

Versatile artichoke dish is meal or appetizer



Hearty Mussels and Artichokes

- 3 pounds mussels, scrubbed and beards removed, see note
- 1 28-ounce can whole tomatoes with juice (chop before using)
- 3 shallots, peeled and chopped
- 4 garlic cloves, peeled and chopped
- 2 teaspoons olive oil
- 1 cup dry, white wine
- Salt, to taste
- ¼ teaspoon pepper
- 1 jar of artichoke hearts (retain juice)
- 4 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- ⅓ cup fresh parsley, chopped

Note: Hard clams, scallops or shrimp can be substituted for mussels. In a tajine or French/Dutch oven, heat 2 tablespoons olive oil over medium heat. Add shallots and garlic and sauté for 4 minutes until softened. Add white wine, chopped tomatoes, artichoke hearts and juice, salt and pepper. Combine ingredients, increase heat and bring to a boil. Add mussels and parsley, cover and cook for 4 minutes over medium heat until mussels open. Toss away any mussels that don't open. Serve with French crusty bread to absorb juices. Serve in individual dishes or the tajine or French/Dutch oven. Makes 6 servings.

Hearty Mussels and Artichokes takes 20 minutes to prepare. Cooking time is 5 to 8

It's the season for gathering with family and friends, and Kerrie Johnson of Paxton is celebrating.

Just in time for the holidays, she shares two recipes – one that could be an appetizer or meal, and the other a rustic dessert that makes the most of locally grown apples and pears.

Hearty Mussels and Artichokes is a dish that is a staple at the Johnson home, but a “must” on Christmas Day.

“It's easy to put together with plenty of flavor that packs a punch,” said Johnson. Be sure to have crusty bread on hand as an accompaniment. “Guests love to use the bread to soak up every last drop of the broth,” she said.

Warning: This dish may not make it out of the kitchen to the serving table. Johnson said her guests line up in the kitchen, and when she puts the dish on the counter, they begin tasting. Hard clams, scallops or shrimp can be substituted for the mussels in the recipe, according to Johnson.

Sweet-tart apples and juicy pears embody some of New England's best autumn flavors. They're versatile, too, and taste great in cobblers and crisps. For Johnson's dessert, Pear Ginger Apple Crisp, toss plumped dried cherries with the fresh fruit, crystallized ginger and spices, and bake under a crisp oat topping. The warm spices are a delicious complement to the fruit.

Johnson realized her passion for cooking when as a youngster she and her father watched Julia Child's TV cooking shows in “black and white.”

“My dad always cooked for the family on Sundays,” said Johnson, who grew up in Fitchburg, where her parents Paul and Maureen Hanney still reside.

“It really was my dad who first taught me the do's and don'ts of cooking,” said Johnson. “Today, he's my go-to-guy for recipes. He has an awesome cookbook collection. When he comes to my house, he's the taste-tester.”

Johnson not only loves to cook, but likes to discover new

kitchen gadgets.

As the owner of Whisk, a small kitchen shop in Paxton, Johnson routinely shares food trends and entertaining tips with customers. She worked in public relations and sales for 25 years before her company downsized. The decision to open a specialty shop was an easy one, according to Johnson.

“My mother was born and raised in Scotland, and I remember family visits there, and the charming, small independent shops,” she said. “The shop owners were friendly and knew their customers by name, and there was something cozy and comforting about shopping at these businesses. I wanted to replicate the feeling.”

Johnson left her job on Oct. 22, 2010, opening Whisk exactly one year later.

About one-third of Whisk's customers are men who love to cook, said Johnson. At this time of year, the home cooks turn to cookware, such as tajines or Dutch ovens for slow-cooked stews and soups, she said. “Colder temperatures bring comfort food with big, bold flavors.”

Johnson and her husband, Ken, have two sons. At home, the Johnsons entertain friends about once a month with cocktails, dinner or an outdoor barbecue. Kerrie Johnson especially likes to host a “dessert and champagne night.”

“I love to bake, and chocolate is in my veins,” said Johnson, who puts pies, breads and anything with meringue on her list of favorite things to bake.

The Johnsons also are avid gardeners. Johnson said she

has clocked more than 140 hours on the family's new tractor.

Enjoy Kerrie Johnson's recipes, and here's a suggestion when you serve Hearty Mussels and Artichokes. Double the recipe, it's delicious!

■ Whisk, at 715 Pleasant St., Paxton, is open from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. For more information, visit whiskkitchenshop.com or call (508) 754-8591.



Kerrie Johnson of Paxton holds a dish of Pear Ginger Apple Crisp. The recipe is on Page 76.



Preparation time for Pear Ginger Apple Crisp is 90 minutes; cooking time is 60 minutes. The recipe serves 8.

Pear Ginger Apple Crisp

- 2 pounds ripe Anjou or Bosc pears (about 4)
- 2 pounds Macoun or Gala apples (about 6)
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup dried Bing cherries, see note
- 2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- 2 teaspoons lemon zest
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup granulated sugar
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon nutmeg
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons cinnamon
- 2 tablespoons chopped crystallized ginger

TOPPING

- $\frac{1}{2}$ cups all-purpose flour
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup granulated sugar
- 1 cup light Muscovado sugar or light brown sugar, see note
- 2 sticks cold unsalted butter, cut in cubes
- 1 tablespoon crystallized ginger, chopped
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1 cup rolled oats (old-fashioned oatmeal)

Note: Soak dried cherries in boiling water, about 8 minutes until plump. Muscovado sugar is a type of unrefined sugar.

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Peel and core pears and apples and slice into $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch chunks. Place fruit in large bowl and add cherries, lemon juice and zest, sugar, flour, nutmeg, cinnamon and ginger. Mix well and pour into 9-by-12-inch baking dish.

Combine flour, sugars, oatmeal, salt, ginger and vanilla in bowl of electric mixer with paddle attachment. Mix for 2 minutes on low until the mixture resembles crumbs. Crumble mixture with your fingers evenly over the fruit. Pile topping high, as fruit will reduce in size in baking. Bake for 60 minutes or until top is golden brown and fruit is cooked. Let crisp cool for 10 minutes. Serve warm with vanilla ice cream or fresh whipped cream, if desired. Makes 8 servings.