

THE ULTIMATE CRAB CAKES

THE SECRET TO THE ULTIMATE CRAB CAKE IS TWOFOLD. First, I use only fresh, jumbo lump crabmeat, which gives the cake a hefty bulk so when you put your fork through it, you pull out pure hunks of delicious crab, not breading. Which brings me to the second point: I use soft, fresh white bread crumbs. Dry bread crumbs soak up all the moisture in the crab and leave the cakes dense, heavy, and dry. Fresh bread crumbs give the mixture just enough structure to make the cakes easy to flip, and they hold in moisture so the cakes are as light as a cloud.

SERVES 4 TO 6 CRAB CAKES

Extra-virgin olive oil
1 onion, finely minced
2 garlic cloves, finely minced
1 pound jumbo lump crabmeat
1/2 cups fresh bread crumbs (made from 3 or 4 slices of white bread with the crusts removed)
2 tablespoons mayonnaise
1 large egg white
Juice of 1 lime
1/4 cup chopped fresh cilantro, plus whole leaves, for garnish
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

CHILE MAYONNAISE

1 cup mayonnaise
1 canned chipotle chile in adobo, finely chopped, plus 1 teaspoon of the adobo sauce
Zest and juice of 1 lime
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

Small bunch of mâche or baby greens, for garnish
1 fresh red chile, sliced, for garnish (optional)
1 lime, segments cut free of their membranes, for garnish (optional)

Make the crab cakes first so that they have time to firm up in the fridge before you cook them. Heat a 2-count of olive oil in a frying pan over medium heat. Add the onion and garlic and cook for 5 to 7 minutes, until the onion gets kind of caramelized and delicious. Dump that into a bowl and fold in the crabmeat, bread crumbs, mayonnaise, egg white, lime juice, and cilantro, mixing just until well blended. Season with salt and pepper. Shape the mixture into 6 fat crab cakes. Put them on a plate, cover, and stick them in the refrigerator to chill.

For the chile mayo, put the mayonnaise, chipotle chile, adobo sauce, lime zest and juice, and salt and pepper in a bowl and stir it up. Cover and refrigerate until you're ready to eat.

To serve, heat a 3-count of olive oil in a large sauté pan over medium heat. Add the crab cakes and cook for about 4 minutes on each side, or until they're nice and crisp. Serve with the chile mayonnaise and garnish with the greens and sliced red chile and lime segments, if using.



CHICKEN AND COCONUT "PAELLA"

THIS IS ONE OF THOSE DELICIOUS HODGEPODGE DISHES THAT DEFIES DESCRIPTION. Despite the ingredients, it's not really Spanish though it is reminiscent of a paella, nor is it Asian, and it's definitely not Italian. Chicken thighs, lightly crusted with crushed coriander seeds, develop a deep, lemony aroma when sautéed. The thighs get tucked into basmati rice that has been simmered in sweet coconut milk and ginger. The dish is finished in the oven and then goes straight out to the table and served family style.

SERVES 4 TO 6

- 1/4 cup coriander seeds
- 8 chicken thighs
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
- Extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 onion, finely minced
- 1-inch piece of fresh ginger, peeled and chopped
- 1 bay leaf
- 2 cups basmati rice
- Grated zest of 1 lemon
- 1/2 cups chicken broth
- 1/2 cups coconut milk

PEA SALAD

- 1 cup frozen green peas, thawed in a colander under cool water
- Small handful of fresh mint leaves
- 1 bunch of watercress
- Juice of 1/2 lemon
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

- Mint leaves, for garnish
- Lemon wedges, for garnish

Preheat the oven to 400°F. Coarsely crack the coriander in one of three ways: pulse in a spice grinder; wrap the seeds in a tea towel and crush with a rolling pin or the bottom of a heavy pan; or grind in a pepper grinder on the coarse setting. Season the thighs well with salt and pepper and sprinkle all over with the cracked coriander. Heat a 3-count of olive oil in a large, deep, ovenproof skillet over medium-high heat. Lay the chicken thighs in the pan, skin side down, and give them a good sear for 3 to 4 minutes to develop a nice crust. Turn and cook for 3 to 4 minutes on the other side to brown the meat. Take the chicken out of the pan.

Hit the pan with another tablespoon of olive oil and turn the heat down to medium. Add the onion, ginger, and bay leaf and cook, stirring, for 3 to 4 minutes, until the onion is soft but not colored. Now you've got all this great flavor going on in the bottom of the pan—chicken drippings, ginger, onion, and bay. Add the rice and season with salt and pepper. Stir for a minute or two until the rice is well coated with the oil. Stir in the lemon zest. Now add the chicken broth and coconut milk and bring that to a simmer. Tuck in the chicken thighs, put the whole thing in the oven, and bake, uncovered, until the rice is tender and bound by a creamy sauce and the chicken is entirely cooked through, about 30 minutes. Discard the bay leaf.

When the chicken is done, put the peas, mint, and watercress in a bowl. Add the lemon juice, olive oil, and salt and pepper and give it a good toss. Taste for seasoning. To serve, take a big spoon and scoop out some rice and chicken onto each of 4 plates. Garnish each plate with the pea salad.



COLD PASTA SALAD WITH ROASTED CHICKEN, PLUMS, BLUE CHEESE, AND BASIL

I LOVE CHUNKY PASTA SALADS. They're perfect for lunch or a simple early dinner and this recipe uses all my favorite ingredients. It all works: The roast chicken tastes great with the basil, and the blue cheese tastes great with the plums. Toss it all together with chewy cold pasta and you've got a big bowl of great stuff that'll be dinner tonight and a mid-night snack tomorrow.

You can save a step and make this with leftover roast chicken, roast the plums separately.

SERVES 4

Kosher salt
Extra-virgin olive oil
4 boneless, skinless chicken breasts
Freshly ground black pepper
1 pound plums, halved and pitted
1 pound penne

VINAIGRETTE

1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
1 teaspoon red wine vinegar
1 teaspoon sugar
1/3 cup extra-virgin olive oil
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 bunch of fresh chives, minced
Handful of fresh flat-leaf parsley leaves, chopped

1/4 pound crumbled blue cheese
Handful of whole fresh basil leaves

Preheat the oven to 375°F. Bring a big pot of salted water to a boil over high heat for the pasta.

Heat a 2-cup amount of oil in a cast-iron or other ovenproof skillet over medium heat until almost smoking. Sprinkle the chicken breasts with a generous amount of salt and pepper and cook for 5 minutes, then flip the breasts and cook for 5 more minutes. Flip the breasts again, toss the pan in the oven, and roast for about 20 minutes, or until the juices run clear when you stick a small knife into the chicken. Meanwhile, toss the plums in a bowl with a drizzle of olive oil, salt, and pepper. Throw them in with the chicken during the last 8 minutes of cooking. Take the chicken and plums out of the pan, cool slightly, then stick them both in the refrigerator to chill.

Meanwhile, when the pasta water comes to a boil, add the penne and give it a stir to keep the penne from sticking together. Boil for 8 to 9 minutes, until al dente. Drain in a colander and chill under cold running water. Drain again.

The last thing is to make the vinaigrette: Whisk together the mustard, vinegar, and sugar in a large serving bowl. Whisk in the oil and season with salt and pepper. Fold in the herbs. Slice the chilled chicken and toss into the bowl along with the pasta, the blue cheese, and the basil leaves. Toss, and taste for seasoning. Mound on a plate with the plums alongside.



THE ULTIMATE MACARONI AND CHEESE WITH PEAS AND BACON

I DON'T KNOW A MAN, WOMAN, OR CHILD WHO DOESN'T LOVE A BOWL OF GREAT MAC AND CHEESE. *Sweet peas and bacon spooned on top take it to a whole new level. This is the one and only macaroni and cheese recipe you will ever need.*

SERVES 6 TO 8

Kosher salt

1 pound elbow macaroni

3 tablespoons unsalted butter

3 tablespoons all-purpose flour

4 cups warm milk

5½ cups shredded sharp white Cheddar cheese

Freshly ground black pepper

¼ cup chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

Extra-virgin olive oil

4 slices bacon, cut crosswise into thin strips

1 large onion, diced

2 garlic cloves, smashed

Leaves from ¼ bunch of fresh thyme

2 cups frozen peas, thawed in a colander under cool water

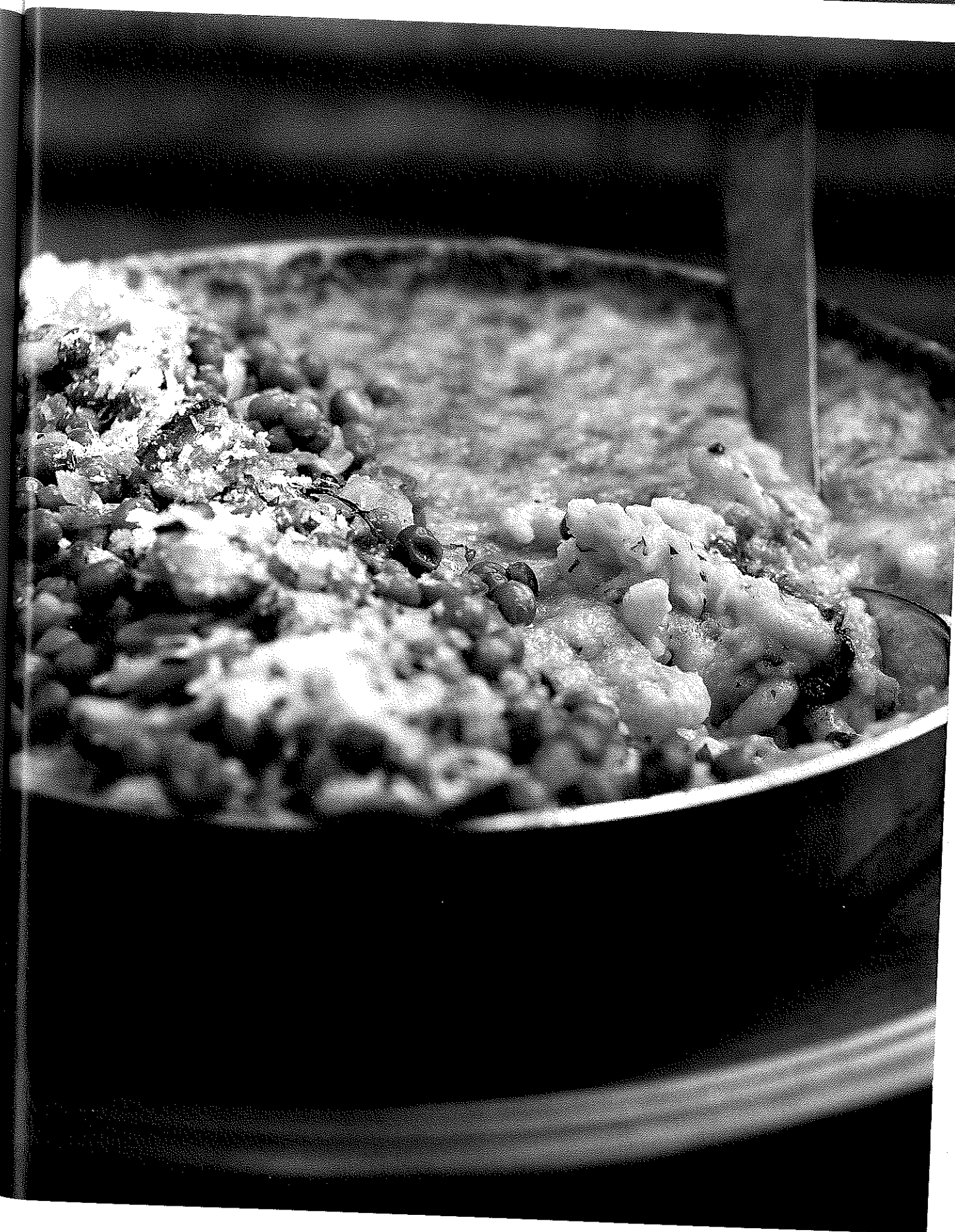
Bring a pot of salted water to a boil over high heat. Add the macaroni and cook for 8 to 9 minutes, until al dente. Drain.

Preheat the oven to 400°F.

Melt the butter in a large, deep skillet over medium heat. Whisk in the flour and cook for about 1 minute, stirring constantly to keep lumps from forming. Gradually whisk in the milk and, whisking vigorously, cook until the mixture is thick and smooth. Stir in 4 cups of the cheese and continue to cook and stir to melt the cheese. Season with salt and pepper. Add the cooked macaroni and the parsley and fold that all in to coat the macaroni with the cheese mixture. Scrape into a 3-quart baking dish and sprinkle with the remaining ½ cups cheese. Bake for 30 minutes, or until hot and bubbly.

While that's going, heat a 2-count of olive oil in a sauté pan. Add the bacon, onion, garlic, and thyme and cook for about 5 minutes to soften the onion. Fold in the peas and season with salt and pepper.

To serve, scatter the pea and bacon mixture over the mac and cheese. Use a big spoon to scoop out servings, making sure you get some of the smoky pea mixture on each spoonful.



THE ULTIMATE BAKED BEANS

BAKED BEANS ARE AN INSTITUTION OF THE AMERICAN PICNIC. *This dish has all the sweet barbecued flavors you've come to expect but with a spicy punch from chipotle chiles. The dressing is super easy—the whole thing happens in a blender—and because it's made with canned beans the dish comes together in a fraction of the time you might think.*

Before it goes in the oven, I top the dish off with thick slabs of smoky bacon and the needles from a few sprigs of fresh rosemary. It's the right side dish for any outdoor barbecue and the whole thing takes only half an hour.

SERVES 6

½ cup molasses

¼ cup ketchup

2 tablespoons Dijon mustard

2 canned chipotle chiles in adobo

3 big (28-ounce) cans cannellini beans

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

10 bacon strips

3 to 4 fresh rosemary sprigs

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Put the molasses, ketchup, mustard, and chiles in a blender and purée. Scrape that into a big bowl, add the beans, season with salt and black pepper, and gently toss so that the beans are coated with the molasses mixture. Now dump that into a 9 by 13-inch baking dish and level it. Shingle the bacon strips over the top. Throw the rosemary sprig on top and bake until the bacon is browned and fat is rendered, about 25 minutes.



OVEN FRIES

CRISPY OVEN FRIES ARE A GREAT WAY TO GET THAT CLASSIC BISTRO EFFECT *without having to heat up a pot of oil. The wedges are tossed in a healthy amount of extra-virgin olive oil and roasted in the oven until very crisp.*

There are two tricks to making these. Roast at a high temperature, and don't shake the fries around while they're cooking, the longer they sit in contact with the metal baking sheet, the crisper they get. Tossed with chopped parsley and freshly grated Parmigiano, they'll make any French-fry lover happy.

SERVES 4

2 russet potatoes, cut in half lengthwise, halves cut lengthwise into fourths to make 16 big, fat wedges

¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil

¾ teaspoon kosher salt

¼ cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese

2 tablespoons chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

Preheat the oven to 425°F. Toss the potatoes with the olive oil and salt in a large bowl, then dump the potatoes out onto a baking sheet, spreading to a single layer. Roast for 30 to 35 minutes, until the potatoes are cooked through, brown, and crispy. Toss them in a big bowl with the cheese and parsley and serve hot.



PEAR COBBLER WITH CRANBERRY STREUSEL

THE WARM, MELTED FRUIT COMBINATION OF PEARS AND CRANBERRIES MAKES A FANTASTIC COMFORT-FOOD DESSERT *to warm up even the coldest night. Grab a bowlful with a scoop of ice cream and slip on a thick pair of socks. You've got the ultimate winter nightcap.*

SERVES 4

Unsalted butter, at room temperature

Granulated sugar

4 Bartlett pears

2 teaspoons vanilla extract

¼ cup brown sugar

2 tablespoons all-purpose flour

1 teaspoon cinnamon

½ teaspoon ground nutmeg

STREUSEL TOPPING

½ cup (1 stick) unsalted butter, softened

½ cup brown sugar

½ cup all-purpose flour

½ teaspoon kosher salt

1 cup fresh or frozen cranberries

½ cup heavy cream, beaten to soft peaks

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Butter an 8 by 8-inch baking dish. Dust the dish with granulated sugar, tapping out any excess.

Peel the pears and cut them in half through the stem end. Use a melon baller to scoop out the cores. Put the pear halves in a large bowl, sprinkle with the vanilla, and toss. Then sprinkle over the brown sugar, flour, cinnamon, and nutmeg and toss so that the pears are really well coated with the flavorings. Set the pears in a single layer, cored side down, in the prepared baking dish.

Now make the topping. In the same bowl, combine the butter, brown sugar, flour, and salt and mash it all together with your fingers. Toss in the cranberries. Crumble the topping mixture over the pears in the baking dish and bake until the topping is nice and crunchy and browned and the pears are very tender, 35 to 40 minutes. Serve with whipped cream.

