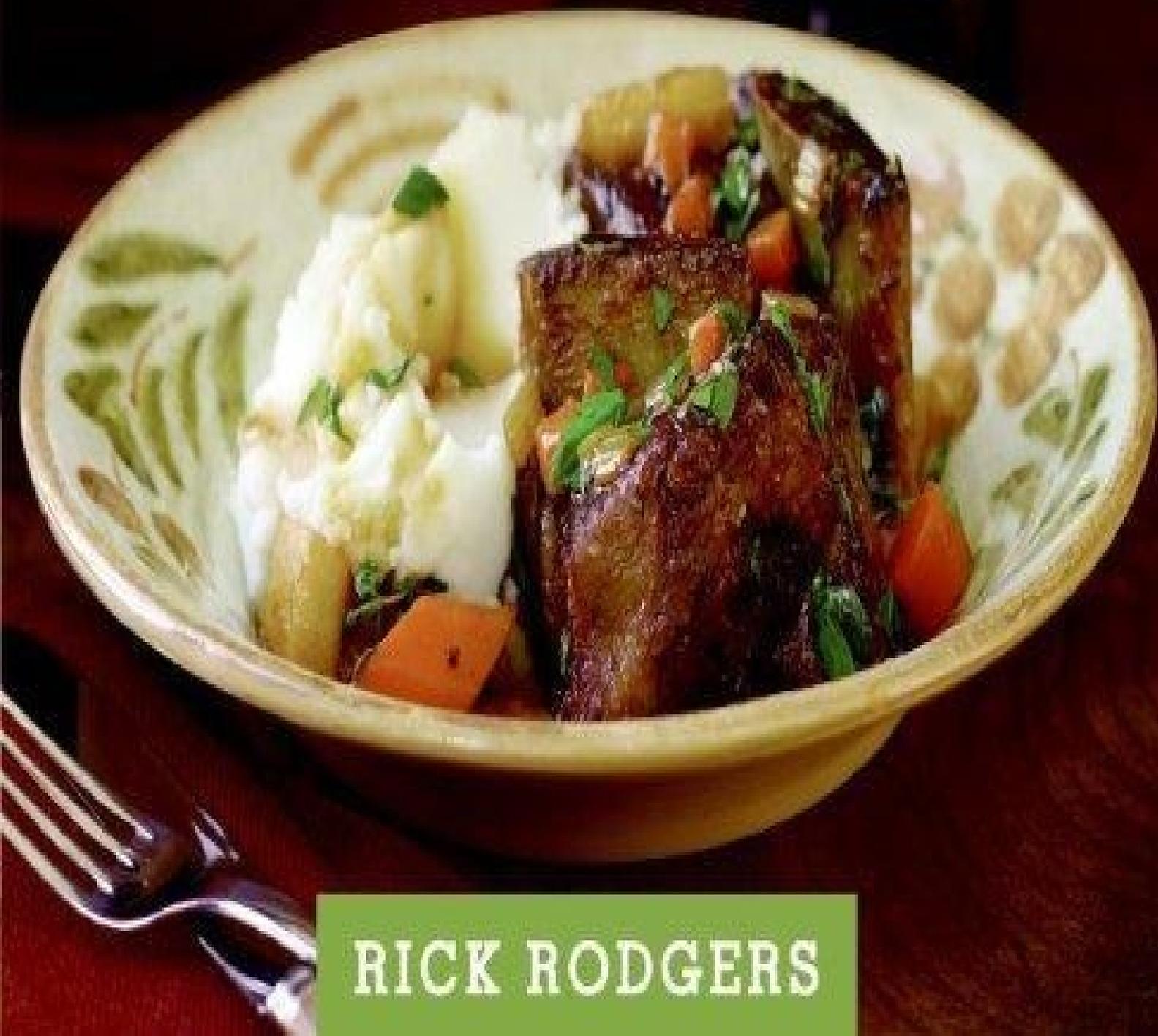


# WINTER GATHERINGS

CASUAL FOOD TO ENJOY WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS



RICK RODGERS

# **Winter Gatherings**

Casual Food to Enjoy with Family and Friends

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Photographs by Ben Fink

 HarperCollins e-books

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## **Introduction**

When the weather turns cold, cooking becomes more of a challenge. Summer's juicy, sun-kissed bounty is long gone, and the remnants of the fall harvest have also dwindled. But that's fine by me. My mind turns to thoughts of woodsy mushrooms, earthy root vegetables and winter squashes with their inherent sweetness, bitter greens that can be tamed by long cooking, and the huge array of brightly colored citrus to be found at the market.

It's no secret that American cooks can get just about whatever produce they want out of its natural season—seasonability doesn't equate to availability anymore. And availability doesn't equate to quality, either. As you have surely found in your own experience, the more distant the source of your food, the less flavor it has. Do the math on the impact of long-traveled food on our environment and you are likely to lose your appetite. This isn't a book about only cooking with locally produced ingredients, although it has become a no-brainer that supporting your local agriculture is good for your community. But *Winter Gatherings*, like its companion volumes in this seasonal gatherings book series, does hope to inspire you to cook with traditional seasonal fare, and to show that your cooking will be the better for it.

“Traditional” is key here. When our country was agrarian-based, for the majority of cooks it was not just a struggle to get interesting fare on the table during the winter, but any food at all. Fresh vegetables were pretty much restricted to root vegetables stored in the cellar. Canned, pickled, salted, and otherwise preserved produce and meats were eked out to create meals. Nowadays, we cook with turnips in January not because we don't have a choice, but because our palates crave the variety that cooking with the seasons brings.



Even though I don't have pantry shelves lined with rows of home-canned goods, I turn to plenty of preserved foods during the winter. Olives, anchovies, sauerkraut, canned and sun-dried tomatoes, chocolate, canned or dried beans, grains, cheese, maple syrup, and other foods that aren't "fresh," but certainly are tasty, are pulled into action.

As for fresh produce, the choices are more plentiful than might be expected. There are at least three growing regions (Southern California, the Southwest and Texas, and Florida) for winter citrus, so our fruit baskets can be loaded with oranges, lemons, and grapefruit, even when it's nippy outside. In winter, think of the vegetables that at one time would have been harvested late in the fall and stored in the root cellar for cooking—cabbage, leeks, onions, potatoes, turnips, rutabagas, sunchokes, apples, pears, carrots, parsnips, and more. In the summer, I savor every sip of gazpacho, but I don't enjoy my rutabaga and pear soup any less because the latter is made with more humble ingredients.

Chilly weather not only changes the ingredients we cook with, but how we cook them. Instead of quick meals cooked in a flash on the backyard grill, we cook hearty fare like stews and ragouts to warm the insides. I couldn't imagine serving sauerbraten with red cabbage and spaetzle any other time than December, January, or February, and it would be pretty silly to put braised lamb shanks with olives and feta on the menu in August. You may find yourself inside more during the winter, so dishes that require an occasional stir as they quietly simmer on the stove may be easier to attend to. Or it could be more primal, with our minds craving extra fat and carbohydrates to protect our bodies from the cold.

Winter is also the time for parties. Ancient cultures knew that the winter solstice signaled the beginning of the depletion of the food supply, so feasts were in order. The sumptuous bashes we throw for Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, and New Year's have their roots in this millennium-old tradition. *Winter Gatherings* shares recipes for all kinds of meals, from modest weeknight suppers to holiday spreads. Food for other special occasions, from Super Bowl Sunday to Saint Valentine's Day to Mardi Gras, is included, too. I've included a few menus for some of the big events of the season, such as a Christmas Day dinner.

So, winter cooking does not have to mean an endless parade of potatoes. Let's lift our steaming mugs of hot chocolate and make a toast to the variety of foods that this austere, but ultimately flavorful, season has to offer.



## **APPETIZERS AND BEVERAGES**

Gruyère and Rosemary Gougères

Sweet and Spicy Chicken Wings

Dill–Whole Wheat Blini with American Caviar

Pizza with Fontina, Potatoes, and Tapenade

Baked Brie with Wild Mushrooms and Thyme

Gruyère and Cider Fondue

Chai Eggnog

Orange-Spice Hot Chocolate with Homemade Marshmallows

## Gruyère and Rosemary Gougères

Makes about 2 dozen

These little savory cream puffs, perfect for snacking along with a glass of red wine, are great to have in your repertoire. Not only are they tasty, they can be made with ingredients you probably have on hand (yes, you can substitute another semifirm cheese, such as Cheddar or Fontina, for the Gruyère, and your favorite herb for the rosemary, as well) to whip up a quick fresh-from-the-oven appetizer for unexpected guests. There are a few little tricks to making gougères, which I've incorporated into the recipe. The French call this pastry *pâte à choux* (literally “cabbage pastry”), not just because the round puffs look like cabbages, but because this is the only pastry that is hot. That would make it *pâte à chaud* or “hot pastry,” and *chaud* became corrupted into *choux* over the years.

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¾ cup whole milk

6 tablespoons (¾ stick) unsalted butter, cut up

1 cup all-purpose flour

5 large eggs, divided

½ cup (2 ounces) shredded Gruyère cheese

2 teaspoons finely chopped fresh rosemary or 1 teaspoon crumbled dried rosemary

2 teaspoons Dijon mustard

½ teaspoon salt, plus more for the egg glaze

¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

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- **1.** Position a rack in the center of the oven. Line a large baking sheet with parchment paper or a silicone baking mat.
- **2.** Bring the milk and butter to a simmer in a heavy-bottomed medium saucepan over medium heat, stirring occasionally to be sure that the butter is completely melted by the time the milk simmers. Add the flour, all at once, and stir with a wooden spoon to make a thick paste. Reduce the heat to low. Stir constantly until the paste comes together into a ball and films the bottom of the saucepan, about 1 minute. Adjust the heat as necessary so the paste cooks without burning. The idea here is to force off excess moisture, in the form of steam, from the paste in order to make a crisper pastry. Remove the saucepan from the heat.
- **3.** Whisk 4 of the eggs in a bowl to combine them. One-fourth at a time, stir the beaten eggs into the hot dough in the saucepan, and stir well until the dough comes together into a glossy mass. Stir in the Gruyère, rosemary, mustard, salt, and pepper.
- **4.** Transfer the warm dough to a pastry bag fitted with a ½-inch plain tip. Pipe 24 walnut-sized balls of dough, about 1 inch apart, onto the baking sheet. Or drop the dough from a teaspoon onto the sheet. Beat the remaining egg well with a pinch of salt. Lightly brush some of the egg glaze on the mounds of dough, being sure that the egg does not drip down onto the sheet.
- **5.** Bake until the balls are puffed and golden brown, 20 to 25 minutes. If the gougères have not baked long enough, they will deflate when taken from the oven, so bake for at least 20 minutes before checking them. Remove the sheet from the oven. Pierce each gougère with the tip of a small sharp knife. (This releases the steam from the interiors of the puffs and helps crisp them.) Return to the oven and continue baking until the gougères are crisp, 5 to 8 minutes. Let cool briefly on the baking sheet. (The gougères can be made up to 4 hours ahead. Reheat in a preheated 400°F oven until they are heated through, about 5 minutes.)



## Sweet and Spicy Chicken Wings

Makes 6 to 8 servings

What's Super Bowl Sunday without a pile of jazzed-up chicken wings? These have become one of my favorite appetizers, as they couldn't be simpler to throw together, and they always disappear. I like the smoky high heat of the ground chipotle, but you could use milder, somewhat sweet ancho or hotter-than-hell habanero, if you prefer. Don't use the frozen "wingettes," however, because they give off too much liquid and don't crisp up nicely.

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Vegetable oil for the baking sheet

4 pounds fresh (not thawed frozen) chicken "wingettes"

1½ teaspoons pure ground chipotle

1 teaspoon ground cumin

1 teaspoon kosher salt

3 tablespoons honey

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- **1.** Position a rack in the center of the oven and preheat to 425°F. Lightly oil a large rimmed baking sheet.
- **2.** Put the chicken wings in a large bowl. Mix the chipotle, cumin, and salt together in a small bowl. Sprinkle over the wings, tossing well. Spread on the baking sheet.

- **3.** Bake for 20 minutes. Turn the wings over and continue baking until golden brown and they show no sign of pink when pierced with the tip of a knife, about 25 minutes longer.
- **4.** Transfer the wings to a large bowl. Pour off and discard the fat in the baking sheet. Drizzle the wings with the honey and toss. Spread again on the baking sheet and return to the oven. Bake until the wings are glazed with the honey, 5 to 10 minutes longer.
- **5.** Transfer to a platter and serve hot, with a bowl for collecting the bones. (They're not very manly, but moist disposable towelettes of some kind would be welcome, too, as fingers will get sticky when eating these.)



## Dill–Whole Wheat Blini with American Caviar

Makes 24 blini; 6 to 8 servings

Traditionally, imported caviar arrived in our country in November, but now, with the popularity and availability of American caviar, you don't have to wait for the cool weather to serve it. It remains one of the most elegant items to offer guests at New Year's. Some people wouldn't think of serving caviar without small buckwheat blini. Because buckwheat isn't the most common flour, I prefer to use whole wheat, which provides the whole grain flavor but will be used up much more quickly and not left to sit in the pantry.

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### BLINI

½ teaspoon dry active yeast

3 tablespoons warm (105° to 115°F) water

¾ cup whole milk

2 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted

2 tablespoons sour cream

1 large egg, separated

1/8 teaspoon sugar

1/8 teaspoon salt

½ cup all-purpose flour

½ cup whole wheat flour

2 teaspoons finely chopped fresh dill

Nonstick cooking spray for the skillet

2 ounces American caviar, such as black paddlefish

½ cup sour cream or crème fraîche

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- **1.** To make the blini, sprinkle the yeast over the warm water in a small bowl. Let stand until the mixture looks creamy, about 5 minutes. Stir to dissolve the yeast.
- **2.** Whisk the milk, dissolved yeast, melted butter, sour cream, egg yolk, sugar, and salt together in a medium bowl until combined. Add the flour and whole wheat flour, and whisk until smooth. Cover with plastic wrap and let stand at room temperature until bubbly (it will not double in volume), about 2 hours.
- **3.** Whisk the egg white in a greaseproof small bowl until soft peaks form. Add to the batter, along with the dill, and fold together.
- **4.** When ready to serve, heat a griddle or large skillet over medium-high heat until a sprinkle of water splashed on the surface forms skittering beads. Reduce the heat to medium-low. Using a heaping tablespoon for each blini, spoon the batter onto the griddle. Cook until holes appear in the tops of the blini, about 1 minute. Turn and cook until the other sides are golden brown, about 30 seconds. Transfer to a platter lined with a clean, fragrance-free napkin or kitchen towel, and wrap the blini in the towel to keep warm while making the remaining blini. (The blini are best freshly made. They can be made up to 2 hours ahead and stored at room temperature. To reheat, overlap blini on a large baking sheet and bake in a preheated 350°F oven, uncovered, until hot, about 5 minutes.)
- **5.** Serve the blini, accompanied by bowls of caviar and sour cream. Allow guests to top each blini with the caviar and sour cream.

## Pizza with Fontina, Potatoes, and Tapenade

Makes 4 servings

Knowing how to make homemade pizza is a great skill to have because you are in charge of the toppings and their quality. While I have friends who are capable of churning out pizza after pizza for a crowd, I prefer to serve a single pizza as an appetizer. This vegetable pizza combines the mellow flavors of Fontina cheese and potatoes with bold accents of olive tapenade—much different than a summery tomato-and-basil pizza, but just as good in its own way. To give the pizza its crisp golden brown crust, use a pizza stone and paddle.

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### PIZZA DOUGH

1 (¼-ounce) package active dry yeast (2¼ teaspoons)

¼ cup warm (105° to 115°F) water

3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided

2 cups bread flour

1 teaspoon salt

½ cup cold water, as needed

### GARLIC OIL

3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

2 garlic cloves, finely chopped

3 small Yukon gold potatoes (8 ounces total), scrubbed but unpeeled

Cornmeal for the pizza paddle

1/3 cup freshly grated Parmesan

1½ cups (6 ounces) shredded Italian Fontina d'Aosta

1 bottled roasted red bell pepper, drained, seeded, and coarsely chopped

3 tablespoons tapenade (see Note)

2 teaspoons finely chopped fresh rosemary

Crushed hot red pepper flakes

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- **1.** To make the pizza dough, sprinkle the yeast over the warm water in a small bowl. Let stand 5 minutes; stir until dissolved. Add 2 tablespoons of the olive oil.
- **2.** Place the flour and salt in a food processor fitted with the metal chopping blade and pulse briefly to combine. Add the yeast mixture. With the machine running, gradually add enough cold water through the feed tube until the mixture comes together in a ball on top of the blade. Process to knead for 45 seconds. Gather up the dough and briefly knead by hand on a lightly floured work surface.
- **3.** Pour the remaining 1 tablespoon oil into a medium bowl. Add the dough and turn to coat liberally with oil. Cover with plastic wrap and let stand at room temperature until doubled in volume, about 1¼ hours.
- **4.** To make the garlic oil, heat the oil and garlic in a small saucepan over low heat until the oil bubbles around the garlic, about 3 minutes. Remove from the heat and let cool.
- **5.** Place the potatoes in a medium saucepan and add enough salted water to cover. Cover with a lid and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat to medium and cook with the lid ajar until the potatoes are almost tender when pierced with a small knife, 12 to 15 minutes. Drain and let cool until easy to handle. Using a thin knife, slice the potatoes into 1/8-inch-thick rounds. Spread the potato rounds on a plate and lightly brush the tops with the garlic oil. Reserve the remaining garlic oil.
- **6.** Position a rack in the lower third of the oven. Place a pizza stone on the rack and preheat the oven to 450°F.