

Garlic Thyme Sliced Steak with Arugula

Celebrating friend's birthdays is always something I enjoy doing, and making their favourite dishes with Italian twists has become a bit of a tradition. Here, fresh herbs and garlic make thick juicy steaks a new Italian favourite.

3 Tbsp (45 mL) red wine vinegar
1 Tbsp (15 mL) extra virgin olive oil
4 cloves garlic, minced
2 Tbsp (30 mL) chopped fresh thyme
1 Tbsp (15 mL) chopped fresh oregano
1 Tbsp (15 mL) Dijon mustard
4 rib-eye steaks
3 Tbsp (45 mL) lemon juice
1 container (5 oz/150 g) baby arugula
1/2 cup (125 mL) shaved Parmesan cheese
Pinch each of salt and pepper
A few strips lemon zest (for garnish)

In a shallow glass dish, stir together vinegar, oil, garlic, thyme, oregano and mustard. Add steaks and turn to coat. Let stand for 10 minutes.

Place steaks in preheated skillet and cook, turning once for about 10 minutes or desired doneness. Remove steaks to cutting board and let stand for 3 minutes. Cut steaks into slices. Return pan to medium heat and add lemon juice to heat through. Spread arugula into a large serving platter or individual plates and then drizzle with heated lemon juice. Sprinkle with parmesan and top with a sliced steak. Season with salt and pepper before serving. Garnish with lemon zest, if desired.

Makes 8 servings.

Tips:

You can also grill or BBQ these steaks in the summer time and drizzle the lemon juice overtop of the dish. Simply grill over high heat to sear then reduce heat to medium-high to grill to your desired level of doneness. Let them rest before slicing.

When picking steaks they should be about 1-inch (2.5 cm) thick.

You will need 8 cups (2 L) of baby arugula for this recipe.

If you like lemon flavour you can add as much lemon zest as you like, a few wisps on each serving will do though.

Mixed Pepper and Bocconcini Pasta Salad

Toasting the pasta gives a nutty flavour and golden colour to this salad. I love making this salad to bring to family gatherings and always remember to make extra to pack for lunches the next day. Toss in some chopped salami or cooked chicken and it's a meal in a bowl.

1 cup baby shell or baby bowtie pasta
1 large red pepper
1 large yellow pepper
1 large green pepper
Half a bunch of asparagus, trimmed
2 Tbsp (30 mL) extra virgin olive oil, divided
1 can (19 oz/540 mL) artichoke hearts, drained and chopped
1 tub (7 oz/200 g) mini bocconcini, drained
3 Tbsp (45 mL) aged balsamic vinegar
2 Tbsp (30 mL) basil or sundried tomato pesto
1/4 tsp (1 mL) salt
Pinch of pepper
1/3 cup (80 mL) chopped, pitted oil-cured olives (optional)

In small, dry nonstick skillet, toast pasta, stirring often over medium-high heat for about 2 minutes or until golden brown. Remove from heat.

In saucepan of boiling, salted water, cook pasta for about 8 minutes or until tender but firm. Drain well and rinse under cold water; place in a large bowl.

Cut peppers into quarters; place in a large bowl with asparagus. Toss with 1 Tbsp (15 mL) of the oil. Place on a greased grill or BBQ over medium-high heat and grill for about 8 minutes, turning once or twice until golden and tender but crisp. Remove to cutting board and chop; add to pasta. Stir in artichoke hearts and bocconcini.

In a small bowl, whisk together remaining oil, balsamic vinegar and pesto, salt and pepper. Drizzle over pasta mixture and toss to combine. Sprinkle with olives, if using.

Makes 8 servings.

Make ahead: Covered, this salad will keep in the refrigerator for up to 2 days.

Tips:

You could also use about 3/4 cup (190 mL) of orzo for this salad instead of the small pasta.

You will need 6 to 8 artichoke hearts if a can is unavailable.

You can substitute 1 1/3 cups (325 mL) chopped bocconcini or fresh mozzarella for the mini bocconcini.

Pizzelle Cookies

My Nonna, aunts and cousins have been playing around with this recipe for thin snowflake shaped cookies for years during the holiday season. Massive quantities of these cookies are made to fulfill the needs of many Christmas appetites. I adjusted this recipe to make a more moderate quantity. So if you're trying them out it won't be as intimidating. You will need an electric pizzelle maker which looks like a waffle iron except much flatter. I tried making them in my waffle iron but it was too thick and didn't get the very thin snowflake look to them. You can also find older non-electric pizzelle irons in some antique shops. A perfect gift for the foodie that has everything!

5 eggs
3/4 cup (175 mL) sugar
1/2 cup (125 mL) canola oil
1 tsp (5 mL) anise or vanilla extract
1 3/4 cups (435 mL) all-purpose flour (approx.)
2 tsp (10 mL) baking powder

In a large bowl, whisk eggs until frothy. Whisk in sugar until dissolved. Whisk in oil and extract. Stir together flour and baking powder and whisk 1 cup (250 mL) into the liquid mixture. Stir in remaining flour mixture until a smooth and sticky dough forms. It will be thick and pasty, if needed add more flour to reach desired consistency 1 Tbsp (15 mL) at a time.

Heat your pizzelle iron and spray with a cooking spray or brush with oil or butter. Drop 1 Tbsp (15 mL) of the batter into the centre of each pizzelle shape. Close lid and seal with latch. Let cook for about 1 minute or until very light golden. Remove from plates and lie flat on top of each other. Repeat with remaining batter. Enjoy warm or cold. They will crisp as they cool.

Makes about 30 pizzelle cookies.

Tip: If you want to shape the pizzelle remove them quickly from the plate and roll them into a cone shape or place them into a small bowl to create a cup shape. For an extra special treat fill them with a Kit Kat bar, break the bar into the 4 segments and place one in hot pizzelle, roll it up and place seam side down to cool.

Storage: Once cooled you can store them in an airtight container or resealable bag for at least 2 weeks. I don't put them in the freezer because they are so thin they will shatter and break apart.

Amaretti Cookies

These are great little crunchy cookies ideal for dunking into coffee although they are just as good for munching on their own. They are also a wonderful addition to a table of sweets.

2 cups (500 mL) unblanched whole almonds
2 egg whites
1 cup (250 mL) sugar
2 Tbsp (30 mL) all-purpose flour
1 Tbsp (15 mL) almond extract
1 tsp (5 mL) baking powder

1 tsp (5 mL) icing sugar (optional)

Line baking sheets with parchment paper; set aside.

In a food processor, chop almonds until in small pieces with some powdery granules. Set aside.

In a large bowl, beat egg whites until soft peaks form. Gradually beat in sugar, until ribbons fall from beaters when lifted. Stir in almonds, flour, almond extract and baking powder.

Preheat oven to 350°F (180°C).

Drop level tablespoons of batter, about 2 inches (5 cm) apart on prepared baking sheets. Using your fingertips, shape each into a neat circle.

Bake in centre of oven for about 12 minutes or until cookies are light brown and crisp on top. Set pans on a cooling rack and let cool for 2 minutes. Transfer cookies to rack and let cool completely. Sprinkle with icing sugar, if desired.

Makes 40 cookies.

Tips:

Can be stored at room temperature for about 2 weeks or frozen for up to 1 month.

Try dipping them in melted chocolate for a new twist on these crisp bites.

You can substitute hazelnuts for the almonds in these cookies.

Do not use dark baking sheets for these cookies as they cause overbrowning.

Spiced Olives

If time is of the essence you can always pick some olives up at your favourite deli instead of infusing them with your own flavours. Just warm them up before serving. Letting these olives marinate is important because it gives them a flavour boost. Normally served cold or at room temperature, by simply warming them you can bring out the flavours more strongly. Warm olives offer up their juicy interior and salty sweet taste in a way that my family and friends love.

1 cup (250 mL) oil-cured black olives

1 cup (250 mL) green olives

1/2 cup (125 mL) extra virgin olive oil

2 sprigs fresh rosemary

2 sprigs fresh thyme

Pinch of hot pepper flakes

1 strip lemon rind

In a small saucepan, heat olives, oil, herbs, hot pepper flakes and lemon rind over medium heat until heated through, fragrant and olives have plumped up slightly.

You need to let the olives cool a bit before serving them as they are very hot inside. About 10 or 15 minutes after they are heated through should be enough time.

Serve warm or cover and refrigerate for at least 4 hours or up to 1 week. Let olives come to room temperature before serving after being refrigerated.

Makes 2 cups (500 mL).

Tip: Leaving the herbs and lemon rind in the olives helps deepen the flavor and is a wonderful garnish when serving the olives.

Basic Crostini

Crostini are very versatile; there are seemingly infinite different toppings you can put on them. I like to cook these until they are lightly golden and still a bit soft in the centre. Always makes it easier to bite into it and not have it shatter. It's never a good thing to have your food all over the front of your shirt. My Zias would surely ask me to take my messy shirt off so to wash it for me!

Half a baguette, sliced into about 1/2 inch (1 cm) thick slices
2 Tbsp (30 mL) extra virgin olive oil
1/4 tsp (1 mL) salt
1/4 tsp (1 mL) fresh ground pepper

Preheat oven to 400°F (200°C).

Brush baguette slices with oil and place on baking sheet.

Toast for about 5 minutes or until they are light golden. Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Set aside.

Makes 20 crostini.

Ricotta and Roasted Red Pepper Crostini

This is an easy appetizer that I've made for years. Creamy ricotta cheese provides the background for sweet roasted red peppers. Add some peppery arugula for a different flavour and a salute to the Italian flag—highlighting red, white and green. The toppings work beautifully with traditional crostini or with pan-fried polenta for gluten-intolerant friends and family.

1 batch Basic Crostini, still warm (see recipe)
1 clove garlic, cut in half lengthwise
1 1/2 cups (375 mL) thinly sliced roasted red peppers
1 small clove garlic, minced
2 Tbsp (30 mL) chopped fresh Italian parsley
2 Tbsp (30 mL) extra virgin olive oil
1 Tbsp (15 mL) red wine vinegar
1/4 tsp (1 mL) salt
1/4 tsp (1 mL) fresh ground pepper
1 cup (250 mL) ricotta cheese
Fresh small basil leaves (optional)

While crostini are still warm, rub garlic over baguette slices while still warm. Set aside.
In a bowl, combine peppers, garlic, parsley, oil and vinegar, salt and pepper.
Spread ricotta over toasted crostini. Top with peppers and garnish with basil, if using.

Makes 20 pieces.