

Effortless Appetizers

By planning ahead and dividing the work to create these irresistible appetizers, playing host is a piece of cake.

The key to any hors d'oeuvre, whether for a wedding or an informal get-together, is cramming a ton of flavor into a small bite. I always strive for combinations of spicy, crunchy, salty, creamy, or sweet for a complex, dynamic taste. These hors d'oeuvres are divided into three categories: **Simple Assembly** of store-bought ingredients, **Day-Ahead Prep** with some last details to tend to day of, and **At the Last Minute** to be made just before guests arrive. Party planning has never been so much fun. >

BY SERENA BASS



PHOTOGRAPHY TERRY BRENNAN
FOOD STYLING LARA MIKLASEVICS

1

simple assembly

1 Little Toasts with Manchego and Quince Paste

MAKES 12 SERVINGS

Sweet meets savory in these tasty bites.

- 1 package Divina square toasts
- 3 to 4 tablespoons salted butter
- 8 ounces Manchego cheese
- 3 ounces quince paste
- freshly ground black pepper

1. Position a rack in middle of oven and preheat to 350°F.
2. Arrange 24 toasts on a sheet pan and bake 8 minutes. Remove from oven and leave on pan to cool.
3. Shave a slice of butter and lay squarely on a cooled toast.
4. Slice Manchego to cover butter. Slightly warm quince paste in microwave and spoon ¼ teaspoon on top of cheese. Finish with a grind of black pepper and serve immediately.

2 Mission Figs with Blue Cheese and Marcona Almonds

MAKES 12 SERVINGS

This recipe takes almost longer to say than to make! Look for figs in a sealed bag and ensure they are soft, not dried out.

- 12 dried black mission figs, stems removed
- 4 ounces Gorgonzola cheese
- 12 Marcona almonds

1. Halve figs vertically. Use your thumb to create an indentation in each fig half.
2. Fill fig with a small scoop Gorgonzola

and, if serving immediately, push an almond into cheese. If serving next day, refrigerate without almond, bring to room temperature 1 hour, and add almond just before serving.

3 Prosciutto-Wrapped Pear and Melon

MAKES 12 SERVINGS

These appetizers disappear as soon as they are served!

- 2 ripe Anjou pears, peeled, quartered, and cored
- 12 pieces ripe honeydew or cantaloupe, peeled, seeded, and cut into 1-inch cubes
- 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
- 12 slices prosciutto di palma, halved across middle
- freshly ground black pepper

1. Cut stem end off each quarter of pear. Create three pieces by cutting off section closest to stem end then halving remaining section.
2. Toss pear and melon pieces with lemon juice and set aside 10 minutes; this adds a lovely flavor and prevents pears from browning.
3. Pat fruit dry with a paper towel then wrap each piece with prosciutto.
4. Arrange with neat side up in a single layer in a covered container. Refrigerate 30 to 60 minutes.
5. Place fruit on a serving tray, add a grind of black pepper, and stick a 6-inch bamboo skewer into each piece of fruit to serve.

Note: Place a small glass or half a lemon on the table for used skewers (see "Dos of Hosting" sidebar on next page).

3

The DOs of HOSTING

DO:

✓ Think about the time of your party: 5–7 p.m. typically indicates it isn't dinner. Make it 6–8 p.m., and people expect your food to be their evening meal.

✓ Use rimmed trays and platters rather than flat or scooped plates to prevent food from sliding off.

✓ Use straight-sided bowls for dips so guests can easily scoop with bread or a vegetable.

✓ Put out containers for discarded olive pits and grape stems. If using skewers, remove end of a lemon then cut diagonally across middle. This creates a sturdy base and a sloped face, perfect for used skewers. Stick a skewer in lemon half so guests get the idea.

✓ Leave a stack of cocktail napkins next to each tray of hors d'oeuvres.

✓ If you know a certain appetizer can be sticky, place a finger bowl next to it. Simply fill a pretty bowl with water and garnish with a floating flower.

2

The DON'Ts of HOSTING

DON'T:

✘ Try to do everything yourself. I like to requisition four friends and ask them each to help for a 30-minute period, either working in the kitchen or clearing used glasses and napkins.

✘ Have more than one hot hors d'oeuvre—otherwise you'll get stuck in the kitchen.

✘ Put a cheese platter on a low table. It is hard for guests to access, results in necklaces in the Brie, and can quickly become a buffet for the family dog. (I once found a sizable chunk of Parmesan buried in my Westie's dog bed.)

✘ Make anything that will crumble, shatter, ooze, or dribble into a two-biter. Keep hors d'oeuvres small to avoid accidents.

✘ Skimp on time for yourself before the party. Plan so you have time to get ready, review the guest list, and put the finishing touches on everything without getting into a panic.

day-ahead prep

1 Crudites with Chipotle Mayonnaise

OFFER 4 TO 6 PIECES PER PERSON.

Crudites sound a bit ordinary, but if you divide them by color and serve with a knee-buckling, lightning-fast chipotle mayonnaise, they will quickly become the star of the show. Plunge all cooked, strained vegetables immediately in ice water to stop the cooking and seal the color. Pat dry, wrap in paper towel, and store in a plastic bag until serving.

RED

Peppers: Cut into 1/3-inch spears.

Tomatoes: Choose firm grape tomatoes.

Beets: Choose 10 small ones, as close in size as possible. Put in a cake tin with 1/4 cup water, cover tightly with foil, and bake 1 hour at 325°F. Wearing gloves, peel cooled beets under running water. Halve or quarter beets depending on size.

Red radishes: Trim stalks to 1/2 inch.

GREEN

Green beans: Trim stalk ends then cook until al dente.

Broccoli: Cut into florets and cook until al dente.

Kirby cucumbers: Quarter lengthwise (or cut into thinner strips if desired).

Asparagus: Trim to 4 inches and simmer in salted water until al dente.

Sugar snap peas: Simmer in salted water no longer than 3 minutes.

WHITE

Cauliflower: Cut into florets and blanch 40 seconds in boiling salted water.

Endive leaves: Remove bases and separate leaves. Soak in ice water 10 minutes, dry, and refrigerate.

Fingerling potatoes: Halve lengthwise and simmer in salted water until tender.

Chipotle Mayonnaise

MAKES 1 1/2 CUPS

- 1 extra-large egg
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- 1 tablespoon aged sherry vinegar
- 1 large clove garlic, roughly chopped
- 1/2 teaspoon ground chipotle, or to taste
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1 1/2 cups vegetable oil

1. Combine all ingredients except oil in a food processor and blend 15 seconds.

2. With motor running, gradually pour in oil. Transfer to a covered container and store in refrigerator up to 1 week.

PARTY by NUMBER

What should you take into consideration when trying to assess how many hors d'oeuvres to make?

1 The age of the guests. In my experience, younger people tend to eat more.

2 The time of the party:
5–6 p.m.: Plan for 4 appetizers per person. Presumably guests will be enjoying dinner somewhere else and won't want to fill up.

5–7 p.m.: Assume 6 to 8 hors d'oeuvres per person.

5–8 p.m.: Because this span covers dinnertime for many, allow 8 to 12 appetizers per person. And don't forget a sweet option toward the end of the evening.

6–9 p.m.: This definitely covers dinnertime, so not only expect 8 to 12 hors d'oeuvres per person but also have some options that are a bit more filling, such as a soup shot.

3 If appetizers will be passed. Plan for more food if this is the case. Guests will almost always take something if it is offered but often won't break away from a conversation to find the plate of stuffed figs.

day-ahead prep

2 Chicken and Tarragon Rolled in Toasted Almonds

MAKES 36 PIECES

This hors d'oeuvre is always a hit! Note that Greek yogurt is too soft for this; it is best to drain plain, fat-free yogurt. Also, it's much easier to coat the chicken with almonds when it is cold.

- 1 cup flaked almonds
- 8 ounces boneless, skinless chicken breast, cut into 3 to 4 pieces
- 2 to 3 cups chicken stock
- ½ cup plain, fat-free yogurt, drained for 24 hours to yield 6 tablespoons
- 2 teaspoons grated lemon zest
- 2 teaspoons fresh tarragon, chopped
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Spread almonds evenly onto an ungreased sheet pan. Toast 12 to 15 minutes, until golden, stirring regularly to prevent burning. Once cool, transfer to a covered container.

2. Place chicken in a small, nonstick saucepan. Cover with chicken stock and bring to a simmer. Cook 8 minutes, until just cooked through. Remove from heat and let chicken cool in stock.

3. Remove chicken from stock, pat dry, and finely mince.

4. In a bowl, mix chicken with yogurt, lemon zest, tarragon, salt, and pepper. Adjust seasoning to taste. Using a teaspoon, drop mixture onto a parchment-lined sheet pan. Cover and refrigerate overnight.

5. Up to two hours before serving, crush almonds and place in a shallow bowl. Roll each teaspoonful of chicken into a round and coat with almonds. Press down very slightly to create a flat base so chicken rounds won't roll around on the tray. Refrigerate until serving.

3 Black Olive Tapenade

MAKES 1 CUP

This is delicious served with Grilled Crostini or atop a freshly sliced baguette.

- 1 cup pitted kalamata olives
- 1 teaspoon grated lemon zest
- 2 teaspoons fresh garlic, minced
- 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons minced Italian parsley
- pinch hot pepper flakes

1. Combine all ingredients in bowl of a food processor and pulse to a rough paste. Adjust seasoning to taste.

2. Transfer to a covered container and refrigerate. Stir and bring to room temperature before serving.

Tip: Place a teaspoon in the serving bowl for spreading tapenade on grilled crostini—it's much easier than a knife.

Grilled Crostini

MAKES 12 SERVINGS OF 2 SLICES

Serve a pile of crostini grilled to perfection with the Black Olive Tapenade. Note: These need to be made the day of the event.

- ½ cup olive oil
- 2 cloves crushed garlic, or to taste
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1 loaf French bread, cut in 24 (⅓-inch) slices
- 3 tablespoons Italian parsley, minced (optional)

1. In a small bowl, mix oil, garlic, salt, and pepper. Lightly brush mixture onto both sides of bread slices.

2. Up to an hour before serving, grill or broil crostini 15 to 20 seconds until nicely marked on each side. Scatter parsley over bread before serving.

at the last
minute

1 Steamed Shrimp with Bloody Mary Cocktail Sauce

MAKES 12 SERVINGS

You can cook the shrimp very plainly in boiling salted water about 3 minutes and let the sauce do all the work. Or you can create a spicy broth to cook the shrimp in to get more bang for your buck.

Bloody Mary Cocktail Sauce

- ¾ cup ketchup
- ½ cup Sriracha Chili Sauce
- 2 tablespoons white horseradish, slightly drained, or to taste
- 2 tablespoons vodka
- ½ teaspoon ground chipotle, or to taste
- 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice

Spicy Broth

- 2 cups white wine
- 1 tablespoon yellow mustard seeds
- 4 bay leaves
- 8 strips lemon zest
- ½ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 2 teaspoons cracked black pepper
- 1 tablespoon salt

1½ pounds extra-large shrimp, tail-on, peeled, and deveined

- For cocktail sauce: Mix together all ingredients and refrigerate up to 1 week. Note: Each day sauce is stored, its punch will diminish slightly, so add more horseradish, chipotle, or lemon juice to taste before serving.
- For broth: Combine all ingredients with 10 cups water. Bring to a boil and simmer 20 minutes. Increase heat to bring to a boil, add shrimp, and cook 3 minutes, until pink in color.
- Strain shrimp and tip out onto a sheet pan in an even layer to cool quickly. Discard bay leaves and lemon zest.
- When cool, transfer shrimp to a bowl, shaking off mustard seeds. Refrigerate until serving.



3



1

2 Arepas (Corn Fritters)

MAKES 50 SMALL AREPAS

These are great for a casual gathering with friends—who will probably try to grab them right off the skillet! Or, if you have someone who can help make them then you can pass them around. The arepas are best served immediately.

- 2 cups fresh sweet corn
- ½ cup whole milk
- 2 extra-large eggs
- 1 cup yellow cornmeal
- ¼ cup flour
- 1½ tablespoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- ½ teaspoon cayenne
- corn oil for frying
- 4 ounces Cheddar cheese cut into thin ¼-inch squares
- Sriracha Chili Sauce

- Combine 1 cup corn and milk in bowl of a food processor and blend 5 seconds. Whisk together with eggs and remaining 1 cup corn.
- Sift together dry ingredients and fold into corn mixture.
- In a heavy skillet, heat ¼ inch of corn oil to medium hot. Fry batter using 1 tablespoon per fritter and do not crowd the pan. Cook the corn cakes until they are crisp and brown underneath, about 2 to 3 minutes, then flip and cook 1 to 2 minutes on the other side. After flipping fritters, lay a small slice cheese on top to melt.
- Remove fritters with a metal spatula onto a baking rack (a paper towel

will make them soggy). Serve topped with Sriracha.

Note: Be cautious when frying batter as corn may pop.

3 Tomato Tartlets with Mozzarella and Basil

MAKES 15 SERVINGS

- 18 small grape tomatoes, halved vertically
- 2 teaspoons olive oil
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ⅛ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 8 small fresh basil leaves, torn in half across the leaf
- 4 ounces small fresh mozzarella balls, cut into 24 ¾-inch-by-⅓-inch pieces (you'll have extra)
- 1 package phyllo shells, baked per package instructions
- 2 to 3 teaspoons aged sherry vinegar

- Position a rack in middle of oven and preheat to 350°F.
- In a bowl, toss tomatoes, oil, salt, and pepper. Tip onto a small, shallow, non-reactive baking dish and bake 30 minutes, until very slightly caramelized at edges. Remove from dish and let cool.
- Place a torn basil leaf in phyllo shell, followed by a piece of mozzarella and two tomato halves.
- Pour sherry vinegar into a cup. Dip a teaspoon in vinegar and just touch it to tomatoes; that little dot makes a huge difference! Serve immediately. ■

NUTRITION

LITTLE TOASTS W. MANCHEGO & QUINCE PASTE: PER SERVING: CALORIES 138 (76 from fat); FAT 9g (sat. 5g); CHOL 26mg; SODIUM 249mg; CARB 9g; FIBER 0g; PROTEIN 6g

MISSION FIGS W. BLUE CHEESE & MARCONA ALMONDS: PER SERVING: CALORIES 64 (32 from fat); FAT 4g (sat.

2g); CHOL 7mg; SODIUM 133mg; CARB 6g; FIBER 1g; PROTEIN 3g

PROSCIUTTO-WRAPPED PEAR & MELON: PER SERVING: CALORIES 43 (11 from fat); FAT 1g (sat. 0g); CHOL 5mg; SODIUM 78mg; CARB 7g; FIBER 1g; PROTEIN 2g

CHIPOTLE MAYONNAISE (1 TBSP): PER SERVING: CALORIES 125 (123 from fat); FAT 14g (sat. 2g); CHOL 9mg; SODIUM 68mg; CARB 0g; FIBER 0g; PROTEIN 0g

CHICKEN & TARRAGON: PER SERVING: CALORIES 25 (13 from fat); FAT 1g (sat. 0g); CHOL 4mg; SODIUM 74mg; CARB 1g; FIBER 0g; PROTEIN 2g

BLACK OLIVE TAPENADE: PER SERVING: CALORIES 19 (16 from fat); FAT 2g (sat. 0g); CHOL 0mg; SODIUM 68mg; CARB 1g; FIBER 0g; PROTEIN 0g

SHRIMP W. BLOODY MARY COCKTAIL SAUCE: PER SERVING: CALORIES 82 (7 from fat); FAT 1g (sat. 0g); CHOL 87mg; SODIUM 792mg; CARB 7g; FIBER 0g; PROTEIN 10g

AREPAS (CORN FRITTERS): PER ONE: CALORIES 47 (24 from fat); FAT 3g (sat. 1g); CHOL 11mg; SODIUM 109mg; CARB 4g; FIBER 0g; PROTEIN 1g

TOMATO TARTLETS W. MOZZARELLA & BASIL: PER SERVING: CALORIES 41 (24 from fat); FAT 3g (sat. 1g); CHOL 5mg; SODIUM 79mg; CARB 3g; FIBER 0g; PROTEIN 2g