

# Baked Trout stuffed with Pancetta and Pistachios



*Award-Winning chef, and culinary poet, Lamar Thomas, has contributed this month's recipe, which can be found in his soon to be published book, **Ginger, Lily, and Sweet Fire: A Romance with Food**. To experience Thomas' world class cuisine visit him at the East West Bistro in Downtown Athens.*

Winter, the body calls for rich and fatty foods to fight the wet, cold season here in Georgia. But when you check the waistline and think about all that you have eaten through the past holiday season, then perhaps what we crave is not what we need. This is where the bounty of the trout farms of North Carolina and North Georgia comes into our lives. I use trout from the Carolina Mountain Trout farm just across the border in Andrews, North Carolina. Use only fresh trout, there is no excuse to use frozen trout imported from Idaho. If you are blessed with a love of the trout waters of the Southern Appalachians, as am I, then of course when the weather is right, take out the fly rod and hit the waters.

I'm often asked what it is that makes balsamic vinegar so special. The easy answer is a great taste, thickness, and depth of flavor varying from light and smooth to heavy and complex, like a wine. The word 'vinegar' is derived from the French 'vin aigre' which means sour wine. There are two stages of curing the vinegar, the first is the introduction of yeast which then ferments and produces the alcohol, and the second is when bacteria converts the liquid into acetic acid, or vinegar. Traditional balsamic vinegar is made from the white Trebbiano grape, where the dark color comes from the aging process. It is aged 12 years in wooden barrels, 25 years for "extra vecchio", or extra special. This kind of balsamic vinegar, the true balsamic, is labeled as "artisan balsamic", and will include the word "tradizionale" on the label; and most important, it is not made from wine vinegar.

A lot of what you see on the shelves is a commercial balsamic that is made with wine vinegar and obtains the dark color through the addition of caramel. Since there are no regulatory agencies for these commercial grades the flavors really do go from poor to just OK. My recommendation is to look for true Balsamic with "tradizionale" on the label. The best comes from the Reggio and Modena regions of Italy. You may be familiar with Reggio for their greatest of all cheeses, parmesan. When you taste a true balsamic vinegar you will never go back to the poorer grades. California is now producing balsamic vinegar but it will be a few more years before we really are able to experience the beauty of what will arise from this venture. They did it with wine and goat cheese, and I am sure the day will come when a Mendocino or Napa valley balsamic vinegar will rate with the best of Reggio or Modena.

Pancetta is truly the king cut of pork. It is Italian style bacon rolled and cured with salt, allspice and mixed peppers. It is not smoked, it is cured, as in cave aged. It comes only from the belly section of the pork. Look for pancetta in the "gourmet" section at the grocery store. If you can't find pancetta, well...then see that the butcher orders it in for you. This is a readily available product and should be on the shelves. Apple cured thick sliced bacon is a fair substitute. But, the flavor of pancetta is in the absence of smoke, which gives it its unique taste. This taste, along with the pistachios and Parmesan inside of the trout will satisfy any urges for the

guilty pleasures of American-Italian dining. And really, the only thing American about it is the Carolina trout, and that it is a dish created in Georgia. Life is good. And it is an easy meal to prepare.

### TROUT STUFFING

3 oz. pancetta, minced  
 3 oz. pistachio nuts, chopped  
 1 tsp. dried marjoram  
 1 Tbl. chopped fresh parsley  
 1/3 cup grated fresh Parmesan cheese  
 1/2 cup breadcrumbs  
 2 oz. balsamic vinegar  
 2 oz. milk

Combine stuffing ingredients and bake on a sheet pan at 375 degrees for 20 minutes. Remove and let cool in your refrigerator. If it seems too dry then add a few tablespoons of milk to the mixture and that will loosen it up a bit.

When it has chilled, about 3 hours, stuff inside each trout, and fold the trout around the stuffing.

### SEASONING

2 whole, boneless 8 ounce trout  
 1 oz. extra virgin olive oil  
 2 Tbl kosher salt

Rub each trout with olive oil, and then sprinkle kosher salt over the trout.

### ROASTING LIQUID (court bouillon)

1 large yellow onion, diced  
 2 stalks celery, diced  
 1 large carrot, peeled and diced  
 3 cloves garlic, thin sliced  
 1 bay leaf  
 2 limes, peeled and sliced  
 2 Tbl olive oil  
 1/3 cup clam juice

Combine ingredients, set aside.

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Pour the court bouil-

lon into a roasting pan large enough to hold the trout and liquid. Place trout in pan. Roast in oven for 20 minutes. Gently lift the trout out of the pan with a couple of long spatulas so that the trout doesn't fall apart. Set on a bed of basmati rice and fresh spinach and arugula mix. Pour pan juices over the trout.

The head is up to you; you can either leave it on or take it off of the trout. The important thing is to leave it on when cooking. There is a lot of flavor in this part of the fish, and leaving it on during the cooking process ensures that the juices and flavors of the trout remain intact and thus enhances the overall taste of the dish.

### BASMATI RICE, SPINACH, AND ARUGULA

1 cup basmati rice  
 2 cups water  
 1 Tbl. salt  
 1/2 Tbl. ground white pepper  
 2 oz. butter (if butter is not in your diet then use corn oil)

Basmati rice is easy. Buy it in the grocery store and follow the directions on the pack. Cook it the same as any other rice, twice the water as dried rice. You do not really need to season this rice except for salt and pepper. It has a nutty flavor that will match well with the trout. While it is cooking your house will smell as if you were roasting almonds. If you have not yet bought a rice cooker, then now is the time to do it. They are cheap, and you always get a perfect pot of rice.

### SPINACH AND ARUGULA

2 oz. stemmed and washed fresh spinach  
 1 oz. fresh arugula

During the winter months spinach and arugula are particularly rich in flavor. Arugula has an oaky and peppery taste that combines with the spinach into a bold taste of freshness and spice. Arugula is similar in tastes to some of the more familiar greens like chicory and endive, but without the bitter after taste.

Any kind of roasted winter squash goes well with this dish. Garnish with fresh parsley sprigs and lime.

*The beauty and the joy  
 Are in the over and over,  
 Making the same plate the same  
 A hundred times plus.  
 Same for the home cook  
 Reading through recipes,  
 Following the stages of preparation,  
 Adjusting for the family,  
 For tastes and preference,  
 We find what we cherish  
 And let that be our guide,  
 The great food, the life,  
 And smiles of our loved ones.  
 This is the grace and the blessing  
 Of a table shared,  
 A hundred times over,  
 And still it gets better every time.*

## THE COOK

*The idea, the food, the plate and the moment,  
 The perfect realization of dream,  
 Life and the sensual.  
 We put the years into seconds  
 With the gardens and farms,  
 The Chef's heart and labor,  
 Where it all seems so easy at the table.  
 A cook's reward reaches and touches  
 Beyond the order of creation.*

