



It's a shame that Italian stews are often referred to as "peasant food." This week's Italian Seafood Stew defies the label and is a rich man's feast of flavors! The flavor base for the stew includes red pepper, anchovies, garlic, and a bay leaf. Licorice-flavored fennel, along with onion and celery are aromatic additions.

The stew is wonderful paired with a Mixed Greens Salad with Orange-Balsamic Vinaigrette and crusty Rosemary Focaccia. And for dessert. . . a decadent treat - Chocolate-Pecan Tarts! Since chocolate plays a starring role, be sure to use high-quality chocolate. Scharffen Berger or Vairhona are two of my favorites gourmet-store brands and Lindt and Ghiradelli are among the best found on the grocery store candy aisle.

Mixed Greens Salad with Orange-Balsamic Vinaigrette

1/4 cup orange juice

2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar

1 teaspoon sweet hot mustard

1 clove garlic, minced

2 tablespoons vegetable oil

4 cups mixed baby greens

1 tart apple, cored and thinly sliced

1/2 cup Gorgonzola cheese, crumbled

1/4 cup roasted pistachio kernels

For dressing, whisk together orange juice, balsamic vinegar, mustard, and garlic. Gradually whisk in oil until well blended. Set aside to mellow flavors. For salad, divide greens among four salad plates. Top with apple slices. Sprinkle with cheese and nuts. Whisk dressing; drizzle over salads. Serves 2 to 4.

Italian Seafood Stew

1/4 cup olive oil

1 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes

1 (2-ounce) tin anchovies, drained

3 cloves garlic, minced

1 bay leaf

1 bulb fennel, cut into thin strips

1 medium onion, chopped

2 ribs celery, chopped

2 cups chicken broth

1 cup dry white wine

1 (28-ounce) can crushed tomatoes

1 teaspoon fresh thyme leaves

1 bunch fresh basil, cut into a medium chiffonade

1 bunch fresh parsley, chopped, divided

1 pound tilapia, cut into chunks

12 large shrimp, peeled and deveined

12 sea scallops

1 can whole baby clams

Heat a Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Add the oil, red pepper, anchovies and garlic and saute until the anchovies have fallen apart. Add fennel, onion, and celery and saute until the vegetables are soft, about 5 minutes. Add the chicken broth and wine and bring to a boil. Let simmer until slightly reduced, about 5 minutes. Add tomatoes, thyme, basil and half of the parsley and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to a simmer and stir in the fish. Cover and simmer, do not stir. Add the remaining seafood, cover, turn off heat and cook until shrimp are pink, about 5 minutes. Garnish with remaining parsley. Serves 8.

Rosemary Focaccia

1 tablespoon fresh rosemary leaves

3 cups all-purpose flour

3/4 cup semolina flour

4 tablespoons olive oil, divided

1/2 teaspoon salt

3 packages rapid-rise yeast

1 1/2 cups hot milk

Additional olive oil and coarse sea salt

Place the rosemary, flours, 2 tablespoons olive oil, salt and yeast in the bowl of a food processor fitted with a steel blade. Pulse several times to chop the rosemary and combine the ingredients. Combine the milk and 2 tablespoons olive oil in a small saucepan and heat until it reaches 120 degrees. Slowly pour the milk mixture into the food processor through the feed tube and process until dough forms a ball and is smooth and elastic, about 3 minutes. Remove dough from food processor and turn onto a flour-dusted work surface. Knead 10 times, form into a round loaf and place on a silicone mat-lined baking sheet. Cover with a towel and let rise for 30 minutes. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Remove towel. Drizzle dough with olive oil and sprinkle with sea salt. Bake for 20 minutes. Remove from oven and drizzle with additional oil. Slice and serve. Serves 8.

Chocolate-Pecan Tarts

1 package prepared pie crust dough

3/5 ounces bittersweet chocolate, coarsely chopped

4 tablespoons butter

5 eggs

1 cup brown sugar

1 1/2 cups light corn syrup

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

2 cups toasted pecan halves

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line two 9-inch tart pans with removable bottoms with the pie crust dough, trimming each even with the top of the tart pan. Set aside. Melt the chocolate and butter in a small saucepan over a double-boiler. Stir occasionally until chocolate is completely melted. Set aside to cool slightly. Combine the eggs, brown sugar, corn syrup and vanilla in a medium bowl. Whisk together until smooth. Whisk in the chocolate-butter mixture and fold in the pecans. Divide mixture between the two prepared tart shells. Place on baking sheets and bake for 45 minutes to an hour. Serves 12.

The writer owns Catering by Debbi Covington and is the author of two cookbooks, Gold Medal Winner of the Benjamin Franklin Award, Celebrate Everything! and Dining Under the Carolina Moon. Debbi's website address is www.cateringbydebbicovington.com. She may be reached at 525-0350 or by email at dbc@cateringbydebbicovington.com.