

Sticky Toffee Pudding Spoon



COOL YULE

New takes on traditional holiday fare.

BY DON DOULOFF

Soon, festive season menus will be on planners' radar and thanks to creatively-minded chefs, who are putting the boots to same-old same-old, groups can dine royally. Indeed, these culinary wizards are reimagining and reconfiguring traditional holiday fare in inventively mouthwatering ways.

Look no further than the International Centre, in Mississauga, Ont., where executive chef Tawfik Shehata promises some intriguing fare. For instance, his novel take on chicken and waffles substitutes turkey and, as the "waffle," bread stuffing rolled out thin and pan-fried. Bringing the dish together is a sort-of chutney—riffing on Cumberland sauce—made of fresh and dried cranberries, port, shallots and orange zest and juice.

There will also be Scotch-style quail eggs, their sausage wrapping scented with cinnamon and nutmeg. And, at dessert, bread pudding studded with dried cranberries and flavoured with coffee and cinnamon.

Over at the Four Seasons Hotel Toronto, executive chef Thomas Bellec's holiday foods for private events include a stuffing of roasted chestnuts, brioche croutons, chicken livers and dried cranberries cleverly baked into "muffins."

Also in Bellec's seasonal repertoire: duck roasted with apple-cider sauce and braised red cabbage, sparked with wild-chuck-cherry chutney. Those craving seafood will be treated to hot-smoked salmon crusted with maple and Pommery mustard; on the side, Meyer lemon and fennel relish. "We'll serve the salmon with the skin on, so customers can scoop out the meat," says Bellec.

Tundra Mess



Star-shaped Gingerbread Christmas Tree



The hotel's festive-season brunch will feature French toast fashioned from panettone (Christmas sweet bread loaf) kicked up with whipped cream and fruit compote.

Presenting season's eatings in dazzlingly original ways is Vancouver's Culinary Capers Catering and Special Events. Witness the signature oven-roasted turkey, turkey gravy, house-made spiced cranberry chutney, celery, apple and onion stuffing and chive crème fraîche mashed potatoes—served in a martini glass.

More imaginative still is Culinary Capers' one-bite hors d'oeuvre: walnut-crusted turkey shooter stix with spiced-cranberry pipette. Diners eat the turkey ball and then squeeze the pipette, releasing the savoury, spiced cranberry jus into their mouth.

Another killer app is the miniature Yorkshire pudding filled with turkey and rich, sage-scented gravy, with a hint of tart cranberry, "conceived when we were looking for a new alternative for a hot poultry hors d'oeuvre for the winter entertaining season," says company CEO Debra Lykkemark.

Satisfying the sweet tooth is Culinary Capers' sticky toffee pudding spoon with toffee sauce and vanilla bean cream, and

Walnut-crusted Turkey Shooter Stix with Spiced-cranberry Pipette



cheesecake lollipop encased in dark chocolate and crushed white-chocolate peppermint brittle.

At Trump International Hotel & Tower Toronto, the sweet tooth gets satisfied six ways from Sunday, courtesy of decadent-sounding offerings from executive pastry chef Leslie Steh.

How about crème brûlée jazzed with eggnog? Or sips of chai tea alternated with spoonfuls of eggnog ice cream? On a more extravagant note, Steh has confectioned a Yule Rocher, big enough to serve 10 and perfect for groups. Steh's creation echoes a Christmas yule log cake and recreates, on a much larger scale, the Rocher chocolate popularized by candy maker Ferrero: a whole roasted hazelnut encased in a thin wafer shell filled with hazelnut cream and covered in milk chocolate and chopped hazelnuts.

But for visual appeal, it's hard to beat the Christmas tree fashioned from stacked, star-shaped gingerbread, of graduated sizes, artfully draped in white-icing "snow," from All the Best Fine Foods, in Toronto.

Drawing inspiration from a traditional British dessert is Kevin Prendergast, executive chef at Tundra restaurant, Hilton Toronto.

When Chef Prendergast was creating the hotel's festive menu, he wanted to serve a traditional Christmas cake, but updated. He decided to use the holiday baked good as a component in a hybrid of an Eton mess, a traditional British dessert featuring strawberries, meringue pieces and cream. *Voilà*—the Tundra Christmas Mess, "marrying the Christmas cake with shards of French meringue, dried fruit poached in honey and maple syrup with rosebuds and topping it all off with a light chocolate whipped cream," describes Prendergast.

Taking a resolutely upscale approach to cool Yule fuel is the Fairmont Vier Jahreszeiten, in Hamburg, Germany. There, adventurous guests can choose from pheasant terrine and smoked duck with pomegranate, clementines and truffle toast; deer carpaccio and beetroot with horseradish panna cotta, walnuts and elderberry dressing; home-made pickled Fjord salmon and North Sea crab with avocado crème and tomato relish; fried monkfish on Brussels sprouts crème and game salami; braised beef knuckle ravioli with celery puree, horseradish and onion rings; and saddle of deer with pickled vinegar cherries, white almond crème and onion-truffle tart.

Of course, no holiday event would be complete without drinks. Consider providing non-alcoholic options, to cater to teetotalers and limit seasonal excess.

Inspired choices include the Hilton Toronto's Pomegranate Julep mocktail (crushed mint leaves topped with ice, pomegranate juice, fresh grapefruit and a squeeze of lime, drizzled with honey); crockpot of hot apple cider (courtesy of Shannon Marshall, mixologist at Four Seasons Toronto's dbar); and, from chef Bellec, a trio of hot chocolates (white, milk and bittersweet) served buffet-style with add-yourself garnishes (marshmallows, whipped cream, cinnamon, nutmeg and chocolate shavings). +

—Don Douloff is a food and travel writer based in Toronto.