

COOK'N WITH CAROLINE

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“Let’s take a closer look at how to serve a meal on a moment’s notice and what it takes to accomplish that.”



Cooking tricks of the trade from 50 years of a Southern Gal’s cooking

By Caroline Holder

How many of you have ever eaten a beautifully prepared Caesar salad? The freshest of Romaine, the perfect amount of those salty little anchovies, garlic worked into a paste with a good sea salt, just the right amount of a good olive oil, some thin onion slices, the tart juice from a perfect lemon, fresh cracked black pepper, and some crispy croutons all

with fresh grated Parmesan cheese? Absolutely nothing better any day of the year with almost anything you serve it with.

But how many of you know the most common story regarding the origin of the Caesar Salad? Seems that a rather well known aristocrat was enjoying a short holiday on a little island when

friends dropped in unexpectedly a little earlier than lunch. Being a congenial host he quickly surveyed his larder and came up with not much: a crisp bunch of romaine, a tin of anchovies, a half loaf of a rather stale French baguette, one lemon, and a passable chunk of good parmesan cheese. For four people? The rest, as they say, is history.

This really demonstrates what creativity can do in the kitchen. It also reinforces the concept that you can create an entrée or an entire menu out of only what is in your pantry and cupboards. You do not start with a recipe, instead you start with what you have on hand and build from that.

Have you ever had to quickly provide something for an impromptu lunch or dinner when someone drops in? Was it the food they enjoyed, or was it the companionship? Food is an important part of our lives and can be the focus for an event, but ultimately it is the conversation, companionship, and friendship that make a memorable meal. So let's take a closer look at how to serve a meal on a moment's notice and what it takes to accomplish that.

A critical part of any well organized kitchen is a well stocked pantry! There should always be essential staples: common herbs and spices, flour, sugar, baking powder, salt, pepper. Canned

goods provide a selection of vegetables and broths (chicken, beef, vegetable), and even some canned meats, cooked chicken, anchovies, etc. Don't forget the pastas, rice, and grains. I also like to keep a few "cocktail" type staples: nuts, pretzels, olives, pearl onions etc.

"Stonehurst Place deserves its incredible high reviews and more. For us it, was a great place to get away without leaving Atlanta. The great room was complemented by the service and the unbeatable breakfast. If you can stay here...do."

Chattaboogy, Athens

We all have such complicated schedules these days - do not be afraid to load up a freezer with vegetables. They are flash frozen at their peak and frequently have more nutrients than their fresh counterparts. Repackage any meats you purchase into single servings or at least what will work for you and your family. Do not try to keep meats in the freezer for more than 6 months depending on the variety, as they lose some of the flavor and begin to dry out. In the fridge keep some good cheese, fresh salad greens, butter, milk, eggs and you should be able to prepare a banquet fit for a king on a moment's notice.

So how do you begin? Think main course and decide on that first: the protein may be in the form of a meat or a combination of rice/beans for vegetarian. Once you have established that fill in the blanks. Turn that can of cooked chicken into tacos, a chicken and rice casserole, or add some canned

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tomatoes, some mozzarella cheese and make it Italian. Whip up pizza dough for a chicken vegetable pizza with onions, olives, peppers (canned or fresh) and some cheese. The possibilities are as endless as your imagination!

There is one more thing that is critical to an enjoyable meal:

PRESENTATION

Always try to remember that how you serve your guest is just as important and maybe more so than the food itself! Make every guest feel as if they are the most important person in your life that day! It may be just a simple taco with some rice and refried beans, but dress up the table and serve it with flair. Dig out that festive table cloth, grab whatever is handy, casual, and fun and put either fresh flowers, or even some pretty fruit and vegetables in the container for a pretty centerpiece. Use small hand towels for a layered look and use them as either a place mat on top of the cloth or shape them for oversized napkins. Use pretty glasses for water or wine. Add a few votives even if it is just lunch time. Slice a lemon or orange and mix together a quick sangria using the last of that wine on hand and if it is not enough, add some good fruit juice and lots of ice... a pretty, light "cocktail" for lunch and oh-so festive!

Don't be afraid to mix and match dinner ware. If you only have one set for four, then mix it with some good

china, it is fun! If you went to Mexico on vacation I am certain you brought home pictures or souvenirs. Scatter them on the table top as part of your decorations. Set a theme and make your guest feel super special. The food becomes secondary to the fun and conversation, and I promise your guest will go home and tell their friends you are amazing. You threw together a feast and a party in no time flat.

Until next time,

Caroline