

Tiny treats

Bite-size foods cherished from childhood are served by a New York caterer at the most swellegant holiday parties.

By Maureen Fitzgerald, Inquirer Food Editor | Published Nov. 30, 2011, 9:00 p.m. ET



Cranberry-tinis on a square tray lined with cranberries by Peter Callahan. Get the recipe here. (David M. Warren / Staff Photographer)

Peter Callahan has a clear image of his first food memory, from the tender age of 4: He bit into a peanut butter and Marshmallow Fluff sandwich on white bread in his neighbor's kitchen.

"I thought it was the greatest thing I had ever tasted and I came home and told my mother we had to have it," he said.

Now a New York caterer with clients such as Kate Spade and Martha Stewart, Callahan has made a reputation mining such food memories and turning them into very sophisticated, very tiny bites at very highbrow parties.

Things like, yes, a Fluffernutter (in a toasted cone with a spoon of peanut butter, topped with torched marshmallow cream) as well as s'mores, macaroni and cheese, hot dogs, even spaghetti and meatballs are re-created as micro-mini hors d'oeuvres and served at the most elegant affairs.

Callahan, 50, who lives in Haverford and operates his catering business here and in New York, has collected his recipes and entertaining secrets in his first book, *Bite by Bite* (Clarkson Potter), published this fall.

"Truth be told, people want simple food," says Callahan, explaining the popularity of his party foods. While some prefer cuisines from across the globe, he says, he has learned after 25 years in the business that "what most people want, even the most well-to-do, is identifiable food."

His offerings are universally recognizable and adorable, and - at the diminutive size of one inch - appealing even to those who have shunned these childhood comfort foods as unhealthy.

"Bite-size versions become legal to eat," he says. "It's OK to eat just one bite."

And do folks eat just one?

"Nooooo!"

The idea of these teensy reproductions began with a request for a micro-mini burger from one of his clients, a Manhattan hostess, who, he says, fell into the category of the "social X-ray" from Tom Wolfe's novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (meaning she was so thin, her figure was skeletal).

"She insisted that it could only be just one bite. She wanted the food to be so small it was almost invisible," he says.

"These hostesses, their apartments are incredibly fragile, they want food that can be consumed in one bite, so it is not messy. God forbid a guest should bite into an exploding mushroom and stain the furniture!"

So after shrinking the burger to the size of a quarter - Callahan and his staff had to make their own rolls because no manufacturer made them that small - they started trying other foods and it took off from there: grilled cheese, Rice Krispies canapés, lobster rolls, fish tacos, even mini PB&J's made with pound cake.

The simple foods everyone grew up with were soon being requested at parties thrown by Vera Wang, Tory Burch, and Regis Philbin.

"In part, it was because entertaining is competitive, especially in New York, and people always want something new, but it was also because these mini foods were just so much fun."

At his stately home in Haverford, where he lives with his wife, dress designer Josephine Sasso, and their daughter, Juliet, 11, he shared some of the tips he's learned over the years and shortcuts to some of his signature hors d'oeuvres.

For instance, instead of baking your own mini burger rolls, he suggests cutting out circles from regular size rolls with a round cookie or pastry cutter. For his catered s'mores, his staff makes graham crackers, adds artisanal chocolate and homemade marshmallows, which are burnished with a kitchen torch.

For the home cook, he suggests buying supermarket ingredients and melting the marshmallows and chocolate under the broiler.

For a holiday party, he put together the following lineup: sliced pears with cheese, grilled vegetables in mini pitas, mini short-rib burgers with mini baked potatoes, and for dessert, mini s'mores.

Ironically, while serving all these comfort foods for a living, he tries to eat a macrobiotic diet at home. No cow's milk in his house fridge, only coconut and almond.

"I try to eat healthy at home," he says, "because all day long I'm tasting wonderful food."

This year, he'll be responsible for as many as 12 parties a week during the holiday season, including one at Philadelphia's Academy of Natural Sciences, where he has a contract for catering parties.

His advice for throwing a successful party at home: Plan ahead.

"But make sure you plan so that you can enjoy the time before the party, as well as the party," he says.

In other words, plan to be finished hours before the party starts, so you can get dressed and relax before guests arrive.

"That comes from making lists and saying when things are going to get done, and being realistic," he says. "And always allow for more time than you would expect, and be realistic about what you are able to get done."

If you have a lot of hors d'oeuvres, you can go lighter on the main course.

"Honestly," he says, "people do not want all that food."

Cheese and Wine

Makes 36 hors d'oeuvres

2 semi-ripe pears, preferably Bosc

1 lemon wedge

4 ounces cold Camembert cheese

2 fresh thyme sprigs

12 mini edible flowers, such as marigolds or violets (if unavailable, use dried cranberries for color)

1 bottle crisp chardonnay

1. Stand each pear on your cutting board and, using a paring knife, cut down around the core so you end up with 4 pieces of pear and a square-shaped core. Slice the pear wedges into 1/8-inch-thick pieces and squeeze a little lemon juice over them to delay browning. Place the slices on a paper towel to absorb extra moisture.

2. Line a rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper. Slice the cheese into 36 one-inch-long, 1/4-inch-thick triangles (see note). Remove the rind if desired, and place the triangles on the prepared baking sheet.

3. Arrange the pear slices on a tray or platter. Top each with a piece of Camembert, a few thyme leaves, and a flower petal (or dried cranberry). Pour the chilled wine into shot or cordial glasses and serve.

- From Bite by Bite by Peter Callahan with Raquel Pelzel (Clarkson Potter, 2011)

Note: For perfectly shaped slivers, freeze the Camembert for 1 hour before slicing. Let the sliced cheese sit out at room temperature for 10 to 20 minutes (depending on how warm the room is) before serving.

Per serving (based on 12 servings): 106 calories, 2 grams protein, 7 grams carbohydrates, 4 grams sugar, 3 grams fat, 7 milligrams cholesterol, 135 milligrams sodium, 1 gram dietary fiber.

Short-Rib Burgers

Makes 6 sliders or 18 to 24 micro-mini burgers

2 pounds boneless beef short ribs
Coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper
2 tablespoons vegetable oil
1 carrot, cut into 1/2-inch pieces
1 celery stalk, cut into 1/2-inch pieces
1 parsnip, cut into 1/2-inch pieces
1 yellow onion, cut into 1/2-inch pieces
2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
2 tablespoons tomato paste
2 cups red wine, such as Chianti or merlot
1 cup canned or homemade beef broth
3 fresh thyme sprigs
1 bay leaf
6 mini burger or slider buns

1. Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Season the short ribs with salt and pepper. In a large, heavy-bottomed, ovenproof pot, heat the oil over medium-high heat. Add the short ribs and cook on both sides until browned, 2 to 3 minutes per side.
2. Transfer the meat to a large bowl, and place the carrot, celery, parsnip, and onion in the pot. Cook, stirring often, until the vegetables start to soften, 5 to 7 minutes. Sprinkle the flour over the vegetables and cook for 1 minute longer. Stir in the tomato paste, and then pour in the wine and beef broth. Add the thyme sprigs and bay leaf, return the meat to the pot, cover, and bring to a simmer.
3. Place the pot in the oven and cook until a fork easily shreds the meat, 2 to 2 1/2 hours.
4. Remove the pot from the oven, uncover, and let the mixture cool. Remove and discard the bay leaf and thyme sprigs. Transfer the meat to a large bowl and, using your fingers or two forks, shred the meat.
5. Pour the liquid and vegetables from the pot into a blender. Puree, taste for seasoning, and add salt and pepper if needed. Pour the sauce over the shredded meat and stir together so the meat gets nicely coated with sauce.
6. To prepare for serving, place about 3 tablespoons of the saucy meat on each bun. Place the burgers on a rimmed baking sheet, cover with aluminum foil, and warm in the oven for 4 to 5 minutes just before you are ready to serve.

- From Bite by Bite by Peter Callahan with Raquel Pelzel (Clarkson Potter, 2011)

Note: This recipe can be doubled for larger parties.

Per slider (for 6): 538 calories, 50 grams protein, 27 grams carbohydrates, 6 grams sugar, 16 grams fat, 135 milligrams cholesterol, 454 milligrams sodium, 3 grams dietary fiber.

S'Mores

Makes 24 s'mores

Nonstick pan spray

About 2 cups confectioners' sugar

39 large marshmallows (15 for s'mores, 24 for serving)

3 whole graham crackers (6 squares)

3 1.55-ounce Hershey's milk chocolate bars, cut into 1-inch squares

2 tablespoons smooth peanut butter

1. Line the bottom of a 5-by-9-inch glass loaf pan with parchment paper, then spray the bottom and sides with nonstick pan spray. Sift 2 tablespoons confectioners' sugar over the pan to liberally coat the bottom and sides.

2. Place 15 marshmallows in a microwave-safe bowl and microwave them in six 15-second increments, stirring after each, until the marshmallows are melted, about 1 1/2 minutes total. Pour the marshmallows into the prepared pan and use a rubber spatula to smooth out the top. Cover the marshmallow layer with 1/4-inch of confectioners' sugar. Refrigerate for 1 hour.

3. Place a small bowl of confectioners' sugar next to your work surface. Lift the parchment out of the loaf pan and set the marshmallow layer on your work surface. Use a 1-inch-square cookie cutter to cut out 24 marshmallow squares, occasionally dipping the cutter into the confectioners' sugar to prevent the marshmallow from sticking.

4. Break the graham cracker rectangles in half so you have 6 squares, then break the squares into individual rectangles; you'll have 12 total. Use a serrated knife to gently saw each rectangle in half crosswise so you have 24 small squares

5. Set an oven rack at the top position (about 3 inches from the broiler element) and heat the broiler to high. Place the graham cracker squares on an aluminum-foil-lined rimmed baking sheet. Place a chocolate square on each graham square, and cover the chocolate with a marshmallow square. Place the baking sheet in the oven and broil until the marshmallow is lightly browned, 15 to 30 seconds (watch closely, as heat intensity varies). Or, if you have a kitchen blowtorch, torch the marshmallows until browned.

6. Place a small dab of peanut butter on the bottom side of each of the remaining 24 marshmallows, and stick them to a serving tray, peanut butter side down. Balance the s'mores on top of the whole marshmallows and serve.

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To simplify: Instead of melting the marshmallows and cutting them into squares, you can slice 6 large marshmallows crosswise into 4 thin rounds. Or you can use 2 mini marshmallows.

Per s'more: 125 calories, 1 gram protein, 25 grams carbohydrates, 19 grams sugar, 3 grams fat, 1 milligram cholesterol, 32 milligrams sodium.

Cranberry-tini

Makes 12 drinks

Grated zest and juice of 6 oranges

5 cups fresh cranberries

1/2 cup sugar

3 cups chilled vodka

Ice

2 cups sparkling water

1. Place the orange zest and juice, 4 cups of the cranberries, the sugar, and 33/4 cups water in a food processor or blender, and puree.
2. Strain through a fine-mesh sieve into a large pitcher. Stir in the vodka.
3. Thread the remaining cranberries on 12 cocktail swizzle sticks, 3 to a skewer. Fill 12 glasses with ice, and divide the cranberry mixture among the glasses, leaving enough room for a splash of sparkling water.
4. Finish with sparkling water, add the cranberry swizzle sticks, and serve.

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Contact food editor Maureen Fitzgerald at 215-854-5744 or mfitzgerald@phillynews.com. Follow her blog at www.philly.com/mydaughter; on Twitter: @mydaughterskit.