

AN EASY BREEZY COCKTAIL HOUR

IMAGINE HOSTING FRIENDS WITHOUT HAVING TO SPEND THE DAY SLAVING AWAY IN THE KITCHEN. THIS ISN'T SOME PERVERSE FANTASY — IT'S THE NO-FUSS GET-TOGETHER! HERE'S HOW YOU CAN PULL IT OFF.

FOOD *Denis Levesque* PHOTOS *Maryse Raymond* TEXT *Craig Silverman*

An after-work or weekend evening get-together is about finger food and conversation, not flambé and courses. The key to success is to keep things casual and fun. A helpful hint: If a single dish takes more than 20 minutes to prepare, it doesn't belong here. Ditto for any cocktail you can't shake or stir in a minute or two.

If you're feeling ambitious, pick a theme that mixes a national cuisine (Mexican, for example), decor elements (wall hangings, colourful clay plates) and drinks (mojitos!). Otherwise, some simple decor tweaks and a variety of food and drink is enough to please everyone.

CHOOSE THE FOOD

Try the easy ensemble of eight stand-alone dishes suggested below. Together they won't take you more than an hour and a half — at the most — to prepare. Even the presentation is kept simple with the sleek

consistency of long plates. No one is going to grade you on your table — they'll be too busy talking, relaxing or otherwise letting the stress of the day evaporate with a cocktail in their hand. Serve up citrus martinis, a twist on an old favourite, or the fruity, fresh, non-alcoholic Pussy Foot. Wine is never a bad choice.

CREATE AN ATMOSPHERE

The casual atmosphere means paper napkins are kosher, but you should take care to make a subtle statement by matching their colour to the decor or the food you trot out. Dining chairs should give way to comfy couches or large pillows for those who want to lounge. And be sure to have a selection of music that encourages conversation and relaxation. Be prepared to tweak the ambience if guests stay into the evening. Change the music and have candles at the ready. Then serve yourself another cocktail and sit back down on the couch.

THE MUSIC



French duo Marc Collin and Olivier Libaux are at it again with this newest collection of forgotten pop gems made over in a cool bossa nova beat. **BANDE À PART**, *Nouvelle Vague*, 2006, Fusion, \$20, available at *Sam the Record Man*, www.samtherecordman.com. www



It's a Saint-Germain-des-Prés rendez vous with this album that conjures up the sounds of a Parisian café filled with customers like Serge Gainsbourg and Diana Krall. **CAFÉ DE FLORE VOL. 2**, *Various artists*, 2005, \$30, Statik, available at *Sam the Record Man*, www.samtherecordman.com. www



Recreate the atmosphere of the celebrated Hôtel Costes and add some European flair to your after-work cocktails. **HÔTEL COSTES VOL. 8**, DJ Stéphane Pompougnac, 2005, \$30, Fusion, available at *Sam the Record Man*, www.samtherecordman.com. www

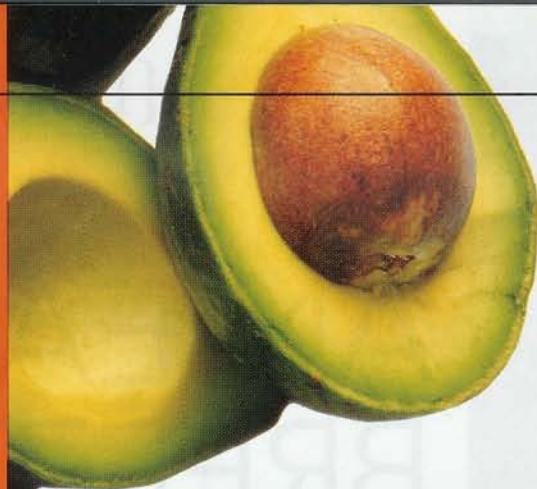


Canadian Leslie Feist transports us to a universe where jazz, folk and pop mingle to sublime effect. **LET IT DIE**, *Feist*, 2005, EMI, \$19, available at *Sam the Record Man*, www.samtherecordman.com. www



Featuring a remix of songs by Nelly Furtado, Basement Jaxx and Jack Johnson, this latest compilation blends the acoustic and the electronic. **MUSIC FOR COCKTAILS VOL. 5**, *Various artists*, 2006, Fusion, \$30, available at *Sam the Record Man*, www.samtherecordman.com. www

Special thanks to Elvis Heath, manager of Sam the Record Man in Toronto, for these suggestions.



AT THIS GET-TOGETHER NO ONE NEEDS A PLATE AND EVERY DISH CAN BE PREPARED IN A MATTER OF MINUTES.



Dates stuffed with goat cheese and Crispy asparagus bites

THE MENU

Smoked Salmon Blinis

(Makes 12)

250 ml (1 cup)	sour cream
30 ml (2 tbsp)	fresh chives, chopped
30 ml (2 tbsp)	fresh thyme, chopped
	salt and pepper, to taste
500 g (1 lb)	smoked salmon, cut into strips
12	blinis
	Fresh dill

In a small bowl, mix together the sour cream, chives and thyme, adding salt and pepper to taste. Shape the salmon strips into rosettes. Spoon 15 ml (1 tbsp) of the sour cream mixture onto each blini and garnish with a salmon rosette. Adorn with a sprig of dill.

Bruschetta, just one cocktail party staple gets an update thanks to pesto and fresh basil.

Pesto Bruschetta

(Makes about 40)

1	thin baguette
125 ml (1/2 cup)	green pesto
240 g (8 oz)	prepared tomato bruschetta
	Fresh basil, chopped

Preheat oven to 180°C (350°F). Slice the baguette about 1-cm (1/4-inch) thick and spread each slice with a thin layer of pesto. Heat until crispy. Add a teaspoon of the bruschetta mixture to each slice. Sprinkle with basil.

THE COCKTAILS

Shaken or stirred? You become the bar chef thanks to these exquisite mixes.

Lemon Martini

60 ml (2 oz)	lemon vodka
30 ml (1 oz)	lemon juice
30 ml (1 oz)	Cointreau
1 drop	sugar syrup*
	Lemon zest to garnish

Shake it up! Mix the first four ingredients in a cocktail shaker with a large quantity of ice. Garnish with the lemon zest.

*Simmer one part water and one part sugar for five minutes, then cool.

Pussy Foot Cocktail

90 ml (3 oz)	cranberry juice
90 ml (3 oz)	pineapple juice
90 ml (3 oz)	orange juice with pulp
90 ml (3 oz)	white grape juice
2 drops	grenadine
	Splash of lemon juice

Mix all ingredients in a cocktail shaker with a large quantity of ice.



Cherry tomato brochettes



Pesto Bruschetta and Miniature grilled cheese



Corn chips with two dips

Crispy Asparagus Bites

(Makes about 24)

- 1 bunch green or white asparagus
- 1 red pepper, diced
- 1 shallot, diced
- 50 ml (2 fl oz) fresh chives, chopped
- 50 ml (2 fl oz) olive oil
- 30 ml (3 tbsp) balsamic vinegar
- 4 sheets phyllo dough
- 165 ml (2/3 cup) melted butter
- 2 slices prosciutto, cut into strips

Cut spears into 2.5-cm (1-inch) pieces and cook. Keep tips aside. Mix chopped asparagus with the red pepper, shallot and chives. Add olive oil and balsamic vinegar. Marinate for 30 minutes, or overnight. Preheat oven to 180°C (350°F). Spread out each sheet of phyllo dough and brush with melted butter. Cut into 7.5-cm (3-inch) squares and put into mini muffin tins. Cook until golden. Cool. Using a slotted spoon, fill each phyllo cup with about 10 ml (2 tsp) of the asparagus mixture. Garnish with an asparagus tip and a strip of prosciutto.

Cherry Tomato Brochettes

(Makes 12)

- 200 g (7 oz) regular bocconcini cut into 2-3 pieces
- 60 ml (4 tbsp) green pesto
- 12 cherry tomatoes

Marinate the bocconcini in the pesto for 30 minutes or overnight. Cut the cherry tomatoes in half. Season with salt and pepper. Thread alternating tomatoes and bocconcini onto a cocktail stick.

Shrimp & Avocado Bites

(Makes about 24)

- 24 phyllo cups (see recipe for Asparagus Bites)
- 2 avocados
- 1 lemon, juiced
- 5 or 6 sprigs fresh cilantro, chopped (or to taste)
- 6 cooked shrimp (size 21/25)
- 125 ml (1/2 cup) olive oil
- 30 ml (2 tbsp) chili pepper

Prepare the phyllo cups. Purée avocado, lemon juice and cilantro to make guacamole. Marinate the shrimps in the olive oil and chili pepper for 30 minutes (or overnight), then dice. Spoon the guacamole into the phyllo cups. Garnish with the shrimp.

A new twist on the classic grilled cheese: Use Quebec's Kénogami cheese instead of boring old cheddar and cut into bite-sized pieces.

Miniature Grilled Cheese With Sun-Dried Tomatoes

(Makes about 15)

- 1 loaf nut bread, sliced
- 100 g (3.5 oz) sun-dried tomato paste
- 300 g (10.5 oz) Kénogami cheese

Toast the bread on one side under the broiler. Spread the sun-dried tomato paste on the toasted side of the bread. Cover with a slice of cheese and a second slice of bread. Grill, using a pan or a panino grill. Cut into small pieces.

Corn Chips With Two Dips

(Each dip recipe makes about 125 mL [1/2 cup])

- 125 ml (1/2 cup) sour cream
- 125 ml (1/2 cup) mayonnaise
- 5 slices fresh ginger, marinated and minced
- 3 or 4 sprigs fresh cilantro
- 15 ml (1 tbsp) fresh chives, chopped
- 15 ml (1 tbsp) curry paste (yellow)
- 15 ml (1 tbsp) white vinegar
- 1 bag corn chips

Mix the sour cream and the mayonnaise and divide this mixture into separate bowls. Into one bowl add the marinated ginger and the cilantro; into the other add the curry paste, dissolved in vinegar, and the chives. Serve with corn chips.

While dessert isn't necessary, a suitable finisher such as goat cheese should anchor the table.

Dates Stuffed with Goat Cheese

(Makes 12)

- 3 or 4 slices maple bacon
- 250 g (8 oz) Chèvre des neiges or creamy goat cheese
- 12 dried dates

Dice the bacon and sauté in a pan. Allow to cool and then mix with the goat cheese. Cut the dates in half and remove their pits. Stuff the dates with the cheese mixture. Heat in the oven for about two minutes, at 180°C (350°F). Serve warm.