 to 35 minutes.

Note: The product Cohen used, Celebrity International Cranberry Goat Cheese with Cinnamon, is made with Quebec cranberries and Canadian goats’ milk cheese. It is available in the Montreal area at Costco, and at Loblaws and Provigo stores.

Marinated Grilled Pineapple with Vanilla Mascarpone

Serves 6

Cooking the pineapple caramelizes its natural sugar and intensifies its flavour and its sweetness. It’s a wonderful way to end a meal. You could use other fruits, such as pears, apples or melon. This dish works hot or at room temperature.

Grilling pineapple indoors in the middle of winter: How’s that for a bit of summer in January? I like this dessert best plain – no mascarpone, no sugar, no syrup, no nothing.

1 medium ripe pineapple, peeled and cut into ½ inch (85 mm) slices
3 cups (750 mL) orange or mango juice
¼ cup (60 mL) dark rum
1 cup (250 mL) mascarpone cheese
2 teaspoons (10 mL) pure vanilla extract
2 tablespoons (30 mL) sugar or to taste
2 tablespoons (30 mL) icing sugar
1 bunch fresh mint

Place pineapple slices in a glass bowl and cover with fruit juice and rum. Marinate, covered and in the refrigerator, for at least 30 minutes and up to four hours. Meanwhile combine mascarpone, vanilla and sugar in a small bowl. Preheat gas barbecue to medium, if using, cover down, for 15 minutes. Or pre-heat a non-stick ridged grill pan on the stovetop on medium for two to three minutes. Using tongs, lift pineapple slices, one by one, and shake off excess marinade and transfer to barbecue or to grill pan and cook about two to three minutes or until golden, then flip to the other side and cook for a further two or three minutes.

Place two or three slices on a plate with a dollop of mascarpone. Using a fine-mesh sieve, dust pineapple and plate with icing sugar, garnish with a sprig of fresh mint and serve.

Note: If you like, reduce the marinade in a pot on the stove to the consistency of syrup and drizzle over pineapple or serve on the side. Use other fruits if you prefer, including pears, apples or melon.