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C'mon Over

COOKING FOR FRIENDS IN A PINCH

THAT SNOWSTORM we knew would come came. With a vengeance. Snow was predicted for 3:00 that afternoon. As if it had a Swiss watch attached to its hovering grayness, it came exactly on time. They were small flakes. I didn't pay much attention. I was having coffee with a friend, and no doubt we were discussing something terribly serious, like where to get a facial or what someone wore at the Golden Globes. Well, someone has to figure this stuff out.

I left one hour later and much to my surprise, had to trek through built up snow to get to my car. Those flakes looked so little. How were they sticking so well? My windshield, too, was icy white. I was supposed to go to dinner with two friends. Would we chance the drive? We temporized by saying we'd make our decision in an hour. I caved in 45 minutes. As I watched the snow build up on

my walkway, I knew it would be madness to venture out. I got a text from one of the ladies saying she was already putting on her jammies. This was set to be one of those night before Christmas type nights where you just hunker down.

The problem was, I was geared up for dinner with friends. We were going to have some laughs, some drinks. I could turn on the TV. I had plenty of liquids of varying colors. It wasn't appealing. I stared out the window and saw lights from an automobile heading down my street. Slowly. Painfully slow. Ah! Snow and ice. Good decision to stay in. I wandered around, then picked up the phone.

"What're you doing?"

"Nothing."

"Why don't you come over?"

"Now?"

"Sure. Why not? Walk through the backyard with your flashlight. We can have dinner."

Normally, "we can have dinner" means I take out tons of cookbooks which I spread all over every flat surface in the kitchen. Then I plan a menu which invariably will require trips to at least two stores and a flower mart. Then I rummage through a linen closet packed with too many napkins and placemats, all of which could benefit from the steam of an iron.

I'm not complaining. I actually get off on all that trivia...but this was different. It was liberating. I could only make what I had on hand. Well, I had chicken thighs. I had a few potatoes. I had herbs of varying degrees of freshness, and I had some Brussels sprouts that looked like they should get a heat treatment...and fast.

I set out some cheese and the few slices of

Sheet Pan Chicken with Potatoes and Herbs



INGREDIENTS:

- 3 tablespoons olive oil, divided
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 1 small clove garlic, minced
- 1 tablespoon fennel seed, toasted and ground
- ½ teaspoon ground cumin seed
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 4-6 bone in, skin on chicken thighs
- 2 Yukon gold potatoes, cut into 1-inch chunks
- ½ lemon, for juicing
- ½ cup chopped mint leaves or cilantro

INSTRUCTIONS

1. In a large bowl, combine 2 tablespoons oil and lemon juice. Whisk in the garlic, fennel seed, cumin, 1 teaspoon kosher salt and 2-3 grinds pepper. Add the chicken thighs and toss to coat with the marinade. Let the chicken marinate for 30 minutes at room temperature, or up to overnight, covered, in the refrigerator.
2. Preheat the oven to 425 degrees. Place the potatoes on one side of a sheet pan and drizzle with the remaining tablespoon olive oil. Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Place the chicken thighs, skin side up, on the other side of the pan.
3. Roast the chicken and potatoes for 20 minutes. Remove from oven and toss the potatoes. Return the pan to the oven and continue roasting until the chicken is beautifully browned and the potatoes are tender, about 20 minutes. Remove the chicken from the pan and allow to rest. If the potatoes are not tender and browned, continue roasting for another 5-10 minutes.
4. Place the chicken and potatoes on a serving platter and drizzle with lemon juice. Scatter the chopped mint or cilantro over the top and serve. Serves 4-6.

prosciutto I had. There were some olives lurking in the fridge. From the freezer I extracted the half loaf of bread that just seemed too good to throw out when I had it the previous week.

The darling of the food writers these days is Sheet-pan Chicken. I googled a few. Basically they're pretty much the same. Take your chicken, season it aggressively, and throw it on a pan with vegetables, herbs...whatever. Couldn't be easier, right?

These days, or maybe it was always so, everyone

seems to be hustling to get things done fast. Me too. But sitting down at a table with someone forces you to take a break; to catch up; to connect. And the spontaneity allows you to relax. You can't overthink this type of meal. It is what it is. It is what you have.

Last week I attended a lecture with my friend Mary. Afterwards, we walked on the track at the gym. While circling, she said, "Do you want to come back to my house for dinner? Mark is making duck." No need to be a rocket scientist to know

what I said. I think she must have texted or called home to say put another plate on the table. Within minutes we were heading to her house, each in our own car.

I was halfway there when Mary called to say all the power was out on her street. "Oh, OK. We can get together another night."

"No. Everything is pretty much ready. Just drive up and Mark will come out to get you with a flashlight." I did, and he did.

It was magical inside. They lit up the kitchen and dining room with candles of every shape and height. First of all, I was impressed by the number of candles they had, but more so by the fact that they knew where they were and had the matches to light them. We sat at the kitchen table drinking very good bubbly with some cheese, crackers, a few grapes. The candles flickered. They were relaxed. I was euphoric. We made our way to the dining room for duck legs served on polenta with some vegetables they had preserved from their summer garden. Mary apologized for not having much for dessert. Has anyone ever tasted her cookies? We had a scoop of ice cream and the remains of the best gingerbread men one could imagine. In the middle of all this, the lights came on. It was almost anticlimactic.


This dinner and my dinner with my neighbor were spur of the moment...but those moments were so very special. It's really not about having company, but rather enjoying the company you have. Next time you're looking at some food in your fridge that you think might not be fancy enough to share with a friend, think again. Pick up the phone. Tell your friend to c'mon over. Both of you will be happy. 



PHOTO: GIRMANTAS URBONAS

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