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Appetizers:

Page 1 – Olives en Croute

Page 2 – Mushroom Fillo Pockets

Page 3 – Pesto Crackers

Olives en Croute

Makes 24 pieces

Originally popular in the 1950s, these delicious bites made a reappearance in the early 1990s. It's about time they made a comeback in 2011! Olives are enclosed in a cheddar-enhanced crust, baked, and served warm or at room temperature. We have only one warning – these little balls are addictive – it's difficult to have just one!

2 cups sharp cheddar cheese, shredded (about 6 ounces)
8 tablespoons butter, (1 stick), cut into 1/2 " cubes
1 cup all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon paprika
1/8 teaspoon cayenne pepper
2 tablespoons minced pimento
2 tablespoons minced parsley
1 jar queen-size green olives, pimento stuffed, about 24 olives

1. In a food processor or with a mixer, blend the cheese and butter until smooth.
2. Add flour, paprika, and cayenne pepper to the cheese and butter mixture, and mix until incorporated.
3. Gather the dough into a ball on a cutting board. Add and knead in the minced pimento and parsley until evenly distributed. Form the dough into a flattened disk. Chill for 1 hour.
4. Drain and pat dry the olives.
5. From the dough, form 1-inch balls. Flatten each ball and wrap around each olive. Pinch the dough so that the olive is fully encased. The balls may be chilled or frozen until ready to bake.
6. Preheat the oven to 400°F, Place the olive balls in a single layer on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper. Bake for about 15 minutes or until just golden brown.
7. Serve warm, or at room temperature.

DO AHEAD:

The crust may be made ahead of time and refrigerated until ready to add the olives. Or, assemble the crust around the olives and refrigerate or freeze the balls until ready to bake. If frozen, allow to sit at room temperature for 30 minutes prior to baking. Baking times may vary based on the temperature of the balls.



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Mushroom Fillo Pockets

Makes 16 pieces

Fillo dough forms paper-thin layers around all kinds of fillings. The buttery crunch with each bite is a delicious experience. We prefer this mushroom filling as an easy, always perfect, place to start with making fillo pockets.

8 ounces white button mushrooms, cleaned
6 tablespoons butter
1/2 cup Italian seasoned bread crumbs
16 sheets fillo dough
8 tablespoons butter, melted for brushing fillo

1. Mince the mushrooms, or finely chop in a food processor. In a skillet, allow 6 tablespoons of butter to melt, add the mushrooms and sauté until tender.
2. Mix together the sautéed mushrooms and their liquid, with the bread crumbs.
3. Defrost and unfold 16 sheets of fillo dough. With the remaining 8 tablespoons of melted butter at hand, brush the first sheet of fillo dough.
4. At one end of the sheet of fillo, place 2 tablespoons of the mushroom filling at one end of the sheet in the center. Fold the right-hand side of the fillo over the filling; brush with melted butter. Repeat with the left-hand side of the fillo. Fold the fillo, end over end, until a neat packet is formed. With the seam side down, place on a baking sheet, brush with butter.
5. Preheat the oven to 400°F, Place the mushroom-filled packets on a baking sheet, bake for 15 minutes or until the pastry is evenly golden brown.
6. Serve warm, or at room temperature.

DO AHEAD:

The filling may be made ahead of time and refrigerated until ready to assemble. Or, assemble the packets and freeze until ready to bake. If frozen, allow to sit at room temperature for 30 minutes prior to baking. Baking times may be longer if packets have been previously frozen.



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Pesto Crackers

Makes 48 pieces

Fresh crackers are an experience worth pursuing. These crackers have a flavor and texture that just can't be found in a box. Your guests will notice the difference between these homemade, handcrafted crackers and the alternative.

1/2 cup (about 2 ounces) pine nuts
1 teaspoon dried basil
2 cloves garlic, sliced
8 tablespoons, (1 stick), unsalted butter, room temperature
2 cups (about 6 ounces) Parmesan cheese, finely grated
1-1/2 cups all-purpose flour
Coarse sea salt or flaked salt for topping

1. In a food processor, add pine nuts, dried basil and garlic. Pulse until nuts are finely ground.
2. Add the butter and cheese to the food processor and blend until smooth.
3. Add flour to the cheese and butter mixture, and mix until incorporated.
4. Form the dough into a round logs with a 1-1/2 inch diameter. Chill for 1 hour.
3. Cut the log into thin slices, about 1/8-inch thick. Place on a parchment lined baking sheet leaving an inch of space between slices.
4. Preheat the oven to 350°F. Sprinkle a few grains of sea salt on top of each cracker. Bake the crackers for 10-12 minutes or until the edges begin to brown.
5. Remove the crackers from the baking sheet and allow to cool on a cooling rack. When cool, stack and store in an airtight container.

DO AHEAD:

The dough may be made ahead of time, formed into logs, then refrigerated or frozen until ready to bake.

VARIATION:

Substitute cheddar cheese and walnuts, or blue cheese and pecans.