

Pumpkin Stuffed with Everything Good

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Around My French Table: More Than 300 Recipes From My Home to Yours

Shortly after I was given this recipe, I started keeping a list of whom I'd made it for—because I loved it so much, I was sure that if I didn't keep track, I'd end up serving the dish to the same people over and over. The idea for it came from my friend H       Samuel's sister, Catherine, whose husband grows pumpkins on his farm just outside Lyon. Catherine sent me a charming outline of the recipe, and as soon as I'd baked my first pumpkin, I realized that an outline is about the best you can do with this dish. It's a hollowed-out pumpkin stuffed with bread, cheese, garlic, and cream, and since pumpkins come in unpredictable sizes, cheeses and breads differ, and baking times depend on how long it takes for the pumpkin to get soft enough to pierce with a knife, being precise is impossible.

As Catherine said when she turned this family favorite over to me, "I hope you will put the recipe to good use, knowing that it's destined to evolve . . . and maybe even be improved."

Well, I've certainly been putting it to good use, and it has evolved, although I'm not sure that it's been improved, since every time I make it, it's different, but still wonderful. My guess is that you'll have the same feeling once you start playing around with this "outline." See Bonne Id     for some hints on variations.

And speaking of playing around, you might consider serving this alongside the Thanksgiving turkey or even instead of it—omit the bacon and you've got a great vegetarian main course.

Yield: Makes 2 very generous servings or 4 more genteel servings

ingredients

1 pumpkin, about 3 pounds

Salt and freshly ground pepper

1/4 pound stale bread, thinly sliced and cut into 1/2-inch chunks

1/4 pound cheese, such as Gruy      , Emmenthal, cheddar, or a combination, cut into 1/2-inch chunks

2–4 garlic cloves (to taste), split, germ removed, and coarsely chopped

4 slices bacon, cooked until crisp, drained, and chopped (my addition)

About 1/4 cup snipped fresh chives or sliced scallions (my addition)

1 tablespoon minced fresh thyme (my addition)

About 1/3 cup heavy cream

Pinch of freshly grated nutmeg

preparation

Center a rack in the oven and preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. Line a baking sheet with a silicone baking mat or parchment, or find a Dutch oven with a diameter that's just a tiny bit

larger than your pumpkin. If you bake the pumpkin in a casserole, it will keep its shape, but it might stick to the casserole, so you'll have to serve it from the pot—which is an appealingly homey way to serve it. If you bake it on a baking sheet, you can present it freestanding, but maneuvering a heavy stuffed pumpkin with a softened shell isn't so easy. However, since I love the way the unencumbered pumpkin looks in the center of the table, I've always taken my chances with the baked-on-a-sheet method, and so far, I've been lucky.

Using a very sturdy knife—and caution—cut a cap out of the top of the pumpkin (think Halloween Jack-o-Lantern). It's easiest to work your knife around the top of the pumpkin at a 45-degree angle. You want to cut off enough of the top to make it easy for you to work inside the pumpkin. Clear away the seeds and strings from the cap and from inside the pumpkin. Season the inside of the pumpkin generously with salt and pepper, and put it on the baking sheet or in the pot.

Toss the bread, cheese, garlic, bacon, and herbs together in a bowl. Season with pepper—you probably have enough salt from the bacon and cheese, but taste to be sure—and pack the mix into the pumpkin. The pumpkin should be well filled—you might have a little too much filling, or you might need to add to it. Stir the cream with the nutmeg and some salt and pepper and pour it into the pumpkin. Again, you might have too much or too little—you don't want the ingredients to swim in cream, but you do want them nicely moistened. (It's hard to go wrong here.)

Put the cap in place and bake the pumpkin for about 2 hours—check after 90 minutes—or until everything inside the pumpkin is bubbling and the flesh of the pumpkin is tender enough to be pierced easily with the tip of a knife. Because the pumpkin will have exuded liquid, I like to remove the cap during the last 20 minutes or so, so that the liquid can bake away and the top of the stuffing can brown a little.

When the pumpkin is ready, carefully, very carefully—it's heavy, hot, and wobbly—bring it to the table or transfer it to a platter that you'll bring to the table.

Serving

You have a choice—you can either spoon out portions of the filling, making sure to get a generous amount of pumpkin into the spoonful, or you can dig into the pumpkin with a big spoon, pull the pumpkin meat into the filling, and then mix everything up. I'm a fan of the pull-and-mix option. Served in hearty portions followed by a salad, the pumpkin is a perfect cold-weather main course; served in generous spoonfuls, it's just right alongside the Thanksgiving turkey.

Storing

It's really best to eat this as soon as it's ready. However, if you've got leftovers, you can scoop

them out of the pumpkin, mix them up, cover, and chill them; reheat them the next day.

Bonne Idée

There are many ways to vary this arts-and-crafts project. Instead of bread, I've filled the pumpkin with cooked rice—when it's baked, it's almost risotto-like. And, with either bread or rice, on different occasions I've added cooked spinach, kale, chard, or peas (the peas came straight from the freezer). I've made it without bacon (a wonderful vegetarian dish), and I've also made it and loved, loved, loved it with cooked sausage meat; cubes of ham are also a good idea. Nuts are a great addition, as are chunks of apple or pear or pieces of chestnut.

Source Information

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