



Food on a stick is simply more fun to eat, even when it's Strawberry Shortcake. (Glenn Koenig/Los Angeles Times/MCT)

Skewer Your Next Shindig

Your Goodies Can Be The Life Of The Party When They're Served On A Stick

BY RENE LYNCH
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Food photographer and blogger Matt Armendariz knows how to be the life of the party: Make food on a stick.

"It almost doesn't matter what you actually make. People see food on a stick and they just start to smile and laugh and they love it. I think it must remind everyone of being a kid again."

Armendariz's new book, "On a Stick!" is this summer's guide to that kind of carefree, easygoing entertaining with 80 mostly make-ahead dishes that allow the host to relax and enjoy the party with the guests. Recipes include some things you might expect in stick food, such as lamb kebabs, chicken satay and strawberry-'n'-buttermilk smoothie ice cream pops. Then there are creative riffs such as a panzanella bread salad with sherry vinaigrette or a caprese appetizer — a plump ciliegine, cherry tomato, sun-dried tomato and basil leaf drizzled with olive oil and a bit of sea salt. It's perfect for popping in your mouth with one hand while holding a drink in the other.

Speaking of drinks, there are also margaritas on a stick (cubes of tequila- and triple-sec-infused lime Jell-O that will no doubt bring back memories of spring break).

And there are gotta-see-it-to-believe-it and deep-fried menaces, such as spaghetti and meatballs, pizza, mac and cheese, chicken and waffles, and a Milky Way candy bar, all served up on a stick.

"I tried to make it all-inclusive stick food, without just being gratuitous and outrageous. There are a lot of 'fair foods' in there — foods you'd find at the county fair. But I didn't just want to do the outrageous. I also wanted to include recipes that you would really make at home, because this is such a fun, easy way to cook and entertain. You can do so much of this in advance before your guests arrive."

He did draw the line at one fair food: fried butter on a stick.

"There was no way I was going to do fried butter," he said. "That is just wrong."

A recent afternoon found Armendariz in his photography studio in downtown Long Beach, Calif., shooting a series of print images for the California Avocado Commission and the Hass Avocado Council. The studio is actually a converted garage with a loft, giving him a sprawling work area and kitchen where he and his team can prepare, cook, style and photograph. It faces west, with a jury-rigged sun screen that draws in a startling amount of natural light.

There's a bit of a flea-market feel to the place, with its bins of cookie cutters, stacks of cutting boards, silverware, stemware and a colorful array of tablecloths, napkins and place settings — all backdrops, props and kitchen gadgets ready to be pulled into the camera's frame. (Many of the items were selected by or purchased with Armendariz's partner, noted food stylist Adam C. Pearson.)

A graphic artist by trade, Armendariz spent much of his career working first for Whole Foods in Austin, Texas, near his hometown, and then later for Bristol Farms, which brought him to San Francisco and then Los Angeles. His career as an art director was firmly on track.

But Armendariz had a dirty little secret: He really didn't know his way around a camera.

"Sometimes I'd have an image in my head of what I wanted, and everyone around me was doing a great job, but at the end of the day I still wasn't getting the shot," he said.

A little over five years ago, he took up photography and started his food blog, Matt Bites, as a way to experiment. It looks like he's got the photography thing down: The blog, with its sumptuous images, is a perennial favorite in any "best food blog" roundup.

As the blog's popularity grew, so did Armendariz's profile in the food world. One highlight: "Cooking with Martha Stewart" in 2008 and landing her coveted "circle" recognition as a favored lifestyle blog.

Requests for his food photography and writing came pouring in, and he found himself frantically juggling all the things he "had" to do — like his day job — and the freelance assignments that didn't seem like work at all.

"There are only so many times you can ask for a day off because you have an assignment on the side," Armendariz said.

You know how this story ends.

About 18 months ago, he took the leap into full-time freelance writing and photography, becoming an inspiration to other food bloggers and writers who want to follow in his footsteps. (A profile in L.A. Weekly, which recently named him one of the best of the Web for his "food porn," referred to Armendariz as "living the dream.")

"I do get that question a lot — people want to know how to make the transition, and I tell them you've just got to do it," he says. "It's a lot of work, but then when you are doing something that you really love, it's not really work."

PINCHOS DE GAMBAS

Total time: 20 minutes, plus marinating and soaking time
Servings: 8 skewers
Note: Adapted from "On a Stick!" by Matt Armendariz.

2 tablespoons smoked paprika
2 tablespoons sweet paprika
1 1/2 teaspoons ground cumin
2 garlic cloves, minced
1 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon pepper
2 tablespoons lime juice
1/3 cup plus 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided
1 pound tiger shrimp, peeled and cleaned, tail on

Directions:
1. In a large bowl, whisk together the smoked paprika, sweet paprika, cumin, garlic, salt, pepper,

lime juice and one-third cup olive oil. Add the shrimp and gently toss to coat. Cover and refrigerate 30 minutes to 1 hour.

2. Soak the skewers 30 minutes before grilling, then thread the shrimp, 3 to each skewer.

3. Heat a grill or grill pan over medium-high heat. Brush the grill with the remaining 2 tablespoons oil. Grill the shrimp just until cooked through (the shrimp will become firm and turn opaque), 2 to 4 minutes per side, careful not to overcook. Serve hot.

Each skewer: 103 calories; 10 grams protein; 2 grams carbohydrates; 0.5 gram fiber; 7 grams fat; 1 gram saturated fat; 91 mg cholesterol; 0 sugar; 482 mg sodium.

STRAWBERRY SHORTCAKE

Total time: 20 minutes
Servings: 16 skewers
Note: Adapted from "On a Stick!" by Matt Armendariz. He recommends using small bamboo skewers for this dish.

2 cups pound cake cut into 1-inch cubes
2 cups strawberries, hulled
1 cup heavy cream
2 tablespoons sugar
2 teaspoons vanilla extract

Directions:
1. Thread alternating pieces of pound cake and strawberries onto skewers.

2. Make the whipped cream: Combine the cream and sugar in a large bowl. Using a hand mixer or whisk, whip the cream until stiff peaks form. Gently fold in the vanilla.

3. Serve the whipped cream with the shortcake skewers.

Each skewer: 120 calories; 1 gram protein; 11 grams carbohydrates; 0.5 grams fiber; 8 grams fat; 4 grams saturated fat; 29 mg cholesterol; 3 grams sugar; 63 mg sodium.

COCKTAIL CUBES

Total time: 10 minutes, plus freezing time
Servings: 20 skewers
Note: Adapted from "On a Stick!" by Matt Armendariz. He recommends using cocktail picks for this dish.

About 1/3 cup blackberries
About 1/3 cup blueberries

About 1/3 cup raspberries
About 2 cups fruit juice, flavor of your choice

Directions:
1. Into each section of an ice cube tray, place assorted berries, then fill with fruit juice. Cover the tray with plastic wrap, and poke a cocktail pick through the wrap into each section.

2. Place the tray into the freezer until frozen.

Each skewer (figured using apple juice): 15 calories; 0 protein; 3 grams carbohydrates; 0.6 grams fiber; 0 fat; 0 cholesterol; 3 grams sugar; 1 mg sodium.

PANZANELLA WITH SHERRY VINAIGRETTE

Total time: 30 minutes
Servings: 12 skewers
Note: Adapted from "On a Stick!" by Matt Armendariz.

24 (1-inch) cubes French bread (from approximately 1/2 loaf)
3/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons olive oil, divided
1 teaspoon garlic powder
Salt

Pinch black pepper
1/4 cup sherry vinegar
1/2 shallot, finely chopped
1 1/2 teaspoons stone-ground mustard
24 cherry tomatoes
24 small mozzarella balls (ciliegine)
24 basil leaves

Directions:
1. Heat the oven to 350 degrees.

2. Toast the bread: In a large bowl, toss the bread cubes with 2 tablespoons oil, the garlic powder, one-half teaspoon salt and a pinch of pepper. Place in a single layer on a baking sheet and toast until golden, 10 to 12 minutes, turning every few minutes.

2. Make the vinaigrette: In a medium bowl, whisk together the sherry vinegar with the shallot and mustard. Slowly whisk in the remaining three-fourths cup olive oil to emulsify. Season with one-eighth teaspoon salt, or to taste.

3. Onto each skewer, thread 2 toasted cubes of bread, 2 tomatoes, 2 mozzarella balls and 2 basil leaves. Just before serving, drizzle liberally with sherry vinaigrette.

Each skewer: 241 calories; 5 grams protein; 9 grams carbohydrates; .66 grams fiber; 20 grams fat; 5 grams saturated fat; 15 mg cholesterol; 1 gram sugar; 222 mg sodium.

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