

Secrets of the Master of the Mini

By Marshall Heyman | Updated October 10, 2011



Scrambled eggs in bacon at a luncheon honoring Peter Callahan. MEL BARLOW

Apparently, the caterer Peter Callahan was the first person to make tiny hamburgers, maybe in the entire world. Or at least that's what Martha Stewart claims in the introduction to Mr. Callahan's recently released cookbook, "Bite By Bite: 100 Stylish Plates You Can Make for Any Party." And she would know, right?

"I started doing it in the '90s," Mr. Callahan in an interview. "You shrink a burger to the size of a quarter. They were really mini and not these big floppy things." Apparently we can also thank Mr. Callahan for the mini grilled cheese, the mini lobster roll and ice cream in a mini sugar cone, as well as hors d'oeuvres on lollipop sticks. "I was the first to do that too," Mr. Callahan said.



Pigs in a blanket. MEL BARLOW

In his book, there are a host of other even more whimsical treats reproducible depending on your level of concentration and patience, of course. (Ours is low in both areas, but the pictures are adorable.) There are mini strawberry-rhubarb pies, mini limoncello popsicles, mini pancake stacks with the pancakes the actual size of a nickel or a dime. Not everything is on the sweet side: There are mini caprese salads, mini salmon tarts in salmon skin cups and butternut squash lollipops with chevre filling.

Last week, weddings expert Darcy Miller hosted a lunchtime affair for Mr. Callahan, his book and his various treats that brought out editors from Martha Stewart Living as well as the cake expert Sylvia Weinstock.



"I was the one who came up with shrinking down comfort food," explained Mr. Callahan, who experiments out of his 6,000-square-foot test kitchen and offices on 25th Street in Chelsea. "There are so many people out there who do the same things. I like to do things that are fresh and different."

Years ago he took an aptitude test. "They told me I was extremely creative, which I had no idea," Mr. Callahan said. "Do you know what one of the biggest definitions of creativity is? Doing what others don't do. That's what makes me tick."

Many of Mr. Callahan's creative parameters have been informed by his Park Avenue clients. "These women have pounded it into my head. They say everything must be one bite. They don't want things to fall on their carpet or upholstery or their dress." Another rule: No side sauces, which again gels with the no-mess contingency as well as no Jerry Seinfeld double-dipping. Finally, Mr. Callahan said, "No skewers, so a guest isn't left with that in her hand."

"We did break that last rule," he explained, when he came up with—one could even say spearheaded—the aforementioned hors d'oeuvre lollipop movement.

Mr. Callahan said he started the cookbook five years ago after Ms. Stewart prodded him. One question that came up before publication: "Does anybody go home and make a mini cheeseburger for dinner?"

"But I don't think people need a book on how to make grilled cheese and pretzels," he said. "All I'm trying to do is make fun stuff that's new and different." He insists tweezers aren't necessary: "We don't have a tweezer in our kitchen."

Still, this all looks pretty difficult, like a black diamond ski slope. But, "you don't have to be a four-star chef or have gone to Cordon Bleu," Mr. Callahan said. "Do you have the patience to twirl spaghetti on top of the single meatball? If you don't, we give short cuts. You can twirl spaghetti on a fork and put the meatball on top instead." Other examples include buying mini-pitas at Trader Joe's instead of making them, and using a cookie cutter to cut out a small bun from a larger hamburger bun to fit the mini-burger.

In his quest to make things all mini, Mr. Callahan has hit a few snags. Getting fruit in little grappa bottles: challenging even for him. "It's totally impractical," he said. Also: mini chicken wings. "A chicken wing has a bone in it. Do you make a toothpick that looks like a bone?" he asked. What about using baby chickens? "My God," he said, "I would be in huge trouble for that."