

TheStreet.com

December 26, 2007

Personal Finance: The Good Life

Take a Celebrity Chef to Dinner

By Charles Passy

So, you've been invited to a New Year's Eve party or New Year's Day brunch and you want to impress the host with a dish to be served at the bash.

Here's a thought: Just bring along your favorite celebrity chef to whip up something special.

OK, OK, so maybe Emeril's not available to accompany you. But a good number of chefs are -- at least in the form of the goodies they affix their names to, from gourmet soups to wine.

With that in mind, we've assembled a complete meal, from appetizer to dessert, with products from big-name chefs. Some offerings are available online (keep in mind order cut-off dates for arrival by Dec. 31), some are in specialty stores or supermarkets.

Of course, you don't need to buy them all to make a holiday statement. Just pick and choose based on what culinary holes your host may need to fill.

For the appetizer:

Daniel Boulud's smoked salmon. It's available through Browne Trading (800-944-7848); priced according to size, \$23 to \$95).



Smoked Salmon

Famed French-born chef Daniel Boulud has brought a contemporary measure of sophistication to traditional French (and American) cooking, evident throughout his restaurants in New York and Palm Beach. The same is true of his line of smoked salmon, which puts your standard Nova to shame. The texture is just right -- soft but not mushy. And so is the flavor, which gets a boost from French sea salt. The subtle smokiness is courtesy of native Maine birch.

For the soup: Wolfgang Puck Soups (available in supermarkets and gourmet stores and online through several sources; approximately \$2.50 to \$3 per can).



Wolfgang's Soup

Austrian-born chef Wolfgang Puck needs little in the way of introduction. He practically invented the post-Julia Child concept of the celebrity chef. His line of soups is broken into three categories: Original

Recipe (Chicken & Dumplings, Hearty Vegetable Beef, etc.); Signature Recipe (Chicken Tortilla, Beef Burgundy & Egg Noodles, etc.); and Organic (Corn Chowder, Classic Minestrone, etc.).

The quality of Puck's products run the gamut -- we've had some disappointing experiences with his cookware -- but he insists his soups are made with lots "of good, honest, old-fashioned love." (Puck also has a line of gourmet pizzas, if you're looking for more options.)

For the entrée: Paula Deen's Crunchy Honey Glaze Spiral Sliced Ham from Smithfield (available in supermarkets and online; approximately \$3.49 to \$3.99 per pound).

Think of Paula Deen as the "mom" of the Food Network, a Southern gal who loves to cook and share her passion for home-style food. Thus, it's no surprise to see she's partnered with a major name in ham, the ultimate in comfort foods, on her own ready-for-your-holiday-table precooked porker. She says the crunchy honey glaze "adds that sweet, baked-caramel crunch" that makes a ham "delicious to bite into." Looking for a side dish? Deen offers those through Smithfield as well, with offerings ranging from sweet potato biscuits to Brunswick stew. (She's got desserts, too.)

For the dessert: Barefoot Contessa's Dessert Baking Mixes (available in stores and online; prices vary depending on mix, but some popular ones cost \$10.95).

The Barefoot Contessa -- a.k.a. New York-based chef, gourmet guru and Food Network personality Ina Garten -- is like an Ivy League version of Paula Deen, a tad more sophisticated but still in a homey vein. You'll have to do some work to make any of the treats from her mixes, but at least she gives you lots of options -- from jam thumbprint cookies to coconut cupcakes. She boasts of her Outrageous Brownie Mix: "I tested this recipe so many times that I am positive it is the best brownie recipe you will find."

For the wine: Mario Batali's La Mozza wines (available in select stores and online through ItalianWineMerchantStore.com and other Web retailers; prices vary depending on wine).

Yes, "Molto Mario" does wine. The Big Apple-based chef, once a Food Network staple and now a major culinary presence with restaurants in New York, Las Vegas and Los Angeles, has partnered with two other prominent names in Italian cooking, Lidia and Joseph Bastianich, on this Tuscan label. La Mozza's wines -- Aragone and I Perazzi -- are said to be more New World than Old in character.

Wine guru Robert Parker has given the 2004 Aragone a solid 92-point rating, noting: "It bursts from the glass with a brooding, almost menacing nose of tar and scorched earth."