

Goat's cheese and rhubarb chutney crostini

Makes: approx 28 hors d'oeuvres

Total time: 30 mins

Ingredients:

40g (¼ cup) raisins/sultanas/chopped dates

40g (¼ cup) chopped dried cherries/apricots

60ml (4 tbsps) Sambuca, or other anise flavoured liqueur

¼ tsp mustard seeds

¼ tsp fennel seeds

150g (1¼ cups) diced rhubarb (approx 2 stems)

45g (¼ cup) sugar

2 tbsps lime juice

a baguette

olive oil

salt and pepper

200g (7 oz) fresh, creamy goat's cheese

fennel fronds or parsley to garnish



Method:

1. Preheat oven to 200C (400F).
2. Soak dried fruits in liqueur in a small saucepan for 10 mins (or longer if you have time). Meanwhile chop rhubarb into ¼" dice and squeeze lime juice.
3. Add the spices to the saucepan, turn on heat and simmer gently until liqueur has almost all evaporated, approx 5 mins.
4. Add rhubarb, sugar, lime juice and a pinch of salt. Simmer slowly until rhubarb has released its water and this has evaporated, approx 8 mins. The mix should now look like a chutney.
5. While chutney is cooking cut baguette on the diagonal into thin slices. You should get approx 28 slices. Lay slices on a baking sheet and toast in the oven for 5 mins or until just starting to colour. Brush with olive oil.
6. Taste chutney and add salt and pepper if needed. Let chutney and crostini both cool slightly before assembling. Spread cheese over crostini and top with teaspoons of rhubarb chutney. Garnish with small fennel fronds or parsley leaves if desired.

This recipe is adapted from one I learnt while assisting a class at the Tante Marie Cooking School. It's originally from Bon Appétit magazine. I've tried it with all sorts of dried and fresh fruits, and each way works well. If you want it to taste predominantly of rhubarb, just make sure there is much more of this than any other fruit. Using a combination of cherries (dried or fresh) and rhubarb produces a bright red chutney which looks great on the white cheese. You can also try different liqueurs and spirits, eg brandy. I think it works well with a creamy cheese with enough flavour not to be totally dominated by the intensely flavoured chutney. A stinking, oozing washed rind cheese makes a fantastic pairing, but I realise that's not everyone's cup of tea.

Rhubarb facts:

- Rhubarb originates from Mongolia. The word was coined in medieval Latin and derives from 'Rha' (old name for the Volga river) and 'barbarum' (foreign) – ie a vegetable from the foreign lands east of the Volga.
- Rhubarb was pronounced a 'fruit' in 1947 by confused US customs officials who opted to classify by its use in desserts rather than its botanical status.
- But rhubarb as pudding, even as food, is a relatively recent concept. For centuries it was used in China and elsewhere purely for medicinal purposes. Rhubarb is a great laxative, if you eat enough.
- It wasn't until the 17th or 18th century that rhubarb became a food crop in England, reaching its peak of popularity in the 'rhubarb boom' between the 1st and 2nd world wars. Being so tart, the easy availability of sugar was needed for the vegetable/fruit to catch on with home cooks.
- There is still a rhubarb festival each year in Wakefield, one corner of the famous 'rhubarb triangle', where it has been an important part of the economy for 150 years. (The other corners are Leeds and Morley.)
- There are two types on sale: 1) In winter, slender pink stems of 'forced' rhubarb, grown in the dark and harvested by candlelight; 2) In spring, fatter red or green stems from bushes grown in the fields. Both are good.
- However delicious you find it, don't eat more than a few tonnes as the stems are mildly poisonous. The leaves contain more of the poison (oxalic acid and oxalate salts), but you'd need to eat 10lbs for them to be lethal.
- Buy bright, solid stems and store in the fridge wrapped in damp paper or cloth inside a plastic bag for up to three weeks. And don't forget rhubarb's "*immense worth in a world in need of mild dependable relief from its ever recurrent constipation.*" (Clifford Faust, 1992)

Sources:

The Taste of Britain, Mason & Brown, 2006

The San Francisco Ferry Plaza Farmers' Market Cookbook, Hirsheimer & Knickerbocker, 2006

What Einstein Told His Cook 2, R Wolke, 2005

On Food And Cooking, H McGee, 2004

www.wakefield.gov.uk