

How To Create Gourmet Meals

By Curt Hagedorn

The word “gourmet” has gone through a number of transitions in the popular imagination over the last 50 years. Starting in the 1950’s, when homemakers were first presented with the ever more convenient kitchens and ever more inspiring cookbooks regaling them with “exotic” recipes like Eggs Benedict and Baked Alaska, “gourmet” meant three things – the appearance of great complexity, usually courtesy of the French; over the top richness thanks to butter, milk, cream, eggs and other ingredients painstakingly assembled into rich sauces and, finally, expense – only the best.

Over time, as American chefs began forging their own way of cooking, whether skillfully adapting classic French methods and recipes like Julia Child or creating an entirely new, organic way of thinking about cuisine like Alice Waters, the idea of a “gourmet meal” has changed. The traditional complicated, rich, many course meals of the past have become occasional indulgences in culinary history –like Paris, a celebration of a moment in time – while culinary tastes now seek out more contemporary flavors less dependent upon rich sauces and more upon the individual flavors of the highest quality fresh ingredients. Fortunately for those of us wishing to pursue “gourmet” excellence in our own kitchens, our supermarkets and specialty food stores these days are chock full of those high quality fresh foodstuffs which, simply combined, and in far smaller (and less caloric) portions, characterize today’s “gourmet” meals.

Take, for example, a “gourmet” staple – the perfect cut of aged beef tenderloin, a filet mignon. In the past, you might have served a sizable piece either broiled or pan sautéed (often to within an inch of its life) along with a generous dollop of Béarnaise sauce chock full of butter, eggs (and cholesterol) with a side of potatoes au gratin layered with more butter, cream and cheese and, as a green vegetable, perhaps some broccoli or asparagus with a cheesy Mornay sauce.

Today, a single piece of that delicious beef filet might be quickly grilled to medium rare either outdoors or in a grill pan on top of the stove (or even a George Foreman tabletop grill), sliced and served on a bed of mesclun salad greens perfectly dressed with a champagne vinaigrette, along with some crisp grilled asparagus stalks and perhaps a few fingerling potatoes roasted with sea salt, fresh rosemary and olive oil. To heighten the “gourmet” glamour, you might shave a truffle or two over your warm beef tenderloin, or top it with a tablespoon full of mango salsa or a sauté of wild mushrooms. As you can see, the key is for each individual ingredient to stand out in its own perfection of form and flavor while harmoniously contributing to the whole. The top chefs in the

country are masters at creating those surprising combinations, however, there's no reason you can't aspire to this kind of creativity in your own kitchen.

The single most important factor in creating gourmet meals whether it's just for yourself or for your family and friends is the quality of the ingredients you bring into your home. Where gourmets of the past depended upon the unusual, the rare and the out of season – a bushel of perfect strawberries in the dead of winter – modern technology has now made most foods available year round: unfortunately often to the detriment of the quality – the taste – of the food itself. You've probably experienced that mid-winter longing for a ripe tomato and-- though what's available can sometime be surprisingly good -- nothing can compare to the fresh fruit picked from a farm stand at the height of tomato season.

So shop locally, utilizing both your supermarket and local producers, and you'll find that the quality of your meals improves tremendously – and that your food bill decreases, since you're buying what's readily available, highly perishable and at the height of its flavor. You may not have fresh strawberries in December, but when you do, they'll taste like strawberries. The same goes for all of your ingredients, from meat to fish to bread to dairy products, buy the freshest and the closest to home, prepare everything simply and with an eye to enhancing, not masking flavors, and you'll be creating "gourmet" meals without even knowing it – and if you hit the creative wall, a quick trip to your local bookstore will open a whole world of gourmet recipes from Aioli to Zabaglione.