

# GRAND TOUR

*Food*

## SPRING BRUNCH

*By Gena Bell*

THE EARTH IS FINALLY DRYING OUT. We've survived what may end up being the wettest California winter on record. Warm sunny spring days are finally here—and fresh seasonal ingredients. Weekends are a great time to slow down, gather with family and friends, and create a special meal. Brunch is the perfect choice for spring weekend gatherings. We can create a meal out of traditional breakfast foods like eggs, pancakes and muffins, adding fresh spring ingredients to reinvent these old favorites.

Eggs are the most popular brunch item on most cooks' lists, and they can be transformed into much more than just plain ol' scrambled or fried. Baked eggs are an easy change of pace and you can add fresh cut herbs for additional spring flavor. For a new egg dish, take two gratin dishes (oval-ceramic 2-cup dishes), place a pat of butter and a tablespoon of cream in each and put under the broiler until melted. Next, break 3 eggs into each dish and sprinkle with fresh chopped herbs and put under the broiler again for 5 to 6 minutes until eggs are almost cooked through. Allow to rest for 1 minute and salt & pepper to taste. Serve your Herbed Baked Eggs with fresh toasted crusty bread and country bacon.

One of my favorite egg dishes is a spring frittata loaded with fresh spring veggies and herbs. A frittata is a baked egg dish that is prepared in a skillet on the stove and then finished in the oven and cut into pie wedges to serve. Frittatas can be served warm or at room temperature, which makes them the perfect brunch food (See recipe below).

If your family is like mine and lives for homemade sauces, create traditional poached eggs served over crusty French bread with roasted tomatoes and homemade hollandaise sauce. Many of us fret over making fresh hollandaise, but fear no more and try an easy blender version. First, melt 1 1/2 sticks of butter in a saucepan (I didn't say this was low-cal). Next, in a blender add 4 eggs yolks at room temperature, 3 tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice, 1/4 teaspoon black pepper, 2 pinches of cayenne pepper and blend for 20 seconds. With the blender on low, add the melted butter and blend for 45 seconds until combined, then salt to taste. I prefer adding fresh herbs such as tarragon, thyme or basil to give the sauce a fresh twist. Nothing could be easier and your family will love you for it!

It wouldn't be brunch without something sweet to go along with your meal. Pancakes with Vermont maple syrup are a favorite, but let's go with something different that can be prepared easily to impress a crowd or large group: Deep Dish

French Toast. In a 13x9 inch buttered baking dish, put 8 thick-cut slices of egg bread or cinnamon raisin bread. In another bowl, whisk together 8 eggs, 2 cups of half and half, 1 cup of cream, 1 cup of sugar, zest of 1 orange, 1 teaspoon of cinnamon and 2 teaspoons of vanilla. Pour half of the mixture over the first layer of bread in the baking dish. Next, layer another 8 slices of bread on top of first layer and pour the remaining egg mixture over the top. Press bread down lightly with fingers to help absorb the egg mixture. Bake in a 350 degree oven for 40 minutes or until lightly browned on top. Serve Deep Dish French Toast with maple syrup or a sprinkling of powdered sugar and a squeeze of orange.

Spring is here and now is the time to celebrate the season with a special spring brunch. Make food fun this spring by creating your own homemade foods using seasonal ingredients.

### ASPARAGUS, RICOTTA AND THYME FRITTATA

- 1 large bunch of asparagus, trimmed and cleaned
- 2 teaspoons olive oil
- 8 large eggs
- 1/2 cup half and half
- 1 cup fresh ricotta cheese
- 1/4 cup parmesan cheese
- 1/4 cup fresh thyme leaves
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon pepper

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. In a large pot of boiling water, place asparagus and cook (blanch) for 4 minutes. Drain and cut into thirds. In a 12-inch skillet over medium heat, add the olive oil and asparagus and sauté for 3 minutes. Meanwhile, in a large bowl combine eggs and half and half and whisk until smooth. Pour egg mixture into skillet over asparagus and stir gently to combine. Cook for 2 minutes on stove top, then add dollops of ricotta cheese and sprinkle the parmesan cheese over the egg mixture. Sprinkle the salt, pepper and thyme leaves over entire mixture. Place in the oven and continue to cook for 30 minutes or until lightly golden brown on top. Serve with salsa, sour cream or both. Enjoy! @T

*Gena Bell is a food writer/consultant and a certified pastry chef and resides in the San Francisco Bay area.*

