



Chef Wilkinson (left) taught our writer several creative takes on holiday fare; his wife mixed up the oatmeal cookie martini that made cooking even more festive.

[Specialty of the House]

Haute holiday cuisine

If I need to rescue my turkey, I can call the Butterball Turkey Talk-line. But where do I turn when my side dishes need an upgrade, and my spirits (the liquid kind) need a lift? Regular old mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce and eggnog seem so yesteryear:

So instead, how about an earthy parsnip puree, tart cranberry-apple chutney studded with crunchy pomegranate seeds, white hot chocolate dolloped with pumpkin caramel and an oatmeal cookie martini in a cinnamon-rimmed glass?

To jazz up my holiday hosting, I asked Steve Wilkinson, executive chef of Horizons at Woodcliff Hotel and Spa, for inspiration.

“These are simple recipes,” says hard-working Chef Wilkinson, who catered his own wedding this summer at the Webster Arboretum. “Nothing to tax you at holiday time.” Plus, they can all be made in advance—a godsend for time-starved holiday hosts.



STORY BY MELISSA F. PHETERSON | PHOTOS BY MATT WITTMAYER

Horizon’s gourmet chef teaches us some *delicious twists* on traditional dishes.

Arriving with his wife, Stephanie, who serves as the banquet manager at Woodcliff, Chef advises me to brew some espresso. It isn’t for stamina, as I thought when I saw our ambitious roster of dishes, but for his trademark maple-espresso walnuts.

“My advice,” he says of holiday hosting, “is to take the time to visualize your game plan. This could start weeks in advance.”

To get us in the proper holiday mindset, Stephanie mixes the oatmeal cookie martini: equal parts Goldschlager, butterscotch schnapps and Bailey’s Irish Cream. Rimming



The crab dip came out bubbly from the oven.



TALKING TURKEY

Chef Wilkinson's tips for a better tasting Thanksgiving.

- Cook your Thanksgiving bird without stuffing. Instead, fill the cavity with fresh herbs, lemon, garlic, fennel, onion, carrot and celery. Cook your stuffing in a separate casserole. When stuffing is about halfway heated, move into a carved out squash or pumpkin and finish baking—it makes for great presentation.
- If you do decide to stuff your bird, do not stuff to full; leave room for air to circulate inside the cavity for a more evenly cooked bird.
- Don't waste the leftover scraps. Turn them into homemade stock, which you can freeze in Ziploc bags for a tasty soup broth.
- To entice your guests with a holiday aroma, fill a crockpot with two quarts of cranberry juice and a sliced orange. Set your crockpot to warm and heat all day. Later, use the cranberry juice in a warm after-dinner cocktail.
- Create a tempting bread display. Warm and slice a few small loaves of artisan breads. Serve on a platter with small bowls of honey butter, olive tapenade, olive oil with a touch of balsamic, a red pepper ricotta spread or your favorite jam. Garnish with fresh herbs.

the martini glass with cinnamon and sugar makes it extra festive.

For the crab dip, Chef snaps on a pair of latex gloves (“These come in handy in the kitchen—fewer utensils to wash”) and folds the ingredients together and hand-scoops everything into a Pyrex dish. “It’s really simple, and really delicious,” he says, as he slides the dish into the oven. “With a little toasted pita, this dip is a great way to greet your guests.”

Next we prepare the seasoned walnuts and pop them into the oven. These are crowd-pleasers, too, says Chef. “You can also top a salad with these—even ice cream.” (They turn out so well, I’m tempted to crush and sprinkle them over my turkey.)

We need a large pot for the puree of parsnip, at its peak in the fall and winter. “Smell the parsnip at the grocery store,” Chef counsels, and check to be sure none have soft spots. We chop them into half-inch pieces (“the smaller the pieces, the easier to cook”).

A few minutes later, the crab dip is bubbly-hot ready. We top with almonds

toasted in the skillet and start dunking our pita.

It’s time to turn to our chutney—a tangy new spin on cranberry sauce. First, Chef hands me a pomegranate to cut and de-seed. (Note to self, and readers: The juice stains!) From the wellspring of lore in my brain, I remember the notion that every pomegranate contains 613 seeds. Luckily, I only need half a cup’s worth.

After a while the chutney becomes a thick ruby sauce, pleasantly tart, with the seeds lending a toothsome crunch.

Once the parsnips have softened and the cream is hot, I blend the ingredients for the parsnip sauce in my immersion blender. (You can also use a regular blender, working in batches.) The puree cuts the earthy bite of parsnips with the mellow richness of the cream.

I’m tempted to help myself to a big bowl, but we’ve got some white hot chocolate to concoct, starting with the dissection of a vanilla bean pod.

Finally, for a topping that rivals Starbucks’ seasonal drinks, Chef shares his

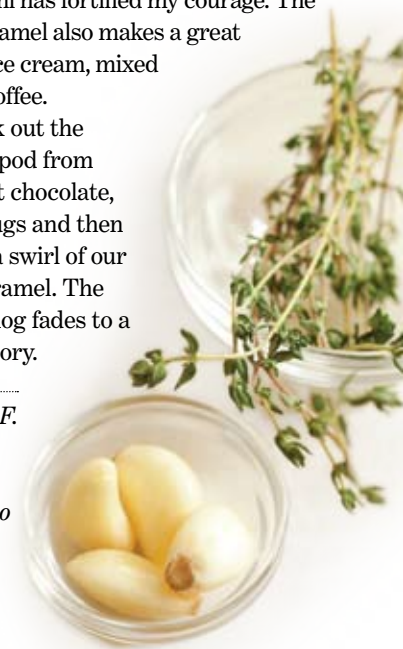
pumpkin caramel recipe.

“Take extra care around the stovetop,” he says as we caramelize the sugar. Usually I shy away from heat, but the oatmeal cookie martini has fortified my courage. The pumpkin caramel also makes a great topping for ice cream, mixed drinks and coffee.

We pick out the vanilla bean pod from the white hot chocolate, ladle into mugs and then crown with a swirl of our pumpkin caramel. The taste of eggnog fades to a distant memory.

Melissa F.

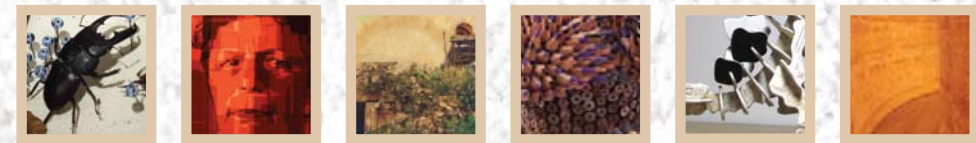
Pheterson is a frequent contributor to Rochester Magazine.



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From left: Jennifer Angus, *Creature Comforts* (insects); Mark Khaisman, *Lydmila* (packing tape). Phyllis Hackleman, *49ers (Virgin, UT)* (inkjet print on used coffee filter); Jennifer Maestre, *Kraken* (colored pencils, thread); Mike Libby, *Stegosaurus* (Bible, glue, wire, wood); Danielle Julian Norton, *Clear* (Neutrogena soap). All shown in detail.

HOLIDAY RECIPES FROM CHEF STEVE WILKINSON

Hot Crab Dip

(Serves eight)

1 lb. cream cheese, softened
 1 lb. blue crab meat, flaked
 3 Tablespoons chives
 ½ cup milk
 2 teaspoons horseradish
 2 teaspoons Worcestershire sauce
 ¼ teaspoon Tabasco
 1 teaspoon salt
 ½ teaspoon ground pepper
 2/3 cup lightly toasted almonds

Preheat oven to 375. Place cream cheese in the mixer and process with the milk until smooth, scraping down the sides. Add all ingredients except the crab and almonds.

Fold in crab meat. Bake until bubbly (around 25 minutes). Top with toasted almonds.

Cranberry, Apple and Pomegranate Chutney

2/3 cup cider vinegar
 ½ cup sugar
 2 Granny Smith apples, peeled and diced small
 1 shallot, diced
 ¼ teaspoon cinnamon
 ¼ teaspoon ground ginger
 ¼ teaspoon allspice
 1 pinch ground clove
 8 oz. fresh cranberries
 ½ cup pomegranate seeds
 Salt and pepper, to taste

In a small heavy-bottomed sauce pot, combine the sugar and vinegar. Bring to a simmer. Add in remaining ingredients and bring to a simmer. Lower heat and cook until apples are tender, about 15 minutes, stirring often. Season to taste.

Parsnip Puree

(serves 12)

2 lbs. (roughly five) parsnips, peeled and sliced ½-inch thick
 4 cups heavy cream
 4 sprigs fresh thyme
 4 cloves garlic, smashed
 4 oz. butter, cubed small

Place parsnips in a medium pot, cover with water, season with salt and bring to a simmer. Simmer till parsnips are tender, about 20 minutes. In a separate small sauce pot, add the cream, garlic and thyme. Season with a little salt and white pepper; heat over low heat. Strain.

Drain parsnips, reserving about a cup of cooking liquid. Place parsnips in blender with butter in two separate batches, and puree with cream and natural cooking liquid until smooth; use only enough liquid to allow the parsnips to puree. (A hand mixer can also be used.) Combine batches and taste for seasoning.

Maple-Espresso Candied Walnuts

(serves 16)

2/3 cup sugar
 2 Tablespoons espresso, freshly brewed
 1 teaspoon real maple syrup
 1 Tablespoon instant coffee
 ½ teaspoon cinnamon
 ¼ teaspoon kosher salt
 1 egg white, beat to a froth
 4 cups walnut halves

Preheat oven to 350. Combine the first 6 ingredients and mix well. Toss walnuts in beaten egg whites and coat well. Add dry ingredients; mix well. On a lined sheet tray, spread walnuts out evenly (Note: It's important to lay the walnuts out in a single layer; avoid overcrowding. Nuts will harden as they cool.) Bake for five minutes. Stir nuts and spread out again; rotate the sheet tray and bake for 5 more minutes.



White Hot Chocolate

(serves 6-8)

1 cup white chocolate chips
 2 cups heavy cream
 3 cups half and half cream
 1 vanilla bean, split and scraped, pod reserved
 1 cup whipped cream

2 Tablespoons pumpkin caramel (see recipe at right)

In a medium heavy-bottomed sauce pot, combine the chips, vanilla, pod and heavy cream.

Heat over medium heat, stirring continuously, until chips are melted. Add in half and half and continue to stir until hot. Pick out vanilla bean pod. Whisk together whipped cream and pumpkin caramel. Ladle into mugs and top with the whipped cream.

Pumpkin Caramel

1 cup pumpkin puree
 2 teaspoons vanilla extract
 1 lemon, juiced
 1 lime, juiced
 ½ cup water
 1 cup sugar

Combine first four ingredients and reserve. In a small heavy-bottomed sauce pot, add sugar and just enough water to create a wet-sand look. Place pan over medium-high heat and do not stir. Cook until sugar starts to caramelize and turn amber—again, do not stir. Remove from heat and slowly whisk in the pumpkin mixture. Mixture will bubble, so be careful. Whisk until smooth. Return to medium-low heat and whisk to dissolve any remaining sugar. Use stick blender to smooth, adding a little water to reach a nice sauce consistency. **R**

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