

Super mashed potatoes, and stuffing that sizzles

Smart advice from chef Tom Gray, 37, of Bistro Aix in Jacksonville

Tip: Heat is vital. When the potatoes are finished cooking, immediately drain and mash them while hot, says Gray, whose bistro is in Jacksonville's historic San Marco area. "Usually people get sidetracked and the potatoes get cold," he says. "Have your cream and butter heated and ready to add in right then. Stir to incorporate. And be OK with a few lumps. If you overstir or let the potatoes cool before mashing, they'll be gluey."

Tip: Sausage easily makes stuffing savory.

"But if you don't want to add meat, make sure you season it well. To do that without adding too much salt, use fresh herbs," Gray says. "At holiday time, fresh sage is great, but it can be overpowering. Combine it with fresh thyme and fresh parsley. Blending these herbs will give your stuffing a depth of flavor and stop it from being bland."



Tom Gray of Bistro Aix in Jacksonville

Decadent Mashed Potatoes

2 pounds Idaho potatoes, peeled and cut into eighths
 2 pounds Yukon Gold potatoes, peeled and cut to similar size of Idaho potatoes
 1 tsp. plus 1 Tb. sea salt
 3/4 cup butter
 1 1/4 cups heavy cream or whole milk
 Pinch of white pepper

Garnish: Thinly sliced fresh chives, or basil sliced into thin ribbons

Place cut potatoes in a 6-quart saucepan and cover with cold water. Add 1 tsp. sea salt, cover and bring to a simmer. Cook for 20 minutes.

Meanwhile, in a small saucepan over low heat, melt butter with cream, 1 Tb. sea salt and a pinch of white pepper.

When potatoes are cooked thoroughly (remove a piece and taste to ensure tenderness), drain in a colander. While still hot, pass potatoes through a food mill with a medium sieve attachment, or through a potato ricer, and put back into the hot pot in which they were cooked.

Slowly pour the warm butter-cream mixture into the potatoes; incorporate gently with a wooden spoon. Taste, and adjust seasoning. Garnish with fresh chives or basil. Serve immediately. Makes 9 cups.

Serves 12. Per serving: 307 calories, 4g protein, 28g carbohydrates, 21g fat, 65mg cholesterol, 3g fiber, 904mg sodium.

Sausage & Mushroom Stuffing with Goat Cheese

1 pound sourdough bread loaf, cut in 1/2-inch cubes
2 Tbs. olive oil
1 Tb. freshly minced garlic (about 3 large cloves)
Pinch of sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
8 ounces fresh mushroom blend (such as portabello, shiitake and oyster mushrooms), stemmed, washed and cut into medium slices
10 ounces mild country or Italian sausage links cut into 1/2-inch slices (or omit and use 4 extra ounces of mushrooms)
2 large leeks, diced, white and light green portions only, to yield 1 cup
1 1/2 Tbs. fresh thyme leaves, chopped
1 Tb. fresh sage leaves, cut crosswise into thin ribbons
4 Tbs. fresh parsley leaves, chopped, divided
8 eggs
1 quart heavy cream
2 tsps. sea salt
1/4 tsp. freshly ground black pepper
6 ounces goat cheese, crumbled

Preheat oven to 250 degrees. Spread bread cubes evenly on a sheet or jelly roll pan. Bake on middle oven rack for 10 minutes. Stir. Bake 10 more minutes to toast on all sides. Set aside.

In a medium non-stick sauté pan over medium heat, warm 2 Tbs. olive oil. Add garlic; sauté, stirring with a wooden spoon, until light golden brown, 2 to 3 minutes. Stir in a pinch of salt and pepper. Add all mushrooms, then cook, stirring frequently, until tender and light brown, 8 to 10 minutes. Set aside.

Preheat a medium non-stick sauté pan over medium-high heat and add sausage. Brown on both sides. Drain fat; set aside.

Thoroughly wash and drain cut leeks 2 or 3 times to remove sand; set aside. In a large mixing bowl, toss together bread cubes, mushrooms, sausage, leeks, thyme, sage and 2 Tbs. parsley. Set aside. In a medium mixing bowl, whisk eggs, cream, salt and pepper. Set aside.

Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Spray a 9-by-13-inch baking dish with cooking spray. Press bread mixture lightly into pan. Slowly and evenly pour egg-cream mixture over bread. Crumble goat cheese evenly over surface and press lightly into dish. Cover with foil and bake for 40 minutes. Raise oven temperature to 350 degrees; uncover and bake 35 minutes, until golden. Cool slightly. Garnish top with remaining 2 Tbs. parsley. Serves 12.

Serves 12. Per serving: 566 calories, 16g protein, 26g carbohydrates, 45g fat, 274mg cholesterol, 2g fiber, 944mg sodium.