

Summer Cooking and Acid Reflux

The summer season provides a cornucopia of delicious vegetables, fruits and herbs. Preparing meals during this wonderful season presents boundless opportunities to prepare easily digestible food. This is particularly important to those who suffer from acid reflux.

The tomato, which many consider the quintessential fruit of summer, has long been given a bad rap. Thought of as acidic in nature, many people who experience acid reflux shun the tomato like the plague. When tomatoes are slowly over cooked to produce a thick sauce they do become extremely acidic. When served raw in their natural state tomatoes, however, are sweet and alkaline.

My all time favorite tomato recipe is quite simple and easy to prepare. Made with slices of tomato, fresh mozzarella and basil, it is better known in Italy as Caprese Salad (in the style of Capri). It is the starter listed below for my favorite summer meal.

Cooking outdoors is an American summer tradition. It is liberating to get out of the kitchen to cook and the clean up is much easier. My favorite main dish of summer is chicken. I buy a “natural” bird to start with. I then butterfly it by cutting close to the backbone from tail to neck, flip it over and press it down, dry it with paper towels and season it. This makes a much nicer presentation than just grilling loose pieces of chicken.

I live in a log cabin on a mountain top in rural Pennsylvania. Because we have so many bear and other creatures who share our love of outdoor cooking, we confine those activities to the deck using a Weber gas grill with a cover. In order to create that real woodsy flavor of a traditional barbeque, we use one of those metal wood chip boxes filled with oak, mesquite or hickory. The oak is free. Twigs and branches fall out of the trees in the back yard. I like to mix these woods together to produce a unique smoke flavor. I call this cooking technique “grill-a-quiring”, because you are combining grilling with barbequing and smoking.

Of course, the chicken can be cooked in the traditional manner over coals or wood. The secret is to start off with high heat in order to seal the bird. When the fat starts to flare up, the heat must be brought down to low. The objective is to keep the juices in while making the skin very crisp. This is more easily controlled when using a gas grill with a cover.

A three and one half to four pounder can require up to two hours to fully cook. While the chicken is slowly cooking filling the air with enticing flavors, I have time to make the final arrangements for dinner. When the chicken is done it is crispy on the outside and moist and juicy inside. It is almost impossible to resist eating the skin. I always have a just little piece of skin off the thigh to satisfy that urge. I present the butterflied chicken on a carving board and serve the portions upon request. If you can't pull it apart with your fingers, then it has not cooked enough.

I like to serve the chicken with a garden salad, utilizing as many ingredients as possible. We grow herbs and vegetables on the decks in large terracotta clay pots. It is very convenient to just walk out the French doors onto the deck and harvest what you will need for the salad while the bird is cooking. If you want carbs, make a simple pasta primavera with the vegetables using penne or even orzo. Toss with oil, vinegar and fresh herbs like oregano and set aside. This dish is perfectly fine served at room temperature.

To complete this meal, I like to serve a simple dessert featuring whatever fruits are in season. Local berries or ripe peaches are always delicious. I like to serve them over lemon pound cake with a dollop of whipped cream. In Pennsylvania we have local apples in late summer. My favorite dessert is a puff pastry apple tart with apricot rum glaze. This is so easy to make, yet looks quite impressive to eagerly awaiting appetites. If you opt for the apple tart, you will have to bake it earlier in the day. Let it cool and place it in a cold oven to keep the pastry crispy.

Bon Appetite!

CAPRESE SALAD

Ingredients:

Four Ripe tomatoes (about two pounds), sliced thin (¼ inch)
Fine sea salt and freshly ground pepper
One pound of fresh mozzarella sliced about the same as tomatoes
One cup chiffonade of fresh Basil (stack basil leave, roll up and cut into thin slices)
Extra virgin olive oil (first cold pressed)
¼ cup chopped fresh chives

Directions:

Arrange the tomato slices on a serving platter. Season with salt and pepper. Drizzle olive oil and sprinkle half the basil on the tomatoes and cover with slices of mozzarella. Drizzle more olive oil and sprinkle more basil over the mozzarella. Garnish dish with chopped chives. Hold at room temperature before serving just long enough to allow the cheese to soften and meld with the tomato juices. Serve with warm crusty bread for sopping up the juices.

GRILL-A-QUED BUTTERFLIED CHICKEN

Ingredients:

Grill spray
Wood chips (oak, apple, mesquite or hickory)
3 ½ - 4 pound natural chicken (butterflied as explained above)
Sea salt, freshly ground black pepper, garlic powder and cayenne pepper

Directions:

Spray clean grill thoroughly with oil and fill the metal wood box with pieces of wood (the wood does not need to be soaked in water). Ignite entire grill at the highest setting. Meanwhile remove excess fat from chicken and season chicken on both sides with salt, pepper, garlic powder and cayenne pepper to taste. When the wood starts to smoke and the grill is very hot, place the seasoned chicken breast side up on the cooking grates. Wait a few minutes and when fat flares up adjust heat to the lowest setting. Continue to cook, checking periodically, until the skin is quite crisp and the joints are easily moved (about an hour and a half to two hours) . The chicken should be well done but not dried

out. When you see that the flesh can be easily pulled apart, carefully move the chicken to a cutting board. Allow fifteen minutes for the juices to set up before serving. The secret to making this dish is “seal and slow”. You do not want the flames that might flare up as fat is being expelled to burn the skin of the chicken. If this does occur, open the lid of the cooker until they subside. Natural chickens have less fat.

PUFF PASTRY APPLE TART WITH APRICOT RUM GLAZE

Ingredients:

One sheet of puff pastry (thawed)
Three or four tart apples (Braeburn, Fuji or Gala) peeled, halved, cored and sliced into very thin pieces
Juice of one lemon
Three tablespoons fine white sugar
Cinnamon
One quarter cup apricot jam
One quarter cup dark rum

Directions:

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
Prepare apples and place in work bowl. Toss lightly with lemon juice. Thaw puff pastry according to directions. Place jam and rum in a deep microwave safe bowl partially covered with plastic wrap. Heat until boiling, but not overflowing so that the alcohol in the rum evaporates and forms a glaze. Set aside. Line a 12” x 18” baking sheet with parchment paper. Roll out pastry sheet on lightly floured surface to make a bit thinner. Fold the edges of the pastry over to form a border of about ½ inch on all sides of the rectangle. Place the sliced apples overlapping each other in alternating vertical rows to cover pastry sheet, keeping the rows within the border. Dust with sugar and cinnamon. Bake for about 25 minutes or until pastry is golden and apples are tender. With a pastry brush, apply the glaze over the apples (reheat the glaze if necessary). Serve with crème fraiche, whipped cream or ice cream. A sprig of mint and a few raspberries make a terrific garnish with each serving.

All courses represent a serving for four.

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