

Spring Spa Menu

Four-course meal is full of flavor
but low in fat

BY AMY COTLER

MENU

Artichokes
Braised with
Whole Garlic
Cloves



Fennel
Risotto with
Shrimp



Arugula &
Aromatic
Orange Salad



Chocolate-
Cinnamon
Sherbet

When I began cooking spa cuisine professionally in the 1980s, I simply wanted to cook for my customers the food that I like to eat myself. I knew how to make *beurre blanc*, beef tenderloin, and chocolate truffle cake, but I preferred food that was still extremely flavorful but not too rich. I wanted my customers to walk away from a meal feeling satisfied but not overly full. Years later, still cooking and now teaching spa cuisine, I've found that more and more people want food that's delicious yet healthful.

WHY IS SPA COOKING DIFFERENT?

When I was taught classic Western cooking, nutrition simply wasn't an issue. In contrast, the spa chef considers nutrition within the context of fine cooking. This shifts the emphasis away from cooking large portions of meat, poultry, and fish in lots of fat, towards a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and carbohydrates. Some dishes are prepared exactly as they might be in a traditional kitchen, while others must be turned upside down to lower their fat content.

Why is lowering the fat so difficult for a cook? The savory smell of frying bacon tells you why. Fat has allure—we love it. It makes us feel satisfied with its heavy richness. Most important, fat has lots of flavor.

Certainly, anyone who's ever eaten a low-fat diet knows the wide role fat plays in our meals. It moistens sandwiches (mayonnaise), gives a tender richness to meats (animal fat), thickens and adds depth to sauces (cream and butter); coats vegetables with a glistening sheath of flavor (olive oil or butter); and it adds richness, texture, and great "mouth-feel" to desserts (butter, sour cream, cream). Unfortunately, that's just the beginning. How do we brown the food we sauté, crisp our potatoes, or dress our salads without lots of delicious fat?

Fortunately, there are many ways to do this, some of which I'll explore in the recipes for our spring spa menu. But one thing is true for all spa food—it demands more seasoning. Spa food can often be bland because the diner is missing something—fat. That missed flavor must be replaced through skillful seasoning. Healthy or not, flavor is the bottom line in cooking, and the finished dish must be delicious.

DESIGNING A SEASONAL SPA MENU

When I begin to compose any seasonal menu, I choose the basic ingredients according to what's fresh. Using these seasonal ingredients, I try to create menus by simply reversing our old ideas of the perfect meal. The traditional large portion of protein with just a little vegetable and starch garnish becomes a meal featuring carbohydrates, vegetables, and fruit with a little protein. For this meal, rice serves as the central dish, flanked by an artichoke appetizer and a refreshing salad of oranges and greens. The finale is a rich-tasting chocolate sherbet, just to prove that a decadent dessert need not be forsaken in spa dining. The menu gets less than 15% of its calories from fat, is comparatively low in calories (approximately 650), but still satisfies. Some recipes have a higher percentage of fat (the salad), some lower (the artichokes), but it is the average that matters in any diet (see the nutritional information chart on p. 93).

THE MEAL OPENS WITH ARTICHOKES

Artichokes are the perfect spa vegetable because they take plenty of time to eat and enjoy, and savoring our food slowly fills us up. But artichokes are often paired with lots of fat, with their leaves dipped

Savor the artichoke course petal by petal. The garlic-, herb-, and lemon-flavored liquid which the artichokes were cooked in makes a delicious sauce for dipping the leaves.

Photos except where noted: Sloan Howard





What is spa cuisine?

Spa cuisine isn't about deprivation, it's about balance. People may change their eating habits for weight or health concerns, but food isn't medicine. If it doesn't taste good, why bother? Whether this kind of food is called "spa cuisine," "light cooking," or "a healthy diet," it isn't about banned foods, bland foods, or even perfect body weight. At its best, spa cuisine is delicious food that is simply good for you.

The term "spa cuisine" was coined by an advertising team for the menu developed in the early 1980s by chef Seppi Renggli and a nutritionist at the Four Seasons restaurant in New York City. Their aim was to create balanced menus with a boosted nutrient-to-calorie ratio that remained tasty and attractive. The menus were and continue to be a smash success.

In the "spa" kitchen, there is no single philosophy. Some chefs may prepare organic vegetarian foods, eliminate dairy, or invent dishes with unusually nutritious foods like quinoa and hiziki. "Low-fat" cookbook authors often reinterpret traditional international dishes for their health-conscious readers. Culinary educators teach their students spa cooking techniques to enable them to tailor a healthier diet to their harried lifestyles. These food professionals may define the specifics of spa cooking differently, but they all share an interest in food and health.

Let starch be the star.

Warm and creamy-tasting risotto is topped with a few marinated shrimp for a hearty main dish.



Take a little off the top and bottom. Slice off the leaves' spiny tops (above), cut off the stems and tough bottom leaves, and cook the artichokes with the garlic (right).

in butter or drenched in a vinaigrette. Luckily, artichokes also love lemon and garlic.

For this dish, the whole artichoke is simmered in herbs, lemon juice, and whole peeled garlic cloves. The acidity of the lemon cuts the earthiness of the artichoke, and the herbs further infuse it with flavor. But the *pièce de résistance* is the garlic. It's added during the last part of the cooking and served in the center of



the open artichoke flower as an accompanying vegetable. To eat, the artichoke leaves are pulled off and swished in the cooking liquid. Then the garlic-filled bottom is eaten with plenty of whole-grain bread.

RISOTTO SUCCEEDS AS A SATISFYING MAIN DISH

The main dish features a carbohydrate as its centerpiece. Years ago, while I was working in a restaurant near a famous health spa, I cooked loads of garlic mashed potatoes for "spa refugees," as we called them. These runaways came to the restaurant to escape their low-fat diets because they simply weren't full. Like those mashed potatoes, risotto satisfies by giving diners the "heavy" feeling they're looking for in a main course.

The key to a good risotto is its texture. Made with arborio rice, the kernels must remain distinct, *al dente*, and yet bound together by a heavenly sauce that's generated from the starch in the rice. The best risotto is made with *superfino* (top-quality) arborio rice, grown in northern Italy, but in a pinch you can use another short-grain rice, as long as it isn't sticky rice. The right texture is attained by adding stock to

the rice in small increments, cooking and stirring until each addition is completely absorbed. Most of us want to be with our guests, not standing by the stove stirring for 25 minutes. So for this recipe, the risotto is partially cooked ahead and then finished right before serving, a common restaurant technique for cooking risotto to order.

Traditionally, risotto starts with a *soffrito*, which is often a combination of oil, butter, and onions. I eliminated the butter, cut down on the olive oil, and exchanged onions for a larger amount of shallots to add flavor without overwhelming the dish. A good dose of fennel is added at this early stage to lend a deep and subtle anise flavor. Next the rice is added and stirred until it is just evenly coated. Often wine is added at this stage, but I used white vermouth, simply because I like the taste and it keeps easily in the home kitchen. Vermouth is aromatic, so again that boosts the flavor further. Finally, a tasty homemade stock is essential to this risotto, because it doesn't fall back on the flavor of butter or cheese like most risottos.

AROMATIC SALAD GIVES A BURST OF FLAVOR

A salad of contrasting sweet aromatic oranges and bitter greens refreshes the palate after the creamy risotto. Salads are often a hidden source of fat. They appear light and low-calorie, but the dressing can be insidiously fatty. People on low-fat diets often ask for dressing on the side, but I find this totally unsatisfying. The greens get nothing or they get drenched by pouring on dressing at the table. There are other solutions.

One technique is to prepare your dressing right on the salad so that you can toss the greens well in a very small amount of dressing. For four to six people, a tablespoon of oil will coat all your greens lightly. Toss the greens well with the oil and a little kosher salt, and then add a tiny splash of vinegar and toss again.

A second approach is to make a classic vinaigrette, but to cut down on the conventional proportions of oil to vinegar, which are three or four parts oil to one part vinegar. To get the most mileage out of the oil you do use, choose a strong, fruity olive oil. For the arugula and orange salad in this menu, I combined both techniques, making the dressing right on the salad and using a little fresh juice from the sectioned oranges to cut the proportion of oil in the dressing. The aromatic spices further boost the flavor, contrasting nicely with the sweet oranges.

RICH-TASTING CHOCOLATE DESSERT FINISHES THE MEAL

The chocolate sherbet is an exercise in spa decadence. Because fruit was used in our salad course, chocolate seemed the obvious choice for dessert. Sherbet can be made ahead with little effort, so it's



good for parties. My challenge? I wanted a rich and satisfying chocolate flavor without the fat of pure chocolate. Sorbets can be lightened by adding whipped egg whites into the partially frozen dessert, but I didn't want to lighten up the texture. I wanted a dessert heavy in mouth-feel but not heavy in the stomach. A top-quality cocoa powder solved part of the problem by adding deep flavor without much fat. The taste is further enhanced with cinnamon, grated nutmeg, lots of vanilla, and a touch of—surprise—freshly ground black pepper. The first results were extremely tasty but a tiny bit icy. By replacing some of the water with evaporated skim milk, the taste was a little richer, and the sherbet now stayed smoother. A fan of banana slices or a ginger snap add a quick flourish.

Spiced oranges and bitter arugula refresh the palate. To evenly coat the salad with the vinaigrette, fruity olive oil, balsamic vinegar, and orange juice are tossed with the arugula, endive, and oranges just before serving.

Preparing the spa meal:

UP TO TWO DAYS AHEAD:

- ◆ Make the sherbet and store it in a covered container in the freezer.

THE DAY BEFORE THE DINNER OR EARLY THAT DAY:

- ◆ Trim the artichokes and keep them refrigerated in a bowl of cold water and lemon juice. Peel the garlic and chop the parsley.
- ◆ Mince the shallots for the risotto. Dice the fennel bulb and store in cold water and lemon juice. Peel and devein the shrimp. If you don't have homemade stock on hand, now is the time to make it.
- ◆ Wash and dry the salad greens. Section the oranges and store them in their juice. Grind and sieve the spices.

A FEW HOURS BEFORE DINNER:

- ◆ Cook the artichokes and remove the chokes from the center of each one.
- ◆ Cook the risotto three-quarters of the way and spread it on a baking sheet.

ONE HOUR BEFORE THE DINNER:

- ◆ Plate the artichokes.
- ◆ Marinate the shrimp.
- ◆ Chill the sherbet bowls.

DURING THE DINNER:

- ◆ Heat the risotto bowls and finish cooking the risotto.
- ◆ Assemble the salad.



Do-ahead risotto. A few hours before serving, cook the risotto ¾ of the way.



Cool the partially cooked risotto by spreading it on a baking sheet.



Finish cooking the risotto with any last-minute additions and serve.

ARTICHOKES BRAISED WITH WHOLE GARLIC CLOVES

Because there's no rich sauce to mask their flavor, the artichokes for this recipe must be especially fresh. Look for tight heads without any hint of brown. The dish can be served warm or at room temperature. To serve warm, hold the artichokes in a 200°F oven in their cooking liquid for up to an hour before the dinner. Serve with plenty of whole-grain bread. *Serves six.*

6 artichokes
1½ to 2 lemons
2 heads garlic
Kosher salt
½ tsp. minced fresh thyme leaves (or ⅛ tsp. dried)
½ tsp. minced fresh rosemary leaves (or ⅛ tsp. dried)
Freshly ground black pepper to taste
2 Tbs. chopped parsley

With a sharp knife, cut off the top inch of the artichoke, parallel to the base (see photo on p. 24). Use scissors to cut off the prickly tips of the remaining leaves. Cut off the stem of each artichoke. Pull off the bottom row of leaves and trim around the base with a knife. Put the trimmed artichokes in a bowl of cold water with the juice of ½ lemon until ready to cook.

Cut a thin slice from one end of each garlic head to expose the flesh of the garlic cloves. Then break the head into cloves with your hands, discarding any extra papery skins. Drop the cloves into boiling water for 20 seconds and then drain. When the cloves are cool enough to handle, remove the skins with your fingers.

Prepare the cooking liquid in a pot just large enough to contain the trimmed artichokes in one layer (or use two pots). Fill it with 1 in. of water, the juice of 1 lemon, a generous pinch of salt, the thyme, rosemary, and pepper. Bring the liquid to a boil and then turn it down to a simmer.

Put the artichokes, stem side up, in the pot. Cover the pot so that no steam escapes while the artichokes cook. Cook at a slow simmer for 20 min. and then drop the peeled garlic cloves into the liquid, distributing them evenly among the artichokes. Cover the pot again and steam for an additional 10 to 20 min., or until a bottom leaf can be pulled off easily and the meat is soft and fleshy when you scrape the leaf between your teeth. You can further test the artichoke by inserting a skewer or the tip of a sharp knife into the base; it should penetrate easily.

Transfer the artichokes to a plate. When they're cool enough to handle, gently spread the leaves open, like a blooming flower, just enough to get into the center to remove the choke. Reach inside with your hand and twist off the cone of small purplish leaves covering the center choke. Using a teaspoon, gently scrape the hairy choke off the bottom. Be sure to remove all of it.

Swish the bottom of one leaf in the cooking liquid and taste. Adjust the seasonings if necessary. The liquid may need the juice of ½ lemon, a pinch of salt, and a generous grind of pepper. Empty the liquid into a measuring cup and pour a few tablespoons onto each plate. Put an artichoke in the center of each plate, spreading the leaves gently apart like a flower. Distribute the garlic cloves evenly into the centers of the artichokes. Sprinkle both the artichokes and the cooking liquid with parsley.

FENNEL RISOTTO WITH SHRIMP

This risotto is partially cooked ahead of time and then finished right before serving. If this is your first time making risotto, you may want to try cooking it to completion once so that you get a feel for when to stop and hold it. *Serves six.*

FOR THE SHRIMP MARINADE:

18 medium shrimp (¾ pound), peeled and deveined
1 tsp. fennel seeds, lightly toasted and ground
Juice of ½ lemon
1 clove garlic, minced
Cayenne to taste

FOR THE RISOTTO:

About 5 cups homemade chicken, fish, or vegetable stock
⅔ cup minced shallots
2 Tbs. fruity olive oil
1½ cups diced fennel bulb
1½ cups uncooked arborio rice
½ cup dry vermouth
2 cloves garlic, minced
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
Fennel sprigs for garnish

Toss the shrimp together with the marinade ingredients and marinate for up to one hour. (The shrimp will get mushy from the acidic lemon juice if marinated too long.)

Bring the stock to a simmer. Adjust the seasonings if necessary; it should be tasty.

In a medium nonstick sauté pan, sauté the shallots in the oil over medium heat until they're translucent, about 5 min. Add the diced fennel and the rice and stir to coat with oil. Add the vermouth and garlic, stirring occasionally until all the liquid is evaporated.

Pour the warm stock over the rice $\frac{1}{2}$ cup at a time, stirring periodically with a flat-ended wooden spoon until all the stock is absorbed before each addition. Scrape the spoon along the bottom of the pot to prevent the rice from sticking and to see if the stock has been absorbed. Keep the temperature at a lively simmer, not a rapid boil. If the heat is too high, the rice will be soft on the outside but hard on the inside.

When the risotto is three-quarters cooked (you will have added 3 to $3\frac{1}{2}$ cups of stock), let the last addition of liquid be completely absorbed and turn off the heat. Taste and season the risotto. Spread the risotto in a thin layer on a baking sheet, cover with plastic wrap, and leave at room temperature. This can be done up to 2 hours ahead.

When you're ready to serve the dish, divide the risotto and the marinated shrimp between two nonstick pans. (If you put all the rice in just one pan, it will be overdone by the time the shrimp is cooked.) Add 2 Tbs. hot stock to each pan. Stir for a few minutes over medium-low heat until the liquid is absorbed and then add another $\frac{1}{4}$ cup stock to each pan. Keep adding stock in $\frac{1}{4}$ -cup increments, stirring constantly until the shrimp is just done and the rice is *al dente* but not chalky in the center. Risotto tends to tighten up a bit once it's finished, so swirl in a bit more stock at the end. The final texture should be like a very thick soup or stew. Taste for seasoning, transfer to warmed bowls, garnish with fennel sprigs, and serve immediately.

ARUGULA & AROMATIC ORANGE SALAD

Peel and section the oranges and then store them in their juice until you're ready to serve the salad. Use some of the juice to flavor the vinaigrette. *Serves six.*

$\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. dried green peppercorns

$\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. coriander seeds

3 navel oranges, peeled and cut into sections, juice reserved
2 bunches of arugula (a scant handful of stemmed leaves for each person)

2 bulbs endive, bottoms trimmed off, cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -in. slices

1 Tbs. fruity olive oil

Kosher salt to taste

1 Tbs. good-quality balsamic vinegar

In a spice grinder or a mortar and pestle, finely grind the peppercorns and coriander seeds together. Pass the spices through a fine sieve to remove any husks. Drain the orange sections (reserving the juice) and toss them with the ground spices.

When you're ready to serve the salad, toss the arugula and endive with the olive oil and salt. In a small bowl, combine the vinegar and 1 Tbs. orange juice. Pour this onto the greens and toss again. Center the greens on six salad plates and top with the aromatic oranges. Serve immediately.

CHOCOLATE-CINNAMON SHERBET

Although it's extremely low in fat, this sherbet has a deep, chocolate taste. If you're used to making ice cream, be patient: low-fat sherbets take longer to freeze than richer frozen desserts. An ice-cream maker is handy but not essential. *Serves six.*



$\frac{1}{2}$ cup plus 2 Tbs. unsweetened Dutch-processed cocoa powder

1 cup sugar

1 tsp. ground cinnamon

Pinch of freshly ground black pepper

Pinch of freshly grated nutmeg

1 cup water

1 can (12 oz.) evaporated skim milk

1 Tbs. vanilla extract

In a small saucepan, mix the cocoa powder, sugar, cinnamon, pepper, and nutmeg. Whisk in the water and bring to a boil, continuing to whisk to break up lumps and prevent burning. Turn down the heat and simmer for 2 to 3 min., until the sugar is completely dissolved, leaving the whisk in the pan to prevent a boil-over. Off the heat, add the evaporated skim milk and the vanilla extract and let the mixture cool.

In an ice-cream maker—When the mixture is room temperature, put it in an ice-cream maker and follow the manufacturer's directions. The sherbet may take as long as 40 min. to freeze to "soft-serve" texture or a little softer. Transfer to a container with a cover and freeze longer for a firmer texture.

In a large dish—If you don't have an ice-cream maker, the sherbet can be frozen in a large, nonreactive baking container, like a glass lasagna dish. The texture of the sherbet done in this manner is a little icier—closer to a granita.

Pour the room-temperature mixture into the dish and put it in the freezer. When it starts to chill, stir at least once an hour until it has the texture of very soft ice cream. The length of time it takes to complete depends on how cold your freezer is.

Serve in small chilled bowls or martini glasses.

Spa meals have

dessert, too. This

rich-tasting chocolate-

cinnamon sherbet is

made with cocoa

powder, which gives it

a deep chocolate taste

without a lot of fat.

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