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Parties made easy, from Cinco de Mayo to graduation

By **TOM MENTZER**
Scripps Howard News Service
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Parties without good food are like summer without sunshine: no one really has much fun. But whipping up memorable eats is never easy, especially for a crowd.

Enter Jamie Gwen, a regular on the Home Shopping Channel and author of three cookbooks. Her latest effort, "Good Food for Good Times" (Powerline Publishing Group, \$24.95), dishes up more than 100 recipes for 21 occasions, from birthday brunches to graduation parties.

Gwen's recipes are simple, but she doesn't skimp on innovation. Pumpkin ginger pancakes and chocolate bread pudding with a sea salt caramel sauce are just two examples of nice twists on regular favorites, a surefire path to memorable meals.

Her Mexican Fiesta collection is a readymade Cinco de Mayo party. Margaritas for the masses are simple but tasty, while the chilled avocado and pineapple soup with chipotle cream and green chile cheese puffs could hold their own against a line of tequila shots.

Gwen's graduation-party gallery is also impressive, perfect for picky youngsters. Especially interesting is the Reuben dip, a deconstructed Reuben sandwich ideal for a hungry mob.

Other winning assemblies include a picnic series (crispy Dijon chicken, lemon basil potato salad) and a soup-centric party with tomato, mushroom, carrot and beet soups.

It's a shame there aren't more menu cookbooks being published, especially with larger groups in mind. The stress of cooking keeps many from hosting parties, which is a shame.

If there is one quibble with this volume, it's a lack of narrative. Assuming a home cook wanted to prepare an entire menu, a few tips on timing would be invaluable, especially for the broader menus. Bringing several dishes to the table at the same time is one of the trickier parts of cooking.

But overall, Gwen's ideas on hosting memorable gatherings are spot on, with a variety of bold flavors that offer something for everyone.

MARGARITAS FOR A CROWD

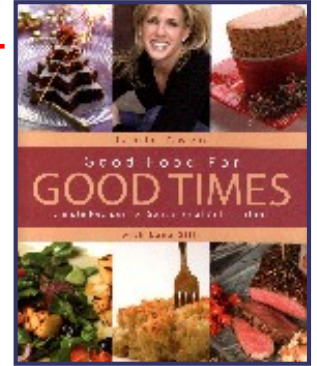
1 cup freshly squeezed lime juice (about 8 to 10 limes)

1/4 cup superfine granulated sugar

1 cup triple sec

2 cups gold tequila

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Ice cubes

1 lime, cut in half

Coarse sea salt

Combine the lime juice, sugar, triple sec, tequila and two big handfuls of ice in a pitcher or blender. Blend or stir to combine. If desired, rub the rims of 8 glasses with the cut lime, then press the rims of the glasses into a plate of salt. Pour the margaritas into the glasses and serve.

_ "Good Food for Good Times"

GREEN CHILE CHEESE PUFFS

3/4 cup whole milk

5 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into small pieces

1/2 teaspoon salt

3/4 cup all-purpose flour

Pinch cayenne pepper

3 large eggs

1/4 cup chopped green chilies

1 cup grated jack cheese

1/2 cup grated Parmesan cheese

1 egg, beaten with 1 teaspoon water _ for the egg wash

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Line 2 baking sheets with parchment paper or silicone baking mats.

Combine the milk and butter in a saucepan and bring to a boil over medium heat. Combine the salt, flour and cayenne in a small bowl. As soon as the milk mixture boils, remove from the heat and add the flour mixture. Place the pan back on the heat and cook for about 1 minute, stirring with a wooden spoon, until the mixture thickens and pulls away from the sides. Place the hot mixture into the bowl of a food processor fitted with the steel blade. Immediately add the eggs, jack cheese and Parmesan and pulse until the eggs are incorporated and the dough is smooth and thick. Stir in the diced chilies.

Spoon the mixture into a pastry bag fitted with a large plain round tip. Pipe mounds 1-inch wide and 1-inch high onto the baking sheets. With a wet finger, lightly press down the swirl at the top of each puff. (You can also use 2 spoons to scoop out the mixture and shape the puffs with damp fingers.) Brush the top of each puff lightly with the egg wash. Bake the puffs until golden brown, about 15 to 20 minutes. Serve immediately.

_ "Good Food for Good Times"

(Tom Mentzer is a free-lance writer. Contact him at [tom.mentzer\(at\)gmail.com](mailto:tom.mentzer(at)gmail.com).)

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