

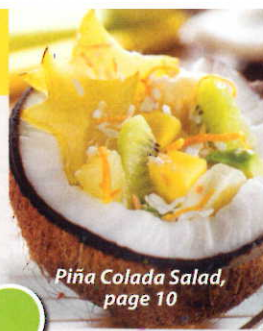
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April 2007

HomeCookingMagazine.com



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# A Feast for Easter

*Appropriately, eggs form the foundation of this spring brunch.*

*By Michael Vyskocil*



The Persians believed the egg to be the symbol of new life. In the Slavic countries of Europe, people have hand-painted intricate designs on Easter eggs for centuries. Indeed, eggs take center stage at Easter celebrations, most notably at Easter egg hunts and egg-dyeing sessions.

One great way to celebrate the holiday is by hosting an Easter brunch featuring eggs.

Why not impress your guests with

poached eggs served in homemade popovers with a drizzling of lemon Hollandaise sauce on top? If you've ever been the least bit intimidated by poaching eggs, just follow the step-by-step directions below for flawless poached eggs every time.

To round out the offerings for guests who don't care for poached eggs, you can serve up an asparagus egg strata, a tropical fruit salad, piping hot bowls of Irish oatmeal with a

variety of toppings and a selection of breakfast meats. You can even serve the popovers plain with jam, honey or butter.

After brunch, all that's left is to gather up the children and enjoy an old-fashioned Easter egg hunt!

## Poached Egg Popovers

*Guests will love this stunning variation on eggs Benedict.*

- 1 tablespoon distilled white vinegar
- 10 large eggs
- Coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 10 thin slices Canadian ham or cooked bacon

## Popovers:

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
- 2 cups milk
- 2 cups flour, sifted
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 4 eggs, lightly beaten

## Lemon Hollandaise Sauce:

- 3 large egg yolks
- 1½ tablespoons water
- 1 to 2 tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice
- ½ cup unsalted butter, melted

**Quick Tip** Flawless poached eggs are uniform, with shining whites encasing a barely set yolk. Always use the freshest eggs you can find for poached eggs: The thick egg white (albumen) will hold together better around a fresh yolk.

Fill a large, wide saucepan with 1 inch of water. Cover and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat to medium so that the water is just simmering (you should still see bubbles breaking the surface of the water), and add the vinegar to the water.

Break 1 egg at a time into a small heatproof ramekin or cup, roughly the size of 1 large egg. Partially immerse the ramekin or cup into the simmering water, and quickly slide the egg into the simmering water. Repeat with remaining eggs, allowing each egg an equal amount of space in the pan (it's best to poach 3 to 4 eggs at a time). Poach until the whites are completely set and the yolks begin to thicken but not become hard, 3 to 5 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, remove the eggs from the water, and set the spoon, with the egg inside, briefly on a clean kitchen towel to drain. Season each egg with salt and pepper.

For popovers, preheat oven to 450 degrees. Butter and lightly flour 10 popover tins or custard cups.

Whisk together the butter, milk, flour and salt until smooth. Whisk in the beaten eggs, little by little until incorporated. Do not overbeat the batter; it should have the consistency of thick cream.

Fill the prepared popover tins or custard cups approximately  $\frac{3}{4}$  full with the batter. Transfer the tins or cups to the oven and bake for 15 minutes.



Without opening the oven door, lower oven temperature to 350 degrees; bake popovers an additional 15 to 20 minutes. Serve hot. Makes 10.

For sauce, in the top of a double boiler or in a large heatproof bowl set over a saucepan of simmering water, whisk the egg yolks with water. Whisk vigorously until the mixture thickens, about 4 to 5 minutes. Immediately

remove the mixture from the heat and stir in the lemon juice.

Slowly whisk in the melted butter, small portions at a time until the sauce thickens. If the sauce becomes too thick or starts to curdle, immediately whisk in 1 to 2 tablespoons hot water. Serve the sauce immediately, or keep warm in a heatproof bowl set over a pan of gently simmering water; whisk occasionally to avoid lumps. Makes 1 cup.

To serve, split the popovers in half and place them on individual serving plates. Top each bottom half with 1 slice Canadian ham or bacon and then with poached egg. Replace top half. Spoon sauce over the eggs. Serve immediately. Serves 10.

### Irish Oatmeal

*Irish oatmeal is firmer and nuttier-tasting than rolled oats.*

- 2 cups Irish oatmeal**
- 8 cups cold water**
- Fresh blueberries or raspberries (optional)**
- Honey or dark brown sugar (optional)**
- 1 cup whole milk (optional)**

## Secret for Great Popovers

Always use large eggs when making popovers.

Stir the batter lightly before filling the popover tins or custard cups to keep the mixture well mixed.

Bake popovers either in popover tins or in 6-ounce custard cups or ramekins.

Grease and flour the tins or custard cups well to make the popovers easy to remove after baking. Use about  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon of unsalted butter for each indentation in the popover tins (or for each custard cup). Be sure to shake out the tins or custard cups thoroughly to remove any excess flour before filling with popover batter.

Never open the oven door during baking. Just like soufflés, cool air is detrimental to popovers, and the slightest draft can cause the popovers to fall.

You can prevent over-browned popovers by placing the oven rack in the lower part of the oven so that the custard cups or popover tins will be in the center of the oven.

Place any leftover popovers in a freezer bag or freezer container and store them in the freezer for up to 3 months. To reheat, place the frozen popovers in a shallow baking pan and bake in a preheated 400-degree oven for 10 to 15 minutes, or until warm.

Place oatmeal in a heavy saucepan with cold water; let stand overnight. When ready to serve, place pan over a low flame; cook for 7 to 12 minutes, or until oatmeal is hot and thick. Serve topped with berries, honey, brown sugar and/or milk, if desired. Serves 8.

### Piña Colada Salad

*For maximum drama, serve this tropical treat in a coconut half.*

- 1 (20-ounce) can pineapple chunks in juice**
- 1 teaspoon lime zest**
- 2½ tablespoons lime juice**
- 2 tablespoons coconut cream**
- 2 star fruit (carambola), washed and sliced to form "stars"**

- 2 kiwi, peeled, halved and sliced**
- 1 mango, peeled and cubed**
- 1 large banana, sliced**
- 1 avocado, peeled and diced**
- ½ cup sweetened shredded coconut**
- 3 coconuts, halved (optional), for serving**

Drain pineapple chunks, reserving ¼ cup of the pineapple juice. Add lime zest, lime juice and coconut cream to pineapple juice. Stir until coconut cream is dissolved.

Combine pineapple chunks, star fruit, kiwi, mango, banana and avocado in a large mixing bowl.

Drizzle juice mixture over the salad and toss gently to coat the

fruit. Sprinkle coconut over the top. Serving suggestion: Place individual servings in halved coconuts. Makes 6 servings.

**Kitchen Tip** Are you planning a large breakfast party? You can easily avoid the last-minute frenzy by preparing your poached eggs ahead of time.

When poaching the eggs, cook them until they're slightly underdone; then transfer the eggs to a bowl of ice water with a slotted spoon. Cool the eggs in the ice bath. (The eggs can keep this way for up to 2 hours before you plan to serve them.) Then, when you're ready to serve the eggs, transfer them to a pan of gently simmering water and cook until the egg whites have set and the eggs are hot, about 2 to 3 minutes.



### Asparagus & Cheese Strata

*Prepare this strata the night before for stress-free entertaining.*

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter**
- 1 pound thin asparagus spears**
- 8 ounces (about 2 cups) freshly grated Swiss cheese**
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh dill**
- 12 slices French bread, cut into 1-inch cubes, divided**
- 6 large eggs**
- 2¼ cups whole milk**
- Coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste**
- ¼ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese**
- Fresh parsley sprigs, for garnish (optional)**

Lightly grease a 2-quart baking dish with the 2 tablespoons butter; set aside.

Clean the asparagus spears under cold running water; snap off any tough woody bases. If the spears are thick, cut them in half lengthwise. Cut the spears into 3-inch pieces.

Prepare an ice-water bath. Bring a



large saucepan half full of water to a boil. Add the asparagus. Cook, uncovered, for 1 to 2 minutes. Transfer the asparagus to the ice-water bath to stop the cooking; place asparagus on a paper towel-lined tray to drain; set aside.

In a medium mixing bowl, combine the grated Swiss cheese and dill. Arrange half the bread pieces in the bottom of the prepared baking dish. On top of the bread, add a layer of half the cheese mixture, followed by a layer of half the cooked asparagus. Repeat. Place the remaining bread pieces on top of the asparagus.

In another medium mixing bowl, whisk together the eggs, milk, salt and

pepper. Pour the egg mixture over the layers in the baking dish. Press down on the layers with the back of a spoon so that the bread pieces are thoroughly moistened. Sprinkle the top layer of bread pieces with Parmesan cheese. Cover the baking dish with plastic wrap and chill for approximately 2 hours or overnight.

Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Bake the strata, uncovered, for about 45 minutes, or until a knife inserted in the middle comes out clean. Remove from the oven to a wire rack and let cool for 10 minutes. To serve, cut into 6 to 8 squares or rectangles. Garnish each serving with parsley sprigs, if desired. Serves 6 to 8. ■

## Think Spring

Give your Easter table a fresh spring look with a few inexpensive touches. Place a cake stand in the middle of the table and place glass votive candleholders filled with fresh blossoms of tulips and daffodils around the edge of the cake stand. Set white dinner plates on a white linen tablecloth and add color with green salad plates, dyed eggs and pink drinking glasses.