

Appetizers

Growing up in a Southern Baptist household with a father who was a Deacon and a cook meant that friends and neighbors were always stopping by my house. My mother was never really big on entertaining. However, my father loved company and any reason to showcase his culinary skills. Sometimes he would treat his guests to desserts and other times to full course meals. When he did not feel up to a lot of cooking, he simply prepared “finger foods” or hors d’oeuvres as the *fancy folks* called them. Finger foods were simply appetizers that guests ate with one hand and ideally did not require using flatware.

My father could turn a simple visit into a festive occasion. I often think that I am experiencing the exact same feelings as my father did when he brought joy to his friends and family members as they smacked their lips while enjoying his savory snacks. I get great joy creating a party atmosphere using simple ingredients.

Appetizers do not require fancy or expensive ingredients. What I particularly like about appetizers is that they also do not require hours of preparation time. My father rarely used sauces, and he definitely did not use salsas, but I have a feeling that he would enjoy my adaptations on some of his fun foods.

So get out the forks and frilly toothpicks because this chapter provides a wide range of appetizers for mild to spicy palates.

Barbecue Shrimp

The barbecue shrimp is wonderful when served alone or as a topping for a miniature open-faced, toasted buttermilk biscuit. My customers equally enjoy this shrimp recipe with grits or white rice.

- 2 oz. sweet butter**
- 1 tbsp. grated Spanish onion**
- 1 tsp. minced fresh garlic**
- 2 tbsp. sugar**
- 1 cup Worcestershire sauce**
- 1¼ cup catsup**
- 1 tsp. Dijon mustard**
- 1 tsp. yellow mustard**
- 1 tbsp. white vinegar**
- ½ tsp. jerk seasoning**
- Salt and pepper, to taste**
- 20 medium shrimp, peeled, cleaned, and deveined**

On low heat, melt butter in a medium sauce pan. Add grated onions, garlic, and sugar. Using a wooden spoon, stir mixture well for approximately 3 minutes. Add remaining ingredients except shrimp. Allow sauce to simmer for 8 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add shrimp and cook an additional 5 minutes. Makes 4 servings.

Seasoned Boiled Shrimp with Cocktail Sauce

Shrimp cocktail is an American icon amongst the list of favorite appetizers.

48 oz. water
1 tsp. Old Bay seasoning
1 bay leaf
1 cup dry white wine
1 lemon, quartered
1 rib celery, cut in three pieces
1 medium carrot, cut in three pieces
1 medium onion, peeled and cut in half
20 medium shrimp, peeled, cleaned, and deveined, with tails on.

In a medium pot add all ingredients except shrimp. Bring to a boil, then add shrimp. Cook shrimp for approximately 10 minutes or until shrimp turn pink. Remove shrimp from pot and place in a perforated pan (or colander) on a bed of ice. Allow shrimp to cool. Refrigerate shrimp until ready to use. Serve chilled with cocktail sauce. Makes 4 servings.

Cocktail Sauce

1 cup chili sauce
1 tsp. prepared horseradish
1 tsp. hot sauce
Juice from 1 lemon, seeds removed

In a small bowl, combine all ingredients. Mix well. Refrigerate for 1 hour. Serve chilled with shrimp. Makes 4 servings.

Cocktail Meatballs

½ lb. ground beef sirloin
½ lb. ground turkey
¼ lb. ground pork
2 tbsp. minced onions
2 tbsp. minced green peppers
1 tsp. minced fresh garlic
¼ cup milk
½ cup plain breadcrumbs
2 large eggs, beaten
Salt and black pepper, to taste
2 cups beef broth

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Combine all the ingredients except beef broth and mix well. Shape the meat mixture into 24 small meatballs and place the meatballs on a medium baking pan. Pour beef broth into pan. Cover pan with aluminum foil and bake for 20 minutes.

Remove foil from pan after 20 minutes. Cook uncovered meatballs an additional 10 minutes. Serve hot. Makes 6 servings.

Corn and Smoked Oyster Fritters

I always serve these fritters with my special renditions of a remoulade sauce and any one of my salsa sauces. The two sauces create a superb contrast in flavors. This appetizer is a favorite item on the menu. Even customers who are not crazy about the consistency of fresh oysters love the firmness of smoked oysters. In addition to ordering this selection as an appetizer, several of my customers who are vegetarians order the fritters with a few side dishes as an entree. I use fresh corn in season to give these fritters a farm fresh flavor.

These tasty morsels might have played a role in helping one couple tie the knot. This couple frequently dined at the restaurant while dating and immediately fell in love with these fritters. When they booked me to cater their wedding reception, the groom insisted that I include the fritters with the remoulade sauce and tomato salsa as one of their appetizers. Their guests were wild about these flavorful delicacies. Due to the rave reviews, this couple always orders the fritters for all of their family's celebrations.

- 2 cups whole kernel corn, frozen or cut from the cob**
- 3 tbsp. all-purpose flour**
- 1 tsp. baking powder**
- 1 large egg**
- 1 3.75-oz. can smoked oysters**
- ½ tsp. seafood seasoning**
- 4 oz. canola oil, for frying**

In a medium mixing bowl, combine all ingredients except canola oil. Heat oil in a heavy gauge frying pan to 325 degrees. Use a large tablespoon to place fritters in oil. Cook fritters on each side approximately 1½ minutes or until golden brown. Cooking time will depend on size of fritters. Remove fritters from oil and drain on paper towel. Serve hot. Makes 5 servings.

Crab and Fresh Corn Cakes

I recall serving this appetizer at a reception following a movie premiere. This appetizer is mouth watering when served alone or with a variety of sauces and salsas. However, on one occasion, when I served the crab and corn cakes with my black-eyed pea relish, the combination caused quite a buzz amongst the guests. Apparently, they were accustomed to eating black-eyed peas as a side dish on top of rice.

- 1 lb. lump crab meat, thoroughly picked over to remove cartilage**
- 2 large eggs**
- 2 tsp. Worcestershire sauce**
- 2 tsp. fresh lemon juice**
- 4 oz. whole kernel corn, frozen or cut from the cob**
- 4 oz. finely chopped onion**
- 4 oz. finely chopped bell pepper**
- 1 tsp. Dijon mustard**
- 3 tbsp. mayonnaise**
- 1 cup plain breadcrumbs**
- 1 tsp. seafood seasoning**
- 4 oz. canola oil, for frying**

Combine all ingredients except canola oil in a mixing bowl. Using the palms of the hand, shape mixture into patties. Place oil in medium frying pan. Heat oil to 325 degrees and place crab cakes into frying pan. Cook each patty 2 to 3 minutes on each side. Remove crab cakes from frying pan and place each patty on a cookie sheet. Bake in a preheated 350 degree oven for 8 minutes. Remove crab cakes from oven and serve hot with tartar sauce. Makes 4 servings.

Crab Cakes with Mango Salsa

**1 lb. lump crab meat, thoroughly picked over to
 remove cartilage**
1 tbsp. mayonnaise
1 egg, beaten
1 tsp. Dijon mustard
1 tsp. chopped fresh parsley
1 tsp. seafood seasoning
¼ cup plain breadcrumbs
Salt and pepper, to taste
Juice from ½ lemon, remove seeds
1 cup vegetable oil, for frying

Place all ingredients except vegetable oil in a medium size mixing bowl. Mix all the ingredients well. Using the palms of the hand, shape crab meat mixture into eight small crab cakes.

Heat oil in a heavy gauge skillet to 325 degrees. Place crab cakes in hot oil and cook approximately 3 minutes on each side. Remove crab cakes from oil and drain on paper towels. Makes 4 servings.

Mango Salsa

2 small mangos
1 tbsp. finely chopped red onion
1 tbsp. finely chopped Vidalia onion
3 tbsp. finely chopped green pepper
2 tbsp. finely chopped fresh cilantro
Juice from 1 lime
Salt and pepper, to taste

Peel mangos and chop into small cubes. In a small bowl, combine all ingredients and mix well. Refrigerate for 1 hour allowing the flavors to blend. Makes 4 servings.

Grilled Black-Eyed-Pea Patties

1 cup dry black-eyed peas, pick over to remove unfavorable particles from peas
5 cups cold water
½ tsp. granulated garlic
1 tbsp. minced onion
3 tbsp. finely chopped tomato
1 pinch turmeric
5 tbsp. chopped cilantro
3 tbsp. fresh lemon juice
1 pinch cayenne pepper
Salt, to taste
4 tbsp. olive oil

Soak peas 3 hours or overnight. Place peas in medium pot with 5 cups of water. Boil peas for 1 hour on medium heat until tender. Drain well and mash peas until semi-smooth. Add remaining ingredients. Using a small scoop, form mixture into approximately 8 to 10 patties. Coat grilling pan with olive oil. Place patties into pan and grill until golden brown on each side. Makes 8 to 10 servings.

Hush Puppies

On occasions when my father was in an especially good mood, he would prepare hush puppies as a special treat to accompany fried fish. First, he fried the fish. Seasoned oil always enhanced the flavor of any fish he fried. Then he used the same oil to fry the hush puppies. Half the fun was popping these corn treats into our mouths. The other pleasure was their taste.

I maintain this tradition and use the same technique when I prepare these hush puppies to serve with fish platters.

- 1 cup yellow corn meal**
- 2 tsp. baking powder**
- ½ tsp. salt**
- 1 tsp. Cajun spice**
- ½ tsp. cayenne pepper**
- 1 chopped medium onion**
- ¼ cup whole kernel corn, frozen or cut from the cob**
- 2 large eggs**
- ¼ cup buttermilk**
- 8½ oz. vegetable oil**

In a medium bowl, mix the dry ingredients, chopped onions, and whole kernel corn. Add eggs and buttermilk. Stir well. Set mixture aside.

Heat oil in medium size iron skillet to 350 degrees. Use a tablespoon to place batter into the oil. Deep fry batter 3 to 5 minutes or until golden brown. Batter should float to the top. Drain hush puppies on paper towel. Serve hot. Makes 4 servings.

Jalapeno Hush Puppies with Crabmeat

- 2 cups fine yellow corn meal**
- 1 cup self-rising flour**
- 2½ tbsp. sugar**
- 4 tsp. baking powder**
- 1½ tsp. kosher salt**
- 1 cup chopped onion**
- 1½ tbsp. chopped Jalapeno pepper**
- 1½ cup buttermilk**
- 2 large eggs**
- 8 oz. lump crab meat, thoroughly picked over to
remove cartilage**
- 3 cups canola oil, for frying**

In a medium bowl, combine all ingredients except oil. Preheat oil in a large black cast-iron skillet to 350 degrees. Drop a level tablespoon of batter into hot oil. Cook until golden brown on both sides, approximately 3 minutes. Drain hush puppies on paper towel. Makes 4 servings.

Fried Okra with Lemon Caper Sauce

Customers who typically do not like okra for its texture absolutely enjoy this appetizer because the finished product is firm and crispy. Occasionally, I prepare this dish the same day of serving. However, I have gotten the best results when I marinade the okra in the buttermilk mixture overnight.

- 2 cups buttermilk**
- 1 tsp. Old Bay seasoning**
- 1 tsp. salt**
- 1 tsp. black pepper**
- ½ tsp. cayenne pepper**
- 1 tbsp. hot sauce**
- 1 lb. medium okra, untrimmed**
- 2½ cups yellow corn meal**
- 1½ cups vegetable oil**

In a medium bowl, add buttermilk, Old Bay seasoning, salt, black pepper, cayenne pepper, and hot sauce. Mix well. Add okra. Cover and refrigerate overnight.

When prepared to fry okra, place yellow corn meal in a shallow pan and set aside. Heat vegetable oil in deep frying pan to 325 degrees. Using tongs, remove the okra from the buttermilk mixture and dredge in the yellow corn meal. Fry in small batches until the okra is crispy and golden brown. Drain okra well on paper towels. Serve hot with lemon caper sauce. Makes 5 servings.

Lemon Caper Sauce

- 1 cup mayonnaise**
- 1 tbsp. grated parmesan cheese**
- 1 tsp. baby capers**
- 2 tbsp. freshly squeezed lemon juice**
- 1 tsp. minced fresh garlic**
- 1 tbsp. hot sauce**

In a medium mixing bowl combine all the ingredients and mix well. Refrigerate until ready to use as a dipping sauce for the okra. Makes 5 servings.

Fried Pecan Chicken Fingers

The perfect accompaniment to the fried pecan chicken fingers is a tasty honey-mustard sauce.

- 1 tsp. kosher salt**
- 1 tsp. white pepper**
- ½ tsp. garlic powder**
- 2 cups plain breadcrumbs**
- 1 cup chopped pecans**
- 3 cups canola oil**
- 2 lb. chicken cutlets, skin removed**
- 1 cup all-purpose flour**
- 2 cups milk**
- 2 large eggs**

In a small dish, mix salt, white pepper, and garlic powder and set aside. Combine breadcrumbs and chopped pecans in a medium mixing bowl and set aside. Heat oil in a heavy skillet on low heat while prepping chicken.

Cut chicken cutlets into strips approximately the size of average fingers. Season chicken with spice mixture, then dredge chicken fingers in flour. Shake off excess flour. Set aside. Blend milk and eggs in a medium bowl. Dip floured chicken fingers in egg mixture and then into breadcrumb and pecan mixture. Set aside until all chicken fingers are thoroughly coated.

Heat oil to 350 degrees when ready to fry chicken. Fry chicken fingers approximately 3 minutes until golden brown. Serve hot or at room temperature with dipping sauce. Makes 4 to 6 servings.

Miniature Orange Corn Muffins with Cranberry and Pear Relish

Several years ago, I catered a record release party for a legendary recording artist who played a guitar and sang the blues. These muffins served with thinly sliced smoked ham were his favorite appetizer. He was so impressed with the combination of flavors that he asked if he could take a picture with me! This was definitely a proud moment.

These muffins are always a hit with guests whenever I cater upscale parties. I also use sliced smoked turkey in place of ham, based upon the customer's preference.

2½ cups all-purpose flour
2½ cups yellow corn meal
5 tsp. baking powder
1¼ tsp. baking soda
1½ cups fine sugar
2½ tsp. salt
1 cup milk
2 cups orange juice
6 large eggs
8 oz. vegetable oil
8 oz. unsalted melted butter
24 pieces thinly sliced ham

Preheat oven to 325 degrees. In a medium bowl, mix all dry ingredients and set aside. In a small bowl, blend milk and orange juice. Add liquid mixture to dry mixture.

In a separate bowl, beat eggs slightly and then add to mixture. Mix batter well. Add vegetable oil and melted butter to batter. Beat well and set aside.

Spray mini muffin pan with baking release spray. Using a teaspoon, fill each insert in muffin pan with batter. Bake in 325 degree oven for 15 to 20 minutes or until golden brown. Muffin is ready if a toothpick inserted into the middle comes out clean. Makes 8 servings.

Cranberry and Pear Relish

- 1 cup cold water**
- 1 cup whole cranberries**
- ½ cup brown sugar**
- ¾ cup white sugar**
- 1 Bartlett pear, peeled and diced to small cubes**

Place all ingredients in a heavy quart sauce pan. Cook on medium heat for 15 minutes. Cranberries should pop open. Remove from heat and cool until ready to use.

Slice muffins in half separating the top of each muffin from the bottom half. Place a few pieces of thinly sliced ham or smoked turkey with a smear of relish on the bottom half of muffin. Replace tops of muffins and insert decorative toothpicks to hold miniature sandwiches together. Makes 8 servings.

Oyster Fritters

- 1 pt. shucked fresh oysters, reserve ½ cup juice from oysters**
- 2 cups all-purpose flour**
- ¼ tsp. baking soda**
- ¼ tsp. cayenne pepper**
- ¼ tsp. Old Bay seasoning**
- salt and pepper, to taste**
- 3 eggs, beaten**
- ¼ cup buttermilk**
- ½ cup oyster juice**
- 1 qt. vegetable oil, for frying**

Chop oysters into medium size pieces. Set aside. In a small bowl, combine flour, baking soda, cayenne pepper, Old Bay seasoning, salt, and pepper. In another bowl, combine eggs, milk, and oyster juice.

Heat oil in a frying skillet to 325 degrees. Using a tablespoon, drop batter into oil. Cook fritters for 3 minutes on each side. Remove from oil and drain on paper towels. Serve with tartar sauce or remoulade sauce. Makes 8 servings.

Deep Fried Cajun Oysters

Whenever I prepare this recipe, I purchase fresh oysters already shucked and drained from my fish monger. This convenience saves an immeasurable amount of time and diminishes my concerns that novice cooks will hurt themselves preparing this appetizer if unfamiliar with the technique of removing the oyster from the shell.

Prior to preparing the oysters, I insist that my sous-chef allocates a few extra minutes to prepare tartar sauce using my recipe and refrigerate until ready to use. It may be tempting to buy tartar sauce already bottled. However, I do not compromise taste to save a minimal amount of time.

½ cup buttermilk
½ cup milk
2 eggs, beaten
8 oz. all-purpose flour
8 oz. yellow corn meal
2½ tbsp. Cajun spice mix
2 cups canola oil
1 lb. oysters, shucked and drained

Combine buttermilk, milk, and eggs. Mix well and set aside. In a small bowl, mix flour, corn meal, and Cajun spice. Combine well. Set aside. Heat oil in cast iron frying pan to 350 degrees.

Dip oysters in milk mixture. Dredge in seasoned flour and corn meal mix. Place oysters in hot oil. Fry for approximately 3 to 4 minutes or until golden brown. Drain oysters on paper towel. Serve hot with tartar sauce. Makes 4 servings.

Potato Pancakes with Apple Sauce

I find that these pancakes are popular with diverse populations. Due to its wide appeal, I suggest them as appetizers when catering parties with multicultural guests. When cooking for affluent clientele, I substitute sour cream and caviar in place of apple sauce.

3 medium russet potatoes
2 tbsp. grated onions
1 medium egg
1 pinch grated nutmeg
1 tbsp. all-purpose flour
salt and pepper, to taste
2 cups vegetable oil

Peel and grate potatoes. Place grated potatoes in a clean kitchen towel and squeeze out all liquid. Add onions, egg, flour, and seasonings.

Heat oil in a large frying pan to 350 degrees. Using a tablespoon, drop mixture in hot oil, making 8 pancakes. Cook pancakes for 2 minutes on each side. Makes 4 servings.

Apple Sauce

2 golden apples, peeled and diced
¼ cup apple juice
¼ tsp. ground cinnamon
2 tbsp. sugar

Combine all ingredients in small sauce pan. Simmer on low heat for 10 to 15 minutes until apples are tender. Cool and serve with potato pancakes. Makes 4 servings.

Spicy Wings with Blue Cheese Dip

Certain customers who enjoy eating "hot" food prefer to eat these wings without the blue cheese dip. The flavor is very powerful. Therefore I suggest serving the wings with the dip for most guests who have a milder palate.

8 chicken wings, tips removed
1 cup all-purpose flour
2 cups vegetable oil
4 oz. unsalted butter
4 oz. hot sauce
4 oz. dry white wine
1 tsp. minced fresh garlic
1 tbsp. fresh chopped cilantro

Cut each chicken wing at the joint into 2 separate pieces. Dredge each piece in flour. Shake off excess flour and set aside. In a medium frying pan, heat vegetable oil to 350 degrees. Fry chicken pieces in vegetable oil for approximately 15 minutes or until golden brown. Chicken is ready when the pieces float to the top of the oil. Remove each piece of chicken from oil and drain on paper towel. Set aside.

In a medium sauce pan, combine butter, hot sauce, wine, garlic, and cilantro. Cook ingredients on medium heat. When butter mixture begins to boil, add chicken pieces. Coat pieces well with butter mixture. Reduce heat and simmer approximately 3 minutes. Remove pan from heat and serve chicken pieces sizzling with blue cheese dip. Makes 4 servings.

Blue Cheese Dip

6 oz. mayonnaise
2 tsp. sour cream
2 oz. crumbled gorgonzola blue cheese

Combine all ingredients and mix well. Refrigerate 30 minutes. Serve with spicy wings. Makes 4 servings.