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REVIEW™



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NATIONAL ONION ASSOCIATION

Duane Keller's roasted Gorgonzola-stuffed sweet onion combines the tangy cheese with rich brioche stuffing to complement the lovely, mild notes of the sweet onion.

Sweet plantains with queso fresco is perhaps classic in Mexico, but is an exotic way to liven up your sides menu. Matthew Lake, executive chef of Besito in Huntington, N.Y., likes working with the cheese because of its mild, milky flavor.

He's also adapted the recipe for the American palate, substituting vegetable oil for the more traditional pork fat. "It's a nod to the American palate, for sure, and it also keeps the dish vegetarian, which gives that segment of diners some real menu alternatives," he says.

"Queso fresco is tart and acidic, and counteracts the sweetness of the plantains beautifully," says Lake. He sautés the plantains in vegetable oil until golden brown. After draining them, he plates them and crumbles the queso fresco atop. A drizzle of fresh cream finishes the side dish. "They're great by themselves, but also pair really well with salmon in a *manchamantel* mole [a sweet/tart sauce]."

Gerry Kent started with the premise that "salt and fat taste good together." That thought brought about his avocado/manchego strudel.

"Manchego has a great buttery, nutty flavor and is

creamy when melted," says Kent, chef/owner of The Forge, a catering company in Temecula, Calif. "Avocado has a lot of similar characteristics, except the salt, which I got from the manchego and the pancetta."

He browned pancetta and onions. Once cooled, he spread them on puff pastry, then added avocado wedge and manchego cheese. He baked the strudel at 450°F until golden brown.

"It's a similar concept to a cordon bleu. You could add a protein to make it a main course, or keep it as a side and serve with a nice salad," says Kent.

Sweetening the dish

If paired with the right ingredients, cheeses can offset sweet flavors with wonderful counterpoint. Duane Keller, regional chef with Western Golf, a golf and F&B management company based in Lake Forest, Calif., prepares a roasted Gorgonzola-stuffed sweet onion, playing the tangy cheese off the caramelized onion.

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taste. It just works so well together,” says Keller.

For the stuffing, he combines Gorgonzola with brioche, egg, chives, olive oil and pepper. Meanwhile, he roasts scooped-out yellow onions coated in olive oil and salt and pepper at 350°F for 20 minutes. Once cooled, he fills them with the stuffing, then bakes, uncovered, for 12 to 15 minutes in a 350°F oven.

“The brioche is perfect here, because it’s such a rich bread. It makes the stuffing light and fluffy,” he says.

He features this on a sides menu, and also serves it alongside a grilled 30-ounce porterhouse steak.

A dish that showcases that holiday favorite of a sweet/tart side dish is a pumpkin/pecorino terrine, served at the Southampton Inn in Southampton, N.Y.

“The pecorino really enhances the flavor of the pumpkin,” says executive chef Joseph Hsu. “It’s sharp, but not overpowering.” Hsu serves this as a fall special, and features it on the catering menu.

He beats butter with cream cheese, then adds pumpkin, pecorino, cinnamon, nutmeg, vanilla extract and marshmallow fluff. He spoons the mixture into a terrine, about one-quarter of the way up, then lays down a graham-cracker crust. He repeats this sequence twice, then refrigerates the terrine for a minimum of eight hours. To serve, Hsu flips the mold over and slices into wedges.

“It’s a great side for a traditional dinner, or you can add whipped cream and turn it into a dessert,” he says. □

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