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(my first Food Love column)

A Case for Courses

Holiday lights adorn the column, frayed lamp post decorations line the main streets, neighbors have put out their blow-up Frosty. It's that time of year again, no doubt, no denial. I had to write about the holidays, fraught though they are but completely *steeped* with culinary traditions. Thanksgiving is past but we have Hanukkah, Posadas, Christmas, New Year's, and Kwanzaa. While I don't wish to add stress to anyone's already busy holiday time, I am going to suggest something new for your celebratory meals: planning a menu (or choosing one handily presented in a cookbook) and serving that meal in courses. Yes, *courses*, complete with all the table settings (now is the time for grandma's unused wedding china), perhaps even with wine for every course. Stay with me; don't turn to the horoscopes, shaking your head at my obvious naïveté, callousness or just plain ignorance of your over-scheduled life. Let me ask the cooks of these holiday meals: would you rather have all your hard work enjoyed slowly, with conversation and appreciation, or hoovered up in twenty minutes finding yourself abandoned in the kitchen while the bloated relatives beach on respective couches? I propose that, carefully chosen, a menu served in courses is no more work than the lay-it-all-out on the table or buffet style that many Americans enjoy.

Let's explore the pros of eating in courses. As I mentioned, the food becomes the centerpiece. Consumed one dish at a time, the cook's hard work is truly appreciated. In the typical style of pile-it-all-on-at-once, flavors get mingled and messed, and most of us eat too fast to savor what's going down anyway. The folks that slather on salt and gravy (and I love both, don't get me wrong) will pretty much taste, well, salt and gravy. What about your slow simmered goose underneath? Or the subtlety of sage rubbed parsnips going unnoticed under a soup of simmered turkey innards? And then, at least in most households I've had dinner in, the meal—which took hours to prepare—is over in less than half an hour. With a meal served in courses, the meal can last an hour or more, and in this way the guests have time to enjoy each other and the food and wine. I hear what you might be saying—I don't want to enjoy my guests, I want them out as soon as possible. And while I'm no stranger to the awkward or dull family gathering, why have a big splashy meal with people you don't like? Honestly? Perhaps if you have some time to actually sit and listen to those relatives you don't relish, you might learn something new about them. Or, simply, don't try this dinner party idea on those you don't like to hang out with.

The next benefit of eating in courses is that, believe it or not, the cooks get to relax and enjoy the meal too. Again, the trick is picking a menu that works—don't plan on actually *cooking* between courses. Food should be already prepared and waiting, warmed or cooled as appropriate. Share out between-course tasks; a sibling to help serve, an older child to clear, and an uncle to do any necessary washing up. Probably the best benefit, other than really getting to enjoy your company, is that *you* can savor the food. Slowly, in small portions, with rest in between, each dish shines on its own. Picture movies you've seen, enormous tables set with goblets and a hundred forks, candlelight sparkling off the crystal and china, laughing guests, and the cook basking in the glow of success and conviviality. Often these films take place in Europe or the past (and OK, servants), but doesn't it seem appealing? For many of us the

meal is the high point of these holidays. And if your particular tradition has symbolic food or dishes made from recipes handed down over generations, this style of meal showcases those foods. For guests who are keen to contribute, coordinate the menu with them, and have them bring dishes that can take their place in line without being cooked in your busy oven—salads and desserts are ideal for this, or some cheese and fruit for a cheese course. Consider also choosing a co-cook for the whole meal.

You might wonder if I myself have attempted such a dinner party; I have. The meals have ranged from several courses with a wine chosen for each one, to simpler three course meals with no wine at all. I request guests bring whatever dishes and cutlery I don't have. Everything looks good in candlelight—including sheets as tablecloths and plastic flowers. I have presented these meals to resistant and enthusiastic family members alike, but after the meal *everyone* has been delighted with the experience. Especially the cooks.

This style of meal does take some flexibility and planning with children. But I have participated in these types of meals where kids were just a part of it all; they fit in naturally and ate what they wanted of what was being served and were allowed to come and go from the table. Having games in between the courses sparks fun for older kids and adults alike. Conversation starters like “two truths and a lie” are popular, but even photocopied maps of the US with guests competing to fill in states and capitals is playful but challenging (come on, we're Americans). Use your imagination and delegate mid-course entertainment to another family member. If there is wine flowing you won't have a problem with conversation.

In our quest to become more mindful, grateful, and healthy around our eating and engaging with others, creating a meal in this style is a challenge worth taking on. Below are two sample menus. Look to your own cook books, traditions, and beloved food to craft a menu that makes sense for you. *Bon Appétit!*

Vegetarian (from *The New Vegetarian Epicure*, by Anna Thomas)

Starter: Bruschetta w/ caramelized fennel and onion

Salad: Arugula and persimmons with walnuts and blue cheese

Intermezzo: Mint sorbet

Entrée: Eggplant pancakes in sweet red pepper sauce, Grilled polenta w/fresh porcini mushrooms

Dessert: Warm chocolate cakes w/ crème anglaise and boysenberry sauce

Meat (from *How to Eat*, by Nigella Lawson)

Starter: Trio of autumn crostini—wild mushroom, lentil and black olive, shrimp and eggplant

Salad: Chestnut and pancetta salad

Intermezzo: Lingonberry sorbet

Entrée: roast venison with apple puree and rosemary sauce, Parsnip mash w/ peas

Dessert: Quinces poached in muscat w/ lemon ice cream