

Venison & Gruyère-Stuffed Mushrooms with Black Pepper Zinfandel Reduction Sauce

I dined on an appetizer quite similar to this at my grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary dinner. Aside from tasting magnificent, it holds something of a sentimental sense of value to me. It was a grand dish for a grand evening and my take is primed and ready for any special occasion you may have.

YIELD – 4 servings

Combine the venison, port wine and Worcestershire sauce in a bowl. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 2 hours.

Remove the venison mixture from the refrigerator. Drain off the liquid and set the meat aside. Melt the butter in a large sauté pan over medium-high heat. Add the venison, season with basil, thyme, salt and pepper and cook until the meat is browned, about 8 minutes. Add the onion, carrot and celery and cook until soft and tender, 4 to 5 minutes. Add the garlic, breadcrumbs and Parmegiano-Reggiano and cook, stirring, until the cheese melts and all of the ingredients are fully incorporated. If the mixture is too dry, add $\frac{1}{4}$ of a cup of the veal stock. If the mixture is still too dry, add more veal stock, 1 tablespoon at a time, until it takes on a moist dressing texture. Transfer the mixture to a bowl to cool.

Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

Warm the remaining veal stock in a cast-iron skillet over medium heat. When the veal mixture has cooled, spoon equal parts into the cavities of the mushroom caps. Place the mushrooms in the skillet and transfer the skillet from the stovetop to the oven. Bake the mushrooms until they are tender, 12 to 15 minutes. Sprinkle the Gruyere over the mushrooms and continue to bake until the cheese is melted and golden brown, 2 to 3 minutes. Remove the skillet from the oven.

To serve, spoon a fourth of the reduction sauce onto the bottom of a round appetizer plate. Arrange 4 of the mushrooms in a diamond pattern toward the center of the plate, sprinkle with chives and serve.

Black Pepper Zinfandel Reduction Sauce

YIELD – $\frac{1}{2}$ cup

Pour the wine into a small, non-reactive saucepan over high heat. Add the shallot, peppercorns, thyme and bay leaf and bring to a boil. Continue to boil until the wine reduces by 80 percent, about 20 minutes. Strain the sauce through a fine-mesh strainer and return to the saucepan. Whisk in the butter until it has melted completely. Serve warm or at room temperature.

$\frac{1}{2}$ pound ground venison
1 cup port wine
1 tsp Worcestershire sauce
2 Tbsp unsalted butter
1 tsp dried basil
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp dried thyme
salt and fresh ground pepper to taste
2 Tbsp yellow onion, finely diced
2 Tbsp carrot, finely diced
1 Tbsp celery, finely diced
1 tsp garlic, minced
1 Tbsp unseasoned breadcrumbs
2 Tbsp Parmegiano-Reggiano cheese, grated
1 cup veal stock
16 cremini mushrooms, stemmed
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup smoked Gruyère cheese, shredded
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup black pepper zinfandel reduction sauce (recipe follows)
 $\frac{1}{2}$ Tbsp chives, finely chopped

3 cups zinfandel
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup shallot, chopped
2 Tbsp black peppercorns
3 sprigs fresh thyme
1 bay leaf
1 Tbsp unsalted butter