

- Have a “come as you are” “Soup Supper,” maybe even on a weeknight. Invite some friends or family members, put the soup (or chili or stew) in a slow cooker, set out bowls, and let people serve themselves. Add a simple salad, some bread, and, for dessert, some cookies or brownies. People will be well fed with minimum hassle.
- Host a coffee and cake evening. Invite some friends, family members, and/or acquaintances to stop by and share a beverage—coffee, tea, cocoa, or something else warm—and dessert. The “come for coffee and cake” option is an old custom. Your parents or grandparents may have practiced it years ago. It’s an easy, frugal, and relaxing way to connect with friends and others you’d like to know better. Think of it as meeting for coffee at home (instead of at the CoffeeBucks place).
- Have a tree decorating party. Invite others to help you hang the lights and ornaments on your tree and offer them cocoa, punch, or coffee and a selection of homemade cookies. Enjoy the decorating and the fellowship with others.
- Have a “Christmas Movie” night. Invite others to come and watch a favorite Christmas movie (“It’s a Wonderful Life”?) with you. Serve some popcorn, hot cider, and cookies.



DRAFT

- Invite others for a holiday breakfast. You needn't get too fancy. You might, for example, limit your preparations to fruit, a breakfast casserole, some homemade muffins or bread, and plenty of coffee and tea. How about some hot cocoa? You might even consider hosting an evening "breakfast" on a weeknight. Many people enjoy a nice, warm breakfast but rarely have time in the morning for more than cold cereal or a bagel. Having a chance to sit down to breakfast with others you care about and to linger over coffee and a warm scone could be a real treat.
- Have a "wrap it" party. Invite some friends to bring the gifts they need to wrap and whatever paper, bags, or boxes they want to use. You supply the scissors, tape, and perhaps some ribbon and bows. You can play Christmas carols, and you and your guests can chat while you wrap. Once the gifts are all covered, you can offer your friends some coffee, tea, and treats—perhaps some homemade cinnamon buns or deep, dark chocolate cake? A chore accomplished, time with friends, and a sweet splurge—a simple, relaxing, and frugal get-together.



DRAFT



DRAFT *

Third Sunday of Advent

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion. Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

Isaiah 52:7-10

Joy

The many tasks that are a part of traditional Christmas meals and Advent treats are, indeed, time-consuming. Nonetheless, the taking of the newly created goodies from the stove or oven, the always new aromas of sugar and spices, and the ever new recollection of these treats and so many others from our growing-up years is a special joy. Cooking and sharing meals is one of the most pleasurable ways to help us prepare for God's coming Gift.

Surely we ready our hearts and homes with a special kind of joy for good news is at hand!

O holy Child of Bethlehem,
descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin, and enter in,
be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell;
o come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Emmanuel!

("O Little Town of Bethlehem," 4th Stanza, from The United Methodist Hymnal,
Phillips Brooks, 1835-1893)

DRAFT *





DRAFT

in the Kitchen, Third Sunday in Advent

Caprese Salad

Parmesan Popovers

Meatballs in Florentine Sauce

Fettuccine

Steamed Green Beans

Tiramisu or Minty Brownies

Celebrate the third Sunday of Advent with a dinner that incorporates the colors of the season. Start with a caprese salad, bursting with cherry tomatoes, mozzarella, and fresh basil. Parmesan popovers would go nicely with the salad as well as the main dish, meatballs in Florentine sauce. The low-fat meatballs simmer in a simple tomato sauce, and you add frozen spinach near the end of the cooking time for bright color, flavor, and vitamins in your dinner. Boil some fettuccine, preferably whole grain, or other noodles to go with the meatballs. Green beans, fresh or frozen and steamed in the microwave, would round out the Sunday dinner. Do you think anyone will have room for dessert? How about Tiramisu? The coffee-flavored treat is best made ahead. Or, if you'd prefer, you could opt for simple, seasonal minty brownies. The brownies are rich and chocolaty. If you'd like to continue the minty theme, you could serve the warm brownies topped with low-fat mint chocolate chip or peppermint ice cream. This is a great family-style dinner that's wonderful for company!





DRAFT Caprese Salad – Serves 4-6

Gourmet chefs will turn up their noses at this salad because it's made with low-fat string cheese. But the salad tastes great, and the string cheese cuts costs, calories, and provides some relatively cheap protein. Best of all it's easy. If you'd like to use fresh tiny mozzarella balls instead of the string cheese, please do. They'll upgrade the salad. But be aware, you'll also add to the fat and calories (not to mention the cost!). If you'd prefer, you can leave out the romaine lettuce and serve the caprese salad "as is" or even on top of a bed of salad greens. I prefer to mix the romaine in with the other ingredients because it stretches the salad, distributes the dressing to the lettuce, and, for me, is easier.

1 pint of cherry or grape tomatoes, halved

4 low-fat mozzarella string cheese sticks cut into half-inch chunks

½ cup of chopped fresh basil

2 tablespoons of olive oil

2 tablespoons of balsamic vinegar

¼ teaspoon of salt

¼ teaspoon of pepper

1 teaspoon of grainy Dijon mustard

Combine everything in a salad bowl and mix gently but well to distribute the oil, vinegar, and seasonings. Stir the salad again before serving it.





~~DRAFT~~

~~Cold Oven Parmesan Popovers – Makes 12~~

Forget temperamental, fussy popover recipes. This one is simple, quick, and inexpensive. The popovers will puff, but they won't be huge—just nicely sized to accompany your dinner (or breakfast). The cheesy little puffs are crisp on the outside and slightly pudding-like in the center, and they get extra flavor from the cheese. If you aren't serving them immediately, don't forget to prick them with a toothpick or knife tip (just a little, you don't have to slay them!) so that the steam inside them can escape. It's best, though, to serve the popovers hot out of the oven, puffed and brown, so people can say, "Ooh! Ahh!", before devouring them. If you'd like something different for breakfast, substitute shredded cheddar cheese for the Parmesan, and add a tablespoon of dried minced chives (or fresh, if you have them) to the batter before you pour it in the muffin pan.

3 eggs

1 cup of low fat milk

1 cup of flour

½ teaspoon of salt

1/4 cup of shredded Parmesan cheese

Coat the wells of a 12-muffin pan with nonstick cooking spray and set the pan aside. Whisk the eggs and milk together well. Whisk the flour and salt into the egg/milk mixture until everything is combined, but don't whisk until everything is smooth (if you whisk too much, the popovers won't "pop" much). Divide the batter among the 12 muffin wells, filling them about half full, then sprinkle a little of the cheese on top of each of the batter-filled cups. Put the muffin pan in a cold oven and turn the oven on to 450 degrees. Bake the popovers for about 30 minutes or until they are puffy and golden brown. Remove the popovers from the oven and pierce them with a knife or toothpick to prevent their quick collapse.



Cold Oven Parmesan Popovers – Makes 12





DRAFT

Meatballs in Florentine Sauce – Serves 4-6

This is a fancy name for meatballs in red gravy (i.e., sauce) with spinach mixed into it. The recipe is simple to prepare, but it tastes quite good—hence the “froufrou” name. The meatballs are soft and flavored with herbs and Parmesan cheese, and the simple sauce is far better tasting and more nutritious than the jarred variety. Try the meatballs atop polenta as well as pasta.

16-20 ounces of lean ground beef (93 percent lean)

2 eggs

½ teaspoon of salt

¼ teaspoon of pepper

1 tablespoon of dried parsley flakes

1½ - 2 cups of stale bread crumbs (about 3 slices of bread, crumbled, preferably whole grain)

¼ cup of low-fat milk

1 teaspoon of garlic powder

1 tablespoon of dried Italian herbs

2 tablespoons of grated Parmesan cheese (from the round green canister is fine)

1 teaspoon of minced dried onions

Mix all the ingredients well and let the mixture sit for at least 10 minutes (you can also refrigerate for a few hours it and make the meatballs later in the day). Stir the mixture again and form little meatballs, slightly smaller than golf balls. Drop the meatballs into the simmering sauce (see the recipe below), bring the sauce back to a boil, partially cover the pan, and let everything cook at least 20 minutes, or until the meatballs are done. Stir in the frozen spinach and bring the mixture back to a simmer. Cook the sauce and meatballs for just a few minutes longer. You want the spinach to be barely cooked and still bright green. Keep in mind that the spinach will continue to cook as it sits in the hot sauce, so don't overdo it.



Florentine (Red Spinach) Sauce

1 teaspoon of olive oil

1 medium onion, chopped

1 28-ounce can of crushed tomatoes

½ teaspoon of salt

¼ teaspoon of pepper

1 teaspoon of dried basil

1 teaspoon of sugar (optional)

1½ cups of red wine

8 ounces of frozen spinach (1/2 of a 16-ounce package)

Heat the oil in a Dutch oven or large chef's pan. Add the onion and sauté it until it softens a bit, about 5 minutes. Turn down the heat, add the tomatoes, salt, pepper, basil, sugar (if you like), and wine and let the mixture simmer, covered, for 10-15 minutes. Add the meatballs and spinach (see the directions above). If you'd prefer to use fresh, rather than frozen, spinach, drop 4-6 handfuls of the spinach into the sauce after cooking the meatballs and just before serving time. Stir the sauce until the spinach wilts and then serve the meatballs and sauce.

