



In remorse for killing his wife, emperor Nero burned a year's supply of cinnamon at her funeral

FOOD GEEK



It's time to eat real, America!

Food Day in America will be celebrated on Monday, October 24. The day has been sponsored by the Center for Science in the Public Interest and backed by Slow Food USA. The day will see thousands of Americans gather in schools, college campuses, farmers markets, City Halls, and state capitols to talk about what's right and wrong with their diets and whole food system and how to fix them. Their idea is to transform the American diet.

what's cooking

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Normally, when representatives of various countries, aka envoys, are stationed in a foreign land, they have a fixed agenda: to be a spokesperson for their country, build relationships, promote businesses, create awareness, and assist overall in the prevalence of general harmony and goodwill between the two countries.

We see them in formal meetings with the ministers of our country, heading important initiatives with industry bodies. And then in spite of such hectic schedules, some of them find time to engage the local public. Every embassy hosts a gala of events circling around food and drink and general mirth. The celebrations of the French and the Australian embassies are absolute crowd-pullers every time. But then, among the sacred brethren of 'Excellencies', there are a few who deviate from the norm, take the more-casual less-tried path, and build bridges into peoples' hearts.

My first interaction with the ambassador of Argentina was shockingly casual. As Señor Ernesto Alvarez sauntered around his office, he offered me a Coke, and when I acquiesced, he served it out of the fridge himself. No protocols, no bellboys-in-waiting, just straight up homely hospitality. From that point on, I have met him in the most relaxed of dispositions, even at the most formal of settings, and he has always been the one to lighten the mood. He fights a tough battle for Argentinean wine and food and in spite of the taxes and legal objections, he remains relentless.

Chile has always had a major presence in India and their ambassadors have set a series of examples as to how to organise wine events. From large scale tastings to small dinners, from previews to exhibitions, they are in the fore front when it comes to promoting local food and drink.

And then, on a very informal note, I happened to be invited to the residence of the Mexican ambassador, Jaime Nualart, and I was greeted with genuine warmth and love, not to mention, an array of Mexican wines, and also one of the most impressive art collections I have ever seen. Since then, I have also spent an afternoon being educated in Tequila and how shooting it is the worst way to enjoy it. The vibrancy and vivaciousness of Señor Nualart's attitude towards the beverages of his country, as also his sense of style and his acumen to know what makes a good party mix, make him best-suited to speak with authority on the subject.

Finally, one of the most surreal connections I made this year was when earlier on in the year I wrote about a particular Port wine and shortly found an email from the just-landed ambassador of Portugal, who had been diligently following up on India before coming and had duly found the article. He expressed his happiness and promised to bring more of the 'good stuff'. He has kept his word and we have witnessed some great wine launches, some super (-Bock) beer parties.

All in all, if the way to a man's heart is through his stomach these people have found the shortest way into the Indian zone of affection. They may be ambassadors of great countries and have serious paper work to go through every morning, but what makes me respect them even more is that they make time to step in as ambassadors of the great gastronomic culture of their nations. And one more thing, at such soires most of the time, they don't even necessary like the formality of the "Your Excellency" tag. If you can hear the national anthem playing somewhere, I am standing and saluting you all!



WHY THE BUNNY IS PERFECT FOR YOUR TUMMY

A minimalistic cooking style coupled with the copious use of fresh fish, lean meat, herbs, vegetables and olive oil has given Mediterranean cuisines a healthy tag, even as a profusion of regional variations gives them wide appeal, reports Geetanjali Jhala

Y ou're going to eat a rabbit? But they're bunnies," exclaimed a colleague when she heard about my assignment.

But rabbit meat is one of the characteristics of traditional Mediterranean cuisine and I soon discovered how tasty it can be. Besides, I learned they're more economical to breed than chicken, they take up less space than poultry and their food is cheaper and more easily available than chickenfeed.

Like chicken, rabbit meat is mild and can be flavoured easily. It is also a lean meat, making it healthier than most poultry and livestock.

At the JW Marriott Hotel's Lotus Cafe, executive sous chef Himanshu Taneja presented three classic French preparations of rabbit which brought out all that is good about Mediterranean fare—cassoulet of rabbit, seared rabbit loin, and spiced rabbit liver. The famous refinement of French cuisine was apparent especially in the delicacy of the rabbit loin cooked lightly in wine and served with saffron potatoes and a dash of rosemary sauce. "This cuisine came about as a result of the creative impulse of the Renaissance," points out chef Taneja.

HEALTH QUOTIENT
The liberal use of fresh herbs and vegetables, along with fish and lean meat, is what is making the so-called 'Mediterranean diet' popular the world over today among the health-conscious. The cuisine actually spans all the way from France and Italy to Lebanon and Morocco,



Prosciutto-wrapped sea scallops, seared foie gras and truffle jus

but what they have in common across these regions are their cooking medium—mostly olive oil—and protein sources. "Fish is the most commonly used protein source because the Mediterranean Sea provides easy access to fresh seafood," says Marco Priolo, Italian chef at Stella, The Leela. "The region's rocky terrain can't support larger herding animals like cows, limiting meat options to livestock, poultry and game." Adding to the health quotient is the minimalistic cooking, which retains natural flavours and nutrients. "In India, we tend to over-cook everything, even the most basic vegetables, and in the process, kill the nutrients," says Joy Bhat-tacharya, executive chef at the Trident Hotel.

The cuisines of Spain, Italy, Morocco and Greece in fact earned their Unesco status as 'intangible cultural heritages' last November to prevent their 'healthy food culture' from getting eroded by fast foods.

REGIONAL VARIATIONS
The term 'Mediterranean' applies to all the cuisines of the region, but each region also has a distinct variation. Even the olives grown and pressed in Spain are different from the olives that make Italian and Greek olive oils. Wine, used liberally in cooking Italian, French and Spanish food, is hardly ever used in the North African regions of Morocco and Lebanon. "Because of the complexity of the region's history, cultures, religions, and geography, Mediterranean food has developed in a variety of regional cuisines based on a divergent geography that ranges from the Alpine to coastal climes," says Taneja.

Take, for instance, rice dishes: The Italian risotto, Spanish paella, and Egyptian biryani are worlds apart. This is because the rice grown in each region is different and it is also cooked differently. While the Spaniards cook it with meat, vegetables and paprika, the Italians prefer cream or cheese in it, and the Egyptians use spices, tomatoes and peppers.

FRENCH SEARED RABBIT LOIN

Ingredients

- 1 rabbit loin ● 1/2 bottle red wine ● 1 tsp extra virgin olive oil ● 2 potatoes ● 3 tbsp butter ● 9-10 stigmas saffron ● 2 cups vegetable stock ● 2 tsp rabbit jus ● 1 sprig fresh rosemary ● salt and pepper to taste

Method

- Clean rabbit loin, remove all fat. Soak in red wine overnight. Remove loin from wine, pat dry on a paper towel.
- Rub with oil and seasonings, sear on a hot pan. Put fresh rosemary and cook till desired doneness.
- Cut potatoes into roundels, heat butter and sear potatoes. Add saffron and veg stock. Cook till they get firm.
- Plate it nicely and spoon over rabbit jus.



Chef Taneja cooking a cassoulet of rabbit, seared rabbit loin, and spiced rabbit liver (top)

Sometimes there is a variation of essentially the same dish from region to region. Caponata, for example, is a classic Sicilian dish made with capers, tomato sauce, celery, onions, fresh tomatoes, vinegar, sugar, basil, pine nuts, olive oil and salt. "The main ingredients are cut into small cubes and sauteed, then dried on paper towels and mixed with all the other ingredients," says chef Priolo. The French version of caponata is the ratatouille; in Spain, a similar preparation is called 'pisto manchego'; in Greece, it's called 'lemon-marinated vegetable'; and in Lebanon, this will be a vegetable salad with tabbouleh.

Similarly, in Greece, a charcoal-grilled sirloin steak is topped with spinach, olives and Feta cheese. In Spain, the sirloin steak is marinated in paprika and cooked with a tomato olive salsa. In Italy, a gorgonzola-topped steak is cooked in creamy polenta. And in France, the steak is marinated in thyme, grilled and served au jus with roast potatoes.

There is something essentially Mediterranean about these cuisines and yet they offer so much variety that it can also blend in with other cuisines. Chef Bhattacharya points out that most Indian foods go well with south Mediterranean cuisines such as Lebanese, Moroccan and Egyptian, and he likes to serve tandoori chicken with hummus. Strange combination? You'll be surprised.

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diet chart

The easier Atkins



The Dukan Diet gained prominence when it was credited with Kate Middleton's svelt figure. The diet, launched in France and hailed as the "easier Atkins", promises weight loss while eating as much meat, fish and fat-free yogurt as the dieter likes. In a nutshell, the Dukan Diet consists of four stages: In the first stage, Attack stage, you live on only protein-rich foods for up to ten days. The time spent on this phase depends on how much weight you have to shed. The Attack phase involves having eggs for breakfast, fish for lunch and steak for dinner. Other foods in this phase are lean and skinless chicken, turkey, lean ham, seafood such as crab and mussel, cottage cheese and skimmed



milk. These must be cooked minus added fat but you can use spices, lemon, vinegar and so sauce to season them. In addition, dieters have about two tablespoons of oat bran each day for fibre and at least 1½ litre of fluids such as water, tea, coffee and herbal tea. The Cruise stage is next, which involves adding unlimited amounts of certain vegetable every other day. If you make it to your goal weight without falling off the Dukan wagon you can enter the Consolidation phase. This is when "normal foods" such as bread, breakfast cereals, fruit, pasta, rice oils and butter along with



odd glass of alcohol—are gradually re-introduced. Dieters have to follow the Consolidation phase for five days for every pound lost on the diet. While this diet insures rapid weight loss and is comparatively simple, eating around three or four times your daily protein quota can put a strain on the kidneys. In spite of the oat bran, daily fibre intakes are usually lower than targets which can cause constipation.

GETTING STICKY WITH IT



It's an early holiday morning. Sleepy-eyed, you sneak out of bed into the kitchen. The only sound you can hear is the soft whirr of the refrigerator. You pull out the tray of cinnamon buns from the refrigerator and then jump back into bed for about an hour and a half or so. That's just the amount of time the dough needs before it meets its fate in the oven. Another thirty minutes of

baking, and the whole house is redolent with a sweet, warm, cinnamon rich smell. It's a smell that you always want your house to be enveloped in, a smell that was worth the break in your sleep. The oven timer goes off, you pull out the tray to be greeted by golden-hued spirals of sweet buns. It's time to summon the family and share cinnamon buns over coffee.

Making cinnamon buns is no big feat. It takes as much active time as, say, cupcakes. The inactive time is spent either waiting for the dough to rise or for the buns to bake in the oven (You do know that poking into the dough in anticipation is not counted as active time?) It probably feels like a lot of work because of all the expectation that builds while you wait, that you can't think of anything else but how the dough will transform into cinnamon clouds of heaven.

There are two types of cinnamon buns you can make. The flaky, almost

pastry like (the kind you get at Cinnabon) or the ones made with dough that's enriched with milk, eggs and sugar—a poorer cousin of the brioche. The latter is simpler and one that I have baked many times. Once you've got the hang of it, you won't need to wait for a holiday to bake. Also, you can use the same dough to make dinner rolls, the Jewish Challah or the Babka.

The first time I tried a cinnamon bun recipe, I went all out—piping hot sugar syrup to make caramel and a hunt for pecans around the city to make sticky cinnamon buns—caramel coated and spotted with bits of toasted pecans. That was dessert for breakfast.

Other variations worth a shot include: nuts and raisins rolled into the filling, cream cheese icing spooned over the buns or a generous amount of fig jam spread on the dough before rolling.



CINNAMON BUN RECIPE

Ingredients

- Dough: 1/4 cup warm water ● 1 tsp instant yeast ● 60g sugar ● 3/4 cup milk ● 100g butter ● 3 large egg yolks ● 500g flour
- Filling: 100g demerara ● 1 tsp ground cinnamon ● 100g unsalted butter

● Dough: In a bowl combine warm water, yeast and 1 tsp sugar. Stir to dissolve and let it sit until foamy, about five minutes. Add milk, butter, remaining sugar, egg yolks, salt and 3/4th of the flour. Knead until blended. Add the remaining flour and knead the dough until smooth and slightly sticky (add flour if it's too wet).

● Shape the dough into a ball and place in a large, buttered bowl. Turn dough over in bowl to coat it with the butter inside. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap. Let it rise in a warm place until doubled in volume, about 2 hours. Then punch down the dough. Turn out onto a lightly floured cutting board and let sit 20 minutes.

● Filling: Combine brown sugar and cinnamon and softened butter. Roll out dough into a 12x18 rectangle and spread the cinnamon-sugar mixture. Starting with the long side, roll dough into a cylinder. Place seam side down and cut crosswise into 15 slices. Dental floss does a neat job. Place dough slices in a large buttered baking dish. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate overnight.

● The next morning, remove the rolls from the refrigerator and let stand at room temperature for 90 minutes. Pre-heat oven to 190°C. Brush the top of the dough with egg wash (equal parts egg and water beaten together) Bake golden brown, 30 to 35 minutes. Remove from oven and serve warm.