

# A Creole Menu

Designing recipes and courses around contrasting flavors, textures, and cooking methods

BY TI MARTIN

When you're running a restaurant, management and administration can take you away from the real work you love. What I love is everything about cooking—most especially planning menus. I relish the times when I can plan a dinner party for discerning clients.

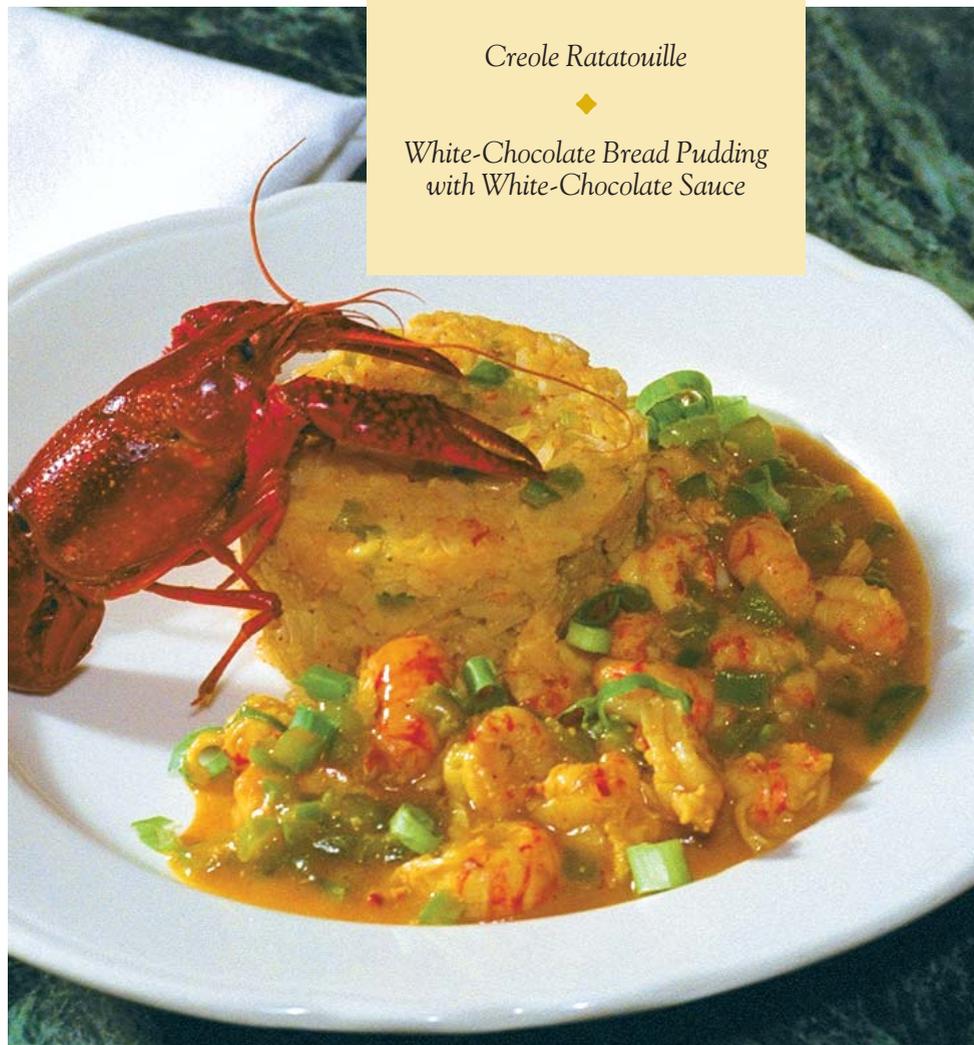
Designing a successful menu means more than just picking out delicious recipes. You need to think about how those dishes will work together. The pace of the meal should be considered, too—you don't want to overwhelm your guests with too much of a good thing. And what goes on in the kitchen is as important as what happens in the dining room. Your menu has to be realistic, so that you can have time to enjoy your own party!

Recently I sat down with Dick Brennan, Jr. ("Dickie"), my cousin, partner, and chef of our restaurant, to plan a menu—"dinner for eight prepared in your home"—that was to be our donation to a charity auction. We considered choice of recipe ingredients, progression of the meal, and last but not least, we thought about how to pull the whole thing off without a hitch. "Contrast" was the key for our plan, and we designed contrasts into all levels of our menu to ensure a delicious, well-paced meal that's a pleasure for guests and cook alike.

## STRIVE FOR CONTRAST IN TEXTURE AND FLAVOR

Ideally, both within dishes and among them, texture and flavor are varied. You wouldn't want chicken mousse with mashed potatoes and puréed peas, because they're all mild in taste and soft in texture. That's pretty clear.

Contrasts within dishes may be less obvious but are equally important. We often use a garnish for contrast, such as crunchy, flavorful toasted pecans



*Sauté of Crawfish with Popcorn-Rice and Crawfish Boudin Cakes—Crawfish are in season from early spring through mid-summer in Louisiana. Seasonal local specialties are a sound base for any menu.*

## MENU

*Grilled-Mushroom Salad  
with Garlic Vinaigrette*



*Sauté of Louisiana Crawfish*

*Popcorn-Rice and Crawfish  
Boudin Cakes*



*Roasted Chicken with Honey  
Red-Pepper Sauce*



*Creole Ratatouille*

*White-Chocolate Bread Pudding  
with White-Chocolate Sauce*

on top of soft and delicate trout. Other times, we might find a sauce does the trick, like piquant Parmesan cheese sauce over somewhat dry and bland veal. Even very plainly cooked dishes, at their best, have contrasts. Take a grilled steak, for instance. The dry, crusty exterior complements the juicy, chewy inside. The idea is to keep the mouth interested and happy rather than letting it get bored.

For our menu, we wanted roasted chicken as the main course. Nothing pleases a greater number of people than a good chicken roasted to a golden brown, and our Creole Seasoning Mix (recipe at right) gives this version a crusty, deliciously flavored skin. The contrast of crisp, slightly spicy skin with the juicy, mild meat makes a sometimes homely dish sublime (recipe on p. 47).

To set off the chicken, we chose a simple red-pepper and honey sauce. It's just a touch sweet, a nice contrast to chicken. While the sauce is meant to have a sweet character, we don't want it to be cloying. Ingredients that contrast with the honey—like the red-wine vinegar and the Worcestershire sauce—will prevent this and give the sauce complexity: it tastes sweet, sharp, salty, and mellow all at once.

Our Creole ratatouille rounded out the plan for the main course (see the recipe on p. 47). Since the chicken sauce is based on red peppers, Dickie planned to omit them from our usual ratatouille recipe. You can always adjust recipes a bit so that they'll complement rather than repeat one another.

In the ratatouille, the contrast is one of flavor and color. Our recipe is especially easy to make. You just simmer all the ingredients together until the vegetables are tender. We use tomatoes, eggplant, onion, green pepper, seasonings, and chicken stock.

Before the chicken, we'd serve crawfish. No one

can get enough of them during the season, and so Dickie came up with a double-crawfish special—rice-and-crawfish boudin cakes surrounded by a crawfish sauté (see the recipes on p. 46). He would lace the creamy boudin cakes with a few just slightly chewy shellfish and serve them with more craw-

fish in a silky, spicy butter sauce. This dish is very rich, and could risk being excessively so, but the piquancy from the fresh scallions and the Creole Seasoning cuts and balances the butter sauce, creating a dish to keep the mouth very happy.

We liked the way the menu was shaping up—creamy boudin, spicy shellfish, and the entirely different taste and bite of vegetables and tender chicken. To begin the meal, we added more contrasting textures and flavors: a crisp green salad topped with grilled or broiled shiitake mushrooms, which feel and taste almost meaty, and a basic vinaigrette sharpened with a crushed clove of garlic (recipe on p. 46).

The variety of texture and taste within the salad is important, but this dish also provides a needed contrast to the rest of the menu. The crawfish sauté with rice cakes, the chicken dish, and the ratatouille all contain bright flavors and colors—paprika, cayenne, red and green peppers, scarlet crawfish. The salad, with its deep brown, grilled shiitakes and mix of fresh greens adds an earthy quality, even a rawness, to the overall character of the menu. This rustic dish also makes the crawfish sauté seem all the more elegant and luxurious—again through contrast.

Dessert was easy. We wanted something sweet and mellow after the vivid and spicy flavors of the meal. White-chocolate bread pudding was the answer (recipe on p. 47). Not only is it the most popular item on our restaurant menu, but it offers more textural contrasts. The browned top is chewy or crispy, depending on whether the

## Seasoning mixes

*Seasoning is in cookery what chords are in music.*

—Louis Eustache Ude

The importance of seasoning is something New Orleans cooks know innately. Well over thirty years ago, as my mother (Ella Brennan) and uncle (Dickie's father, Dick Brennan) strove for consistency in their first restaurant's most popular dishes, their chefs tried making small batches of seasoning mixes. The goal was to deliver the same flavor to the customer no matter who was cooking. The seasoning mixes have evolved into a few basic recipes, and these vary slightly from one Brennan restaurant to another. As chefs from our kitchens move on, the idea spreads, and now perhaps half the restaurants in New Orleans use their own combination of herbs and spices. Here's an all-purpose version that works well in almost anything. We even use it in mashed potatoes.—T.M.

### CREOLE SEASONING MIX

Makes ½ cup.

4 tsp. salt  
4 tsp. paprika  
1 Tbs. granulated or powdered garlic  
1 Tbs. black pepper  
2¼ tsp. granulated or powdered onion  
1½ tsp. thyme  
1½ tsp. oregano  
1½ tsp. cayenne pepper

Combine all ingredients and store in an airtight container.



*Ti Martin selects the freshest ingredients for her recipes. She enjoys designing menus for her New Orleans clients, who she thinks have mastered the art of hosting lavish—but never overdone—dinner parties.*

dessert is served cold (as we intended to do) or hot. Either way, it contrasts with the smooth white-chocolate custard underneath.

### CONSIDER THE PACING OF THE COURSES

The classic French menu moves from light to fuller flavors—say from sole to chicken to lamb to chocolate. Sort of like Ravel's Bolero, the meal builds to a crescendo. In New Orleans, we certainly have a strong French tradition, and we keep the classic pattern in mind. However, New Orleanians are fond of highly seasoned food that's less subtle than most French dishes. We like a lot of flavor in every course, as you can tell. Our menu is built on a different

have the right mix of cooking methods, otherwise pulling off your carefully crafted menu will be too hair-raising. While you don't want to have too much made ahead (because your menu will seem "pre-fab" and lacking in excitement), you should have a few items totally finished and the rest prepped and ready to cook and assemble.

For our dinner, the greens could be washed and dried hours ahead and kept in a bowl in the refrigerator lightly covered with a damp paper towel. The vinaigrette could be made way ahead of time, too. The boudin cakes were another good "do-ahead" dish since the mixture can be made and the cakes shaped and arranged on buttered trays ahead, ready to reheat before bringing to the table.

Peeling crawfish can be tedious, although once you get the hang of it, you'll cut down the time. (For more on cooking and peeling crawfish, see Basics, p. 72.) If fresh crawfish aren't available—or if you want to save time—cooked, cleaned, and frozen tails are a great substitute. For the sauté, the crawfish can be cooked and peeled and the other ingredients chopped and measured ahead of time. The final assembly will only take about two minutes. If the chickens were all set to go, they could roast unattended while the first courses were being served. The Creole ratatouille could be made days before the meal.

By contrasting our cooking methods, we'll avoid congestion in the kitchen and delay at the dinner table. For this menu, we broil, roast, simmer, and sauté.

We'd broil the mushrooms; then turn the oven down, put the chickens in, and serve the salad. While clearing the first course, we could slip the boudin cakes into the oven along with the chickens. They should be warm by the time the sauté was done. For the main course, we'd heat the ratatouille on top of the stove while carving the chickens. Dickie would cook the white-chocolate pudding one day before the dinner and just cut it up and sauce it when ready to serve.

We knew the menu would be fun to do, but admittedly it's not the quickest in the world, and it's on the lavish side. If you prefer something simpler, you might eliminate the second or third course. If I skipped the chicken, I might serve the crawfish



*Roasted Chicken with Honey Red-Pepper Sauce is an elegant, but light, main course. Contrasting rich and light dishes is key to keeping your menu exciting and well-paced.*

structure, in which the sequence of dishes is not a gradual progression, but instead sets a pace that alternates light and rich dishes.

We start with a simple salad to whet the guests' appetites. I think greens with a vinaigrette dressing always make you feel hungrier rather than full. And mushrooms don't fill you up any more than the lettuce. The crawfish course with its butter sauce is rich. Then comes another light course—chicken and vegetables—followed by a pull-out-all-the-stops dessert with plenty of white chocolate and cream. Light to rich to light to rich. Just like the contrasting flavors and textures, this rhythmic progression keeps your palate awake.

### REMEMBER TO BE PRACTICAL

Dickie had been thinking about the cooking plan all along as we developed the menu. It's critical to



*Orchestrating a menu is easy with dishes that require little last-minute attention, such as the crawfish sauté. Brennan arranges the sauté with a boudin cake and a scarlet crawfish for color.*

first and then the salad to avoid two rich courses in a row. And if the crawfish were omitted, I'd add a carbohydrate to the chicken course, perhaps crisp potato pancakes.

### GRILLED-MUSHROOM SALAD WITH GARLIC VINAIGRETTE

Almost any kind of mushroom can be substituted for the shiitake in this salad, and the greens can be varied, too. Try Belgian endive, romaine, or mixed baby greens. A light wine, such as a sauvignon blanc, will not clash with the vinaigrette. *Serves eight.*

#### FOR THE VINAIGRETTE:

4 tsp. red-wine vinegar  
 ¼ tsp. salt  
 ¼ tsp. pepper  
 1 clove garlic  
 ½ cup olive oil

#### FOR THE SALAD:

2 heads radicchio  
 2 heads frisée  
 24 medium shiitake mushrooms  
 3 Tbs. olive oil  
 ½ tsp. salt  
 ¼ tsp. pepper

**To make the vinaigrette**—Whisk the vinegar, salt, and pepper together. Crush the garlic and add, and then slowly whisk in the oil.

**To make the salad**—Tear the greens into pieces, wash, and dry. Cut off the mushroom stems so that they're even with the caps. Toss the caps with 1 Tbs. oil and half the salt and pepper. Grill or broil until tender, about 2 min. a side. Remove from the heat and toss with remaining oil, salt, and pepper. Toss the greens with the vinaigrette, set the mushrooms on top, and pour over the salad any mushroom juices that have accumulated.

### SAUTÉ OF LOUISIANA CRAWFISH

You can buy crawfish live or already cooked and shelled. Most people use the cooked tails. They're so much easier to cook with and don't usually cost more despite the labor. If you do want to try the whole ones, figure you'll get a half pound of cooked, shelled tails from every pound of live crawfish. See Basics, p. 72, for cooking and peeling tips. For mail-order sources of crawfish, see above. Shrimp work beautifully for this recipe, too. The sauté is a great party dish since it all goes together in about two minutes. We like to serve it with a full-flavored chardonnay that stands up to the seasoning in this dish. *Serves eight.*

12 oz. butter, softened  
 6 scallions, chopped (including the tops)  
 2 small green peppers, diced fine  
 2 lb. cooked, shelled crawfish tails  
 2 to 3 Tbs. Creole Seasoning Mix, p. 44  
 2 Tbs. Worcestershire sauce

In a frying pan, melt 2 Tbs. of the butter and sauté the scallions, peppers, and crawfish tails with the Creole Seasoning Mix and Worcestershire sauce until warm, about 2 min. Remove from heat. Add the remaining butter about 1 Tbs. at a time, shaking the pan and stirring so that the butter softens and makes a creamy sauce but doesn't melt completely. Serve immediately.

### POPCORN-RICE AND CRAWFISH BOUDIN CAKES

Popcorn rice is available at most supermarkets now, but if you can't find it, any aromatic rice, such as basmati, will work fine. Since we always have lots of crawfish shells around at the restaurant, we use them for stock and put it in this dish. If you have shells, by all means make a stock by cooking them along with a bit of onion, celery, and garlic in enough water to cover them all. Otherwise, regular fish stock will do nicely, or even chicken stock. You can make these luscious cakes hours ahead of time and reheat them. They taste something like a Creole risotto. Try these with shrimp, too. *Makes eight cakes.*

4 Tbs. butter  
 2 ribs celery, chopped fine  
 1 green pepper, chopped fine

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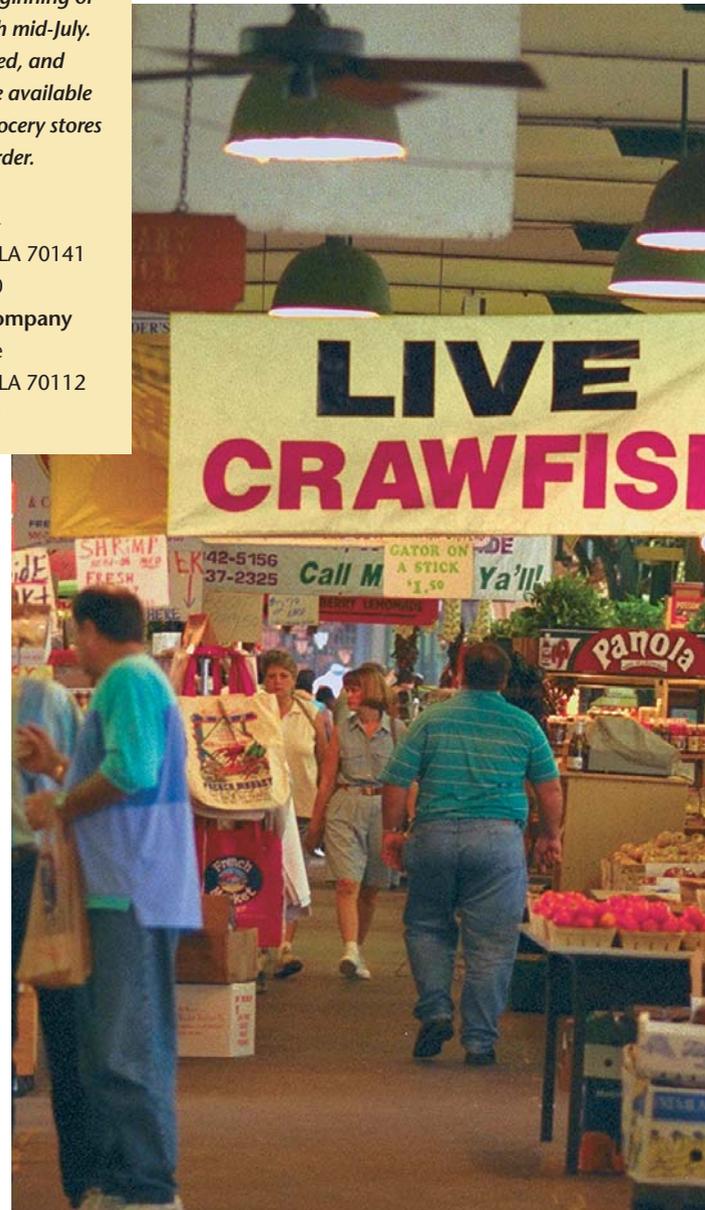
### MAIL-ORDER CRAWFISH SOURCES

*The season for fresh crawfish in Louisiana is roughly the beginning of March through mid-July. Cooked, cleaned, and frozen tails are available at specialty grocery stores and by mail order.*

**Bayou to Go**  
 PO Box 20104  
 New Orleans, LA 70141  
 800/541-6610  
**P&J Oyster Company**  
 1039 Toulouse  
 New Orleans, LA 70112  
 504/523-2651



Briefly process the rice mixture for the boudin cakes, not so long that it becomes a purée. You want to keep some of the grainy texture but to chop the mixture enough so that it will hold together when formed into cakes.



The heart and soul of Louisiana cooking come from its wealth of local ingredients, available at their peak from New Orleans' French Market. Access to top-quality ingredients in any region of the country is often through local farmers' markets.

1 medium onion, chopped fine  
 1 cup raw rice  
 1 $\frac{2}{3}$  cups fish stock or 1 cup chicken stock and  $\frac{2}{3}$  cup water  
 1 tsp. salt  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  lb. cooked, shelled crawfish tails (see the recipe above for details)

In a saucepan, melt the butter. Add the celery, green pepper, and onion and sauté 2 min. Stir in the rice. Add the fish stock (or chicken stock and water) and salt. Bring to a boil, cover, reduce heat, and simmer until the rice is tender, about 20 min. Chop the crawfish and stir in. Taste for seasoning and add salt if needed. Let the rice cool slightly. Whir in a food processor just long enough to chop the mixture (as shown in the photo, at left), but not so long that it becomes a purée.

Form the mixture into eight cakes by hand and put them on a buttered baking sheet, or pack the rice lightly into small ramekins and unmold onto the sheet. When ready to serve, reheat in a 350°F oven for 15 to 20 min. and then transfer to plates with a wide metal spatula.

### ROASTED CHICKEN WITH HONEY RED-PEPPER SAUCE

Creole Seasoning Mix and olive oil give this version a crusty, deliciously flavored skin. We suggest a pinot noir with this dish. You might not normally think of red wine with chicken, but it often works well. In this case, the chicken is fairly highly seasoned and served with an intense sauce. The fruitiness and spiciness of pinot noir echo the same qualities in the sauce. You wouldn't want to serve just any red: a merlot or cabernet, for instance, would overpower the chicken. *Serves eight.*

2 chickens, 2 $\frac{1}{2}$  to 3 lb. each  
 $\frac{1}{4}$  cup Creole Seasoning Mix, p. 44  
 3 Tbs. olive oil  
 2 red peppers, diced fine  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  medium onion, diced fine  
 2 tsp. red-wine vinegar  
 1 Tbs. honey  
 1 Tbs. Worcestershire sauce

Heat the oven to 425°F. Season the chickens inside and out with all but 1 tsp. of the Creole Seasoning and then rub with 2 Tbs. oil. Put the chickens in the oven. After 10 min., reduce the heat to 350°. Continue cooking until the skin is golden brown and the meat is just done, about 50 min. longer. Remove and let rest.

Meanwhile, cook the red pepper and onion gently in the remaining 1 Tbs. of the oil in a covered frying pan until soft but not browned, about 15 min. Set aside.

When the chicken is done, skim the excess fat from the roasting-pan juices and add the pepper mixture to the pan. Heat, scraping up any cooked-on drippings with a wooden spatula. Whisk in the vinegar, honey, Worcestershire sauce, and reserved Creole Seasoning to taste. Cut each chicken into four serving pieces and serve with the sauce.

### CREOLE RATATOUILLE

Ratatouille is too good to reserve for the summertime. Make this well ahead of serving if you like. Our Creole version is extra-easy to make, and it's equally good warm or cold. *Makes about 5 cups.*

1-lb. can peeled tomatoes, drained and chopped  
 1 green pepper, chopped  
 1 medium onion, chopped  
 1 lb. eggplant, peeled and cut into  $\frac{1}{2}$ -in. dice  
 1 tsp. Creole Seasoning Mix, p. 44  
 1 $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp. Worcestershire sauce

1 $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp. hot red-pepper sauce  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  cup chicken stock  
 1 Tbs. chopped fresh basil (or 1 tsp. dried)

Put all the ingredients in a saucepan and simmer until the vegetables are tender, about 20 min. Taste and add salt as needed.

### WHITE-CHOCOLATE BREAD PUDDING WITH WHITE-CHOCOLATE SAUCE

In New Orleans, our long French rolls are crisp on the outside, light and airy within. They're great for this recipe since they soak up custard more readily than heavier breads. Use whatever is available to you that's good but light—perhaps an Italian or Viennese bread. Serve the pudding warm or make it a day ahead and cut it into squares or triangles. For wine, a sauternes is ideal. *Serves eight.*

1 roll, 10 in. long and 2 $\frac{1}{2}$  in. in diameter or the equivalent amount of bread  
 2 cups heavy cream  
 $\frac{1}{2}$  cup milk  
 $\frac{1}{4}$  cup sugar  
 9 oz. white chocolate, chopped  
 1 egg  
 4 egg yolks  
 Semisweet chocolate for garnish (optional)

Cut the roll into eight slices, place on middle rack of a 250°F oven, and leave until dry, about 20 min.

In a saucepan, heat 1 $\frac{1}{2}$  cups of the heavy cream, the milk, and the sugar over low heat, stirring until sugar is dissolved. Add 5 oz. of the white chocolate, stir until melted, and remove from the heat. In a large bowl, whisk the egg and yolks together. Whisk the chocolate mixture into the eggs a little at a time.

Tear the bread into 1-in. pieces, add to the white chocolate custard, and stir to mix. Leave to soak, stirring occasionally, until all the custard has been absorbed by the bread, 1 to 2 hours. Put the mixture into an 8-in. square, 2-in. deep baking dish. Put the dish in a slightly larger pan and add hot water to come halfway up the sides of the baking dish. Bake the pudding in the water bath at 350° for 45 to 50 min., until the custard is set and the top is golden brown.

Serve warm or cold. If you chill it, loosen the sides with a metal spatula and invert the pudding onto a cutting surface. We like to cut it into four squares and cut each square into a triangle, which we serve standing on one edge.

For the sauce, heat the remaining cream in a small pan. Add the remaining 4 oz. white chocolate and melt. If you like, grate some semisweet chocolate and sprinkle on top of the pudding.

*Ti Martin began her restaurant career at the tender age of ten. Her job was to stamp "souvenir" on the menus that customers took home from her family's restaurant. She later worked in two other Brennan restaurants before starting her own, Palace Café, with her cousins. ♦*



Photos: Judith Hill

*White-Chocolate Bread Pudding with White-Chocolate Sauce. A sweet and mellow dessert soothes the palate after a spicy meal. The pudding offers textural contrast within itself, too—the chewy, golden brown surface sets off the smooth custard underneath.*