

HAPPY HOUR

Simple and delicious small bites for a cocktail cruise

By Bob Johndrow

We boat mostly on the Mississippi River around Minnesota and sometimes go as far as Wisconsin where it meets the St. Croix River. Our Carver Mariner yacht is well seasoned, and we take good care of her. There is enough room for Yader and I to have four to six people comfortably dine together on board. I think I'm a pretty good cook, and I've always enjoyed having people over on the boat while treating them to a nice dinner experience. It definitely strokes my ego when people ask what I did to create such a perfectly seared salmon in a cast iron skillet, or why something as simple as skewered shrimp, grilled and served warm, is so delicious. Well, I think food just tastes better on the water.

My favorite way to entertain is by hosting a cocktail hour on the boat. Friends stop by for drinks and a cruise, then we make a meal of small bites while anchored or in the harbor. I typically have one featured cocktail I mix in a shaker for the group. Heavy appetizers, both hot and cold, are mostly prepared in advance with a few hot items finished just before serving. I do things that are simple, filling, flavorful, and make a beautiful presentation. I began doing this when I first started cooking for friends on the boat and made sure I took care of everyone as efficiently as possible.

When guests arrive, I hand them a cocktail and ask them to stow their belongings in the cabin. Even regular visitors need a quick tour and a few reminders regarding safety and some things that are important to us such as recycling and composting. If you want people to bring something, be specific. Chips and salsa, hummus and pita, or fresh fruit are good options. Wine is always a welcome gift that helps supply libations to guests, is simple, and takes up little space. You want things that won't require too much interruption or space in the galley.

Around here, a river cruise at sunset is a perfect time to see wildlife along the shore while catching up with friends. As the sun begins to set, the river takes on the reflection of the sky with an array of beautiful colors bouncing off the water. We spot eagles high above in the treetops. Along the shores, we see otters and beavers playing. Herons rest gracefully just above the shore and take off in flight as the need arises. As the cruise comes to an end, our guests are always ready for snacks. Here are a few of our favorites.



CRANBERRY VODKA COCKTAIL

Want to serve a cocktail that is refreshing and different from the routine boat drinks found around the marina? Try a simple cranberry vodka martini. This concoction of vodka, cranberry juice, and fresh orange is a perfect cocktail to get the evening started.

INGREDIENTS:

3½ oz. vodka
1 oz. cranberry juice
1 oz. fresh, squeezed orange
1 lime slice (to garnish)

To chill a coupe or martini glass, fill to the top with ice and water. In a shaker, combine all ingredients with ice and shake vigorously. Empty the glass full of ice water, then strain mixture into the chilled glass. Garnish with lime. Serves 1.

MISSISSIPPI BEE STING

The Mississippi Bee Sting is a variation of a Bee's Knees cocktail. Our sting comes from a dose of Ancho de Reyes ancho chile liqueur because that was the ingredient when I was first introduced to it on the river. Look for it in the tequila section. This liqueur is not tequila, but that's typically where you'll find it. I love the way it smells with hints of chile, cinnamon, and chocolate.

INGREDIENTS:

2 oz. vodka
1 oz. fresh lemon juice
1 oz. honey-simple syrup
(see preparation)
½ oz. Ancho de Reyes liqueur

Make honey-simple syrup in advance and chill: Combine one cup water and one cup honey in a small saucepan. Warm over medium heat until honey dissolves, stirring occasionally. When the honey has dissolved, remove from heat and let cool before using. Simple syrup can be made in advance and stored in a cooler for about three days. Chill a coupe or martini glass (as directed in the Cranberry Vodka cocktail). In a shaker, combine all ingredients with ice and shake vigorously. Strain the mixture into the chilled glass. Serves 1.





MEDITERRANEAN SHRIMP

We enjoy having seafood on the boat, especially this easy method in which the shrimp is seasoned very simply with oregano, sweet paprika, and a garlic paste with an olive oil and citrus marinade. Marinate the shrimp for a few hours so it absorbs all the flavors of the marinade. We skewer them and cook them on the grill quickly over high heat. When the shrimp skewers are ready, they will turn pink; if you leave the tail on, it will turn bright red. The shrimp should be firm and served hot.

INGREDIENTS:

2 lbs. large shrimp, peeled, deveined, tail on	1 tsp. smoked paprika
8 garlic cloves, peeled	Extra virgin olive oil
1 Tbsp. dried oregano	2 lemons, juiced

Clean the shrimp and place in a mixing bowl. Smash the garlic cloves with the back of a knife, then mince. Add the garlic, oregano, and smoked paprika to mixing bowl. Add lemon juice, a cup of olive oil, and toss everything with the shrimp. Cover and marinate for a few hours. Thread shrimp on metal skewers. Brush the grill with olive oil using a paper towel. Grill the skewered shrimp for about four minutes per side. Line a platter with mixed greens or micro greens and place skewers on top. Offer lemon wedges to squeeze over the top if desired. Serves 8.

CATALAN TOMATO BREAD

On our first trip to Spain, we tried many different variations of *pa amb tomàquet*, tomato bread, and they were all incredible. Catalonians use a “rustic and crusty” bread, but not all use garlic; however, our favorite is this recipe that involves rubbing raw garlic on grilled bread, then topping it with fresh grated tomatoes, olive oil, and salt. You can assemble it for your guests or provide them with ingredients and let them build their own.

INGREDIENTS:

4 ripe tomatoes	1 clove garlic	1 artisan bread
Extra virgin olive oil	Sea salt	boule such as sourdough

Slice the bread into half-inch slices, then cut each slice in fourths. Brush bread with olive oil and grill over medium heat for a few minutes on each side, then remove from grill. Wash and dry the tomatoes. Cut the tomatoes in half and grate them using a box grater. Discard the stem and skins. Cut the clove of garlic in half, and rub the raw garlic on the toasted bread. Spoon the tomato pulp over the toast, then drizzle the extra virgin olive oil and add a sprinkle of sea salt. Serves 6-8.



BISON SLIDERS WITH GORGONZOLA CREAM

These savory sliders use lean bison topped with bacon, avocado, and a delicious gorgonzola cream to create a beautiful platter. We serve them on toasted sesame buns or dollar rolls.

INGREDIENTS:

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| 2 cups whipping cream | 1 lb. ground buffalo meat |
| 3 Tbsp. Worcestershire sauce | 6 strips bacon, cooked, cut into thirds |
| 4 oz. gorgonzola crumble | 4 cloves garlic, minced |
| Leaf lettuce | 8 small sesame buns or dollar rolls |
| 4 oz. Parmesan cheese, grated | Salt and pepper |
| 1 avocado, skin off and sliced | |

In a small saucepan, heat cream to boiling and reduce by half. Remove cream from heat, then whisk in gorgonzola and Parmesan and set aside. Combine the bison meat, garlic, Worcestershire, salt, and pepper in a mixing bowl. Blend together using your hands. Form meat mixture into eight golf ball-sized balls, then press into small patties. Grill patties over medium-high heat for about three minutes per side and remove from grill. To toast buns, place them on a hot grill for about one minute. Place bottom half of buns on a platter. Serves 4. 🍴

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