



DINNER PARTY Starters

'TIS THE SEASON TO SERVE UP SOMETHING GREAT
TO BEGIN YOUR EVENING MEAL

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Set the mood for the holidays with first courses from three of the area's top restaurants. These succulent starters from Restaurant Lorena's in Maplewood, Bernardsville's The Bernards Inn and Restaurant Blu in Montclair will fire up the festivities with delicious flavor.



Salmon Tartare with Wasabi Tobiko from Restaurant Lorena's in Maplewood

⤴ SALMON TARTARE WITH WASABI TOBIKO FROM RESTAURANT LORENA'S IN MAPLEWOOD

"This first-course appetizer has been on the menu since the restaurant opened seven years ago. It is refined yet simple, and it is only as successful as the quality of the ingredients. In other words, this dish defines Lorena's." —Owner Lorena Campos and chef Humberto Campos Jr. **SERVES 4**

INGREDIENTS

FRIED WONTONS

4 wonton wrappers, quartered
Oil, for frying
Salt

SALMON TARTARE

10 ounces impeccably fresh, sushi-grade salmon filet
½ cup sake
2 Tbs. pickled ginger

juice

1½ Tbs. hot or regular sesame oil
1 tsp. fleur de sel
¼ cup crème fraîche (available at specialty Asian markets)
1 cup loosely packed fresh herbs, small pluches (sprigs) or micro greens

Preparation: For the wontons: (The wontons may be fried up to 4 hours ahead.) Heat oil in a heavy bottom pan or deep fryer to 350° F. Add the wonton quarters and fry until golden brown, turning occasionally. Remove from the oil and blot on paper towels. Season the wontons with salt while still hot. Keep in an airtight container until ready to serve. For the tartare: Place the salmon on a clean cutting board and, using a clean, sharp knife, cut the salmon into very small pieces, about ¼-inch thick. Keep the surface cold. (If you have a meat grinder attachment for a Kitchen Aid mixer, this works well too.) In a mixing bowl, combine the sake, ginger juice, sesame oil and salt. Add the salmon and mix gently to coat. Pack a quarter of the salmon mixture into a 3" x 3" ring mold on a serving plate. Add 1 tablespoon crème fraîche to the mold and spread evenly over the salmon. Repeat with the wasabi tobiko. Carefully remove the ring mold. Garnish the plate with 4 wonton quarters alongside the plate and micro greens. Repeat with the remaining ingredients. **Prep time: 30 minutes; total time: 45 minutes**

BUTTERNUT SQUASH DUMPLINGS WITH ALMONDS AND CRANBERRIES FROM RESTAURANT BLU IN MONTCLAIR

"Butternut squash or pumpkin always brings to mind fall; we use these ingredients for appetizers, salads, entrees and desserts. The holidays are a natural occasion for the use of these ingredients." —Chef and owner Zod Arifai **SERVES 4**

INGREDIENTS

DUMPLINGS

1 (2-pound) butternut squash, peeled and cut into 1-inch pieces
24 to 30 wonton wrappers

SAUCE

2 Tbs. butter
2 Tbs. balsamic vinegar
¼ cup water

TO GARNISH

1 cup almonds (chopped)
1 cup cranberries (chopped)

Preparation: Heat the oven to 500° F. Place the butternut squash on a sheet pan and spray with water. Roast till soft, about 30 minutes, then cool. Once it's cool, put the squash in a food processor and puree just until smooth. (Do not overpuree or the squash will be too watery.)

To make the dumplings: Place 5 wonton wrappers on your kitchen table. Fill a small cup halfway with water. Get a pastry brush and dip it in water, then run the pastry brush on both sides of each wonton about ⅓ of an inch from the edge. Do not wet the entire wonton. Place ½ teaspoon of the butternut puree in the center of the wonton, then grab one corner and fold over the filling into a triangle shape. Firmly press the edges between your fingers to close the edges tightly. Repeat until you have enough or have used all the puree. Leave the filled wontons on the counter or table uncovered for 30 to 60 minutes to dry up a bit.

For the sauce: In a saucepan over low heat, melt the butter and cook slowly until golden brown, then cool. Add the balsamic vinegar and water to the browned butter, then bring to boil. Remove and keep warm. Heat the oven to 300° F. Place the almonds on a baking sheet and bake until toasted, about 20 minutes. Remove and set aside until ready to plate.

To cook: In a large pot, bring 2 quarts water to a boil. Salt the water (1 teaspoon for 2 quarts water). Place 10 dumplings at a time in the water and cook for 2 to 3 minutes, depending on the thickness of the wonton wrappers. Remove the dumplings with a strainer or a slotted spoon and place on warm plate. Repeat with the remaining dumplings. Drizzle 2 tablespoons butter sauce, almonds and cranberries over the dumplings.

Prep time: 30 minutes; total time: 2 hours

PEANUT BUTTER STUFFED DATES WRAPPED IN BACON

FROM THE BERNARDS INN IN BERNARDSVILLE

"This was a dish my grandmother always served before our holiday dinners. It's easy to prepare a day in advance and only takes a few minutes to cook. A full platter never made it around the room at my grandmother's house, and I am sure once your guests try them, you will have the same problem."

—Executive chef Corey Heyer **SERVES 10**

INGREDIENTS

20 dates, pits removed
6 Tbs. creamy peanut butter

10 slices bacon, cut in half crosswise
20 toothpicks

Preparation: Put the peanut butter into a pastry bag fitted with a small round tip. Carefully stuff each date with approximately 1 teaspoon of peanut butter. Wrap each date with a half slice of bacon and secure with a toothpick. The dates can be made one day in advance and kept in the refrigerator. Heat the oven to 400° F. Coat a baking sheet with cooking spray and arrange the dates on the sheet so they are not touching. Cook the dates for approximately 3 minutes. Flip all of the dates over and cook until the bacon is crispy, approximately 3 more minutes. Carefully remove the dates from the oven, as the bacon will leave a lot of grease in the bottom of the pan. Place dates on a paper towel-lined plate and allow to cool for 2 minutes. The peanut butter will be extremely hot and will need to cool before being consumed. Arrange on a platter and serve.

Prep time: 20 minutes; total time: 40 minutes +

