

It Ain't Necessarily So



KATHY HARRISON MASTERS THE TEMPTING YET TRICKY TIAN

MY FRIEND JOYCE AND I have been cooking together for many years. She came to a demonstration class I was asked to give at a church in Barrington Hills. My instructions were to make something simple and tasty. I turned to Italy, where simplicity and fresh ingredients reign supreme, and made pasta with tomatoes, basil, and some lovely olive oil. Simple and tasty. Also pretty boring. I had to fight every fiber of my being not to take something simple and gussy it up until it was over the top and too complicated for anyone to even want to make.

Afterwards, a woman approached me to say she, too, liked to cook. She mentioned the Italian dishes she had recently made. Every one of them—and there were many—sounded better than anything in my repertoire. Could she take one of my classes, she asked? No, I answered. ‘You could teach them.’ She looked a little stunned.

I called her the next day to apologize for my flippant response and suggested we cook together. We’d each invite another couple and have a dinner party. She agreed and suggested we get together at her house. We’d have lunch and discuss our menu. Lunch. I was in.

I arrived armed with cookbooks, and she pulled out a mountain of magazines. We came up with a menu that sounded exotic. We assumed that with two of us sharing the work, we’d have no trouble with the recipes that were submitted from restaurants all over the country. If restaurants served these dishes, we reasoned, they’d have to be good.

We chose a first course that looked beautiful in the picture. It was a layered affair with eggplant, tomatoes, and goat cheese. It was called a tian. How elegant! Neither of us had ever attempted something like that.

Some people adjust recipes as they’re making them. Not the two of us! We slavishly followed the tian instructions, assuming that the liquid brimming almost over the edge of our ramekins would somehow get absorbed or otherwise disappear. We cooled our creation for the exact time suggested, then unmolded it. Our tian didn’t stand tall and proud. Actually, it didn’t stand at all, but rather disintegrated into its component parts, almost drowning in its own juices. Joyce wanted to dump it into a bowl, plant a rosemary branch on top, like the flag at Iwo Jima, and serve it up. I could only stare at this mess, mouth agape. My dog, Taffy, would eat anything. She happily ate the plastic reflector off the back of my bike, but this she wouldn’t touch.

We re-read the instructions and couldn’t figure out how we could have


strayed so far afield. Only one thing to do, I thought. Let’s call the chef of the restaurant. Joyce: “Can we do that?” Me: “I don’t know. Let’s try.” We dialed and were connected. Since this fiasco preceded the magic of smart phones, we could only describe our creation. We couldn’t photograph it and whiz it to his screen. He explained that because of length constraints with the magazine article, they had to delete some instructions. He seemed amused that anyone would actually try the recipe. He told us which instructions were left out of the article, wished us luck, and hung up. Back to the store; back to the stove. We started again.

That, unfortunately, was not my only fiasco. There was the banana cream pie whose filling turned to cement before my very eyes. I ran back to the store so many times for more bananas that the produce manager asked if I had a monkey at home. Another call to the chef. This time I couldn’t get past the palace guards. The king and his publicists were busy on another book, so I turned to my mom’s recipe. Hers did not make the into a glossy magazine, but man, did it taste good!

I’m still cracking the code on a lemon tart with a meringue topping that had to have been made with shaving cream, rather than egg whites for the photograph. I’ll give it a few more tries before I use the book for kindling.

Well, Joyce and I persevered. She invited Ham and Betty as her guests. That was his name, Ham. (Don’t even ask how many times we made reference to the line in the film, “Airplane”. Ham on 5, hold the mayo.) I brought Bob and Alice. No jokes there.

Time for the first course. Joyce and I headed for the kitchen. We placed a plate over the ramekin, flipped it upside down, and voila! We had an honest to goodness tian. It shimmered in all its three-tiered glory. We dressed it with gorgeous vinaigrette, garnished it with parsley, of course, and watched six happy guests almost lick their plates. (Taffy ate the front reflector.)

All the ingredients are available at our local markets and at our fabulous farmers’ market. ‘Tis the season to enjoy tian. 



KATHY HARRISON is a Barrington Hills resident who teaches the fine art of cooking. For more information, call 847-381-4828.

PHOTO: GIRMANTAS URBONAS

Eggplant Tian with Tomato and Chevre

INGREDIENTS

SERVES 6

- Nonstick vegetable oil spray
- 5 tablespoons plus 1/3 cup olive oil
- 1 large onion, diced
- 1 large eggplant, unpeeled, diced
- 1 ½ tablespoons chopped fresh thyme
- 2 small cloves garlic, finely minced
- ½ teaspoon sugar
- 6 plum tomatoes, seeded and diced
- 12 ounces fresh chevre (goat cheese), room temperature
- 2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon champagne or white wine vinegar
- 1 bunch arugula, stems removed and coarsely chopped
- Parsley sprigs, for garnish

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1) Line six ¾ cup custard cups with plastic wrap, extending the wrap over the sides of the cups. Spray with non-stick spray. Heat 2 tablespoons oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add chopped onion and sauté until golden, about 5 minutes. Add the eggplant, thyme, garlic, and sugar to the skillet and sauté until the eggplant is tender and browned, about 8 minutes. Add the chopped tomatoes and continue cooking for 3 minutes. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Cool completely. Strain the vegetable mixture, discarding the excess liquid.
- 2) Meanwhile, combine the goat cheese with 3 tablespoons of olive oil and stir until well blended. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Spoon 3 tablespoons cheese mixture into the bottom of each ramekin. Smooth the top. Divide the eggplant mixture among the custard cups, smoothing the top. Evenly divide the remaining cheese over the top of the eggplant. Cover the tops of the ramekins with the overhanging plastic wrap and refrigerate until the cheese is firm, at least 2 hours or up to a day in advance.
- 3) Make the vinaigrette: Combine the lemon juice and vinegar in a blender. Gradually blend in 1/3 cup olive oil. Add the arugula leaves and blend until smooth. (Vinaigrette may be made a day in advance.)
- 4) Turn back the plastic wrap and unmold a tian onto the center of each of six plates. Drizzle with arugula vinaigrette, garnish with a parsley sprig and serve.



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