

# A Dressed Down All-Occasion Party Menu

by Bruce Aidells

This casual menu featuring rib-eye steaks, twice-baked potatoes, and root-beer-poached pears is simple to pull off, but it will still make your guests feel special.



This Dressed-Down menu stars thick rib-eye steaks (which is what you get when you cut a standing rib roast between its ribs). This recipe is simple to pull off, but it will still make your guests feel special. An easy marinade with fresh rosemary and ground fennel seed boosts the hearty flavor of the steaks, and a quick, hot sear gives them crunchy, caramelized crusts. Don't forget to brush the sliced steaks with a bit of the reserved marinade before serving. Nothing could be simpler, or more delicious.

This menu's starter goes retro with crunchy iceberg lettuce wedges and a thick, creamy blue cheese dressing. What's the ideal side dish with a salad and steak? Cheesy twice-baked potatoes, of course. Mildly bitter broccolini with briny olives and capers comes together in less than 20 minutes and rounds out the plate beautifully.

## the menu

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**Iceberg Wedges with Blue Cheese Buttermilk Dressing**

**Rib-Eye Steaks Marinated with Fennel and Rosemary**

**Twice-Baked Potatoes with Sour Cream**

**Broccolini with Olives and Capers**

**Gingerbread Cake with Root-Beer-Poached Pears**



## SHOPPING LIST

### Fresh Produce

8 large Yukon Gold or medium russet potatoes  
4 firm-ripe Bosc pears  
4 medium bunches broccolini (2 to 2-1/2 lb.)  
2 medium lemons  
2 small heads iceberg lettuce  
1 cup scallions plus 2 scallions  
1/4 cup chopped fresh rosemary  
2 tsp. minced garlic

### Meat, Eggs & Dairy:

One 2-bone standing beef rib roast (about 5 lb.)  
3 large eggs  
2 cups sour cream  
3/4 lb. blue cheese  
1 cup heavy cream  
1 cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano  
2/3 cup buttermilk; more as needed  
7 Tbs. unsalted butter

### Other Groceries:

Five 12-fl.-oz. bottles root beer, preferably an artisanal brand  
1/2 cup mayonnaise  
1/4 cup unsulfured molasses  
2 Tbs. chopped pitted kalamata olives  
2 Tbs. chopped capers

### Pantry Staples:

1 Tbs. confectioners' sugar  
1-3/4 cups packed dark brown sugar  
9 oz. (2 cups) unbleached all-purpose flour  
1 cup vegetable oil  
6 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil; plus one cup  
4 tsp. good-quality balsamic vinegar  
4 tsp. ground fennel seed  
2 Tbs. granulated sugar  
1 Tbs. red wine vinegar  
2 tsp. baking soda  
1 tsp. ground ginger  
1 tsp. ground cinnamon  
3/4 tsp. table salt  
Freshly ground black pepper  
Kosher salt



## MENU TIMELINE

### Three days ahead:

Make the blue cheese dressing.

### One day ahead:

Bake the potatoes, make the filling, and fill the potatoes.  
Blanch the broccolini.

### Four hours ahead:

Make the gingerbread cake.  
Poach the pears.

### Three hours ahead:

Marinate the steaks, turning them every half hour.  
Prepare the remaining broccolini ingredients.

### One hour ahead:

Cook the steaks; let rest for at least 10 minutes before carving.

### Thirty minutes ahead:

Reheat the potatoes.

### Before dinner:

Finish the broccolini.  
Plate and dress the iceberg wedge salads.  
Carve the steaks and brush with marinade.

### Before dessert:

Make the whipped cream.

### Wine pairings:

For this Dressed-Down menu, a dry, fizzy red like the Ermete Medici Concerto Lambrusco 2007 (\$24) is a perfect match. It tastes of dark, juicy, dry fruits with a refreshing blast of minerality, an ideal match for the rib-eye steaks. Another great option is a wine made from the Gamay grape, like the Morgon Cru Beaujolais Côte du Py 2007 from Jean Foillard (\$32). It's a delicate red wine with bright red fruits and a velvety texture.

## Iceberg Wedges with Blue Cheese Buttermilk Dressing

by Bruce Aidells

Serves eight.

### ingredients

3/4 lb. blue cheese, coarsely chopped  
2 scallions, white and light-green parts only, coarsely chopped  
1/2 cup mayonnaise  
1 Tbs. red wine vinegar  
Freshly ground black pepper  
2/3 cup buttermilk; more as needed  
2 small heads iceberg lettuce, quartered and cored

### how to make

Crumble 1 cup of the blue cheese and set it aside as a garnish.

Set up a food processor and, with the motor running, drop the scallions through the feed tube. After 10 seconds, shut off the machine and scrape down the sides of the bowl. Add the remaining chopped blue cheese and pulse a few times to chop it further. Stop the motor and add the mayonnaise, vinegar, and 2 tsp. black pepper. With the motor running, add the buttermilk. Check the texture; if it is too thick, add more buttermilk to produce a thick and creamy, but pourable, dressing. (The dressing may be prepared up to 3 days ahead; store in an airtight container in the refrigerator.)

To assemble the salad, lay the iceberg wedges cut side up on 8 salad plates. Spoon about 1/4 cup of the dressing over each, then sprinkle each with some of the reserved blue cheese and a few grinds of black pepper. Leftover dressing will keep for 1 week in an airtight container in the refrigerator. [http://www.finecooking.com/CMS/uploadedImages/Images/Cooking/Articles/Issues\\_101-110/051102053-02-iceberg-lettuce-wedge-recipe.jpg](http://www.finecooking.com/CMS/uploadedImages/Images/Cooking/Articles/Issues_101-110/051102053-02-iceberg-lettuce-wedge-recipe.jpg)



photo: Christopher Hirsheimer

## Rib-Eye Steaks Marinated with Fennel and Rosemary

by Bruce Aidells

For great steak, start with a well-marbled piece of meat. If you'd rather not cut the roast into steaks yourself, ask your butcher to do it.

Serves eight.

### ingredients

1 cup extra-virgin olive oil  
1/4 cup chopped fresh rosemary  
4 tsp. ground fennel seed  
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper  
One 2-bone standing beef rib roast (about 5 lb.), chine bone and fat cap removed, cut between the bones into 2 rib-eye steaks

### how to make

Combine the oil, rosemary, fennel seed, 1 tsp. salt, and 1 tsp. pepper in a small bowl. Set about 6 Tbs. of the marinade aside.

Put the steaks in two shallow baking pans. Pour the remaining marinade over the steaks. Cover and marinate at room temperature for 2 hours, turning every 30 minutes.

Heat the oven to 425°F. Remove the steaks from the marinade, scrape off the herbs, and pat dry with paper towels. Season each steak with 1/2 tsp. each salt and pepper. Heat two 12-inch ovenproof skillets (preferably cast iron) over high heat until hot. Turn your exhaust fan on high. Cook the steaks, undisturbed, until a deep brown crust has formed, 3 to 4 minutes. Flip the steaks and brown the other side, 3 to 4 minutes more. (Alternatively, heat one skillet, sear one steak at a time, and transfer to a baking sheet for roasting.)

Put the skillets in the oven and roast until an instant-read thermometer inserted into a thick part of the steaks registers 115°F to 120°F for rare, or 125°F to 130°F for medium rare, about 20 minutes for rare and about 25 minutes for medium rare. Transfer the steaks to a large cutting board, tent them loosely with foil, and let them rest for at least 10 minutes. To serve, carve the meat from the bone and then cut the meat across the grain into 1/2-inch-thick slices. Brush the sliced meat with the reserved marinade and serve.



photo: Hirsheimer & Hamilton

## Twice-Baked Potatoes with Sour Cream

by Bruce Aidells

These potatoes are stuffed with sour cream, butter, and cheese, but the secret ingredient isn't dairy—it's a splash of balsamic vinegar, which gives the filling a sweet-tangy note.

Serves eight.

### ingredients

Kosher salt  
8 large Yukon Gold or medium russet potatoes (about 8 oz. each), scrubbed and dried  
6 Tbs. unsalted butter  
2 cups sour cream  
1 cup thinly sliced chives or scallions  
1 cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano  
4 tsp. good-quality balsamic vinegar  
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

### how to make

Position a rack in the center of the oven and heat the oven to 425°F. Put the potatoes on the oven rack and bake for 30 minutes. Prick each potato on all sides with a fork. Continue to bake until the potatoes are tender when pierced with a fork, about 15 minutes more. Carefully remove the potatoes from the oven.

While the potatoes are still hot, hold each one with a clean kitchen towel and cut off about one-quarter lengthwise from the top. With a spoon, gently scoop the potato flesh into a large bowl, leaving enough flesh attached to the skin that it holds its shape. Scrape any flesh from the tops and discard the skin (or eat it as a snack).

With a fork, mash 4 Tbs. of the butter into the potatoes until melted. Add the sour cream, chives or scallions, 3/4 cup of the cheese, and the vinegar. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Don't overmix—it's fine if the mixture has a few lumps.

Spoon the filling into the reserved potato shells, mounding it nicely and making sure the filled shells are resting upright. (The potatoes may be prepared to this point up to 1 day ahead; wrap each in plastic and refrigerate.)

When ready to serve, arrange the potatoes on a baking sheet or in a baking dish. Cut the remaining 2 Tbs. of butter into small pieces and dot the potatoes with the butter. Sprinkle the potatoes with the remaining cheese. Bake at 425°F until heated through and starting to brown on the top, 20 to 25 minutes. (If baking straight from the refrigerator, allow an additional 10 to 15 minutes for the potatoes to heat through.)



photo: Christopher Hirsheimer

## Broccolini with Olives and Capers

by Bruce Aidells

Broccolini is a more delicate version of its larger cousin, broccoli (which is just fine to use in this recipe if you can't find broccolini). The entire stalk is edible, and there's no need to trim it.

Serves eight.

### ingredients

Kosher salt  
4 medium bunches broccolini (2 to 2-1/2 lb.)  
6 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil  
2 tsp. minced garlic  
2 Tbs. chopped pitted kalamata olives  
2 Tbs. chopped capers (rinse only if salt-packed)  
Freshly ground black pepper

### how to make

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil over high heat. Add the broccolini and stir to separate the stems. When the water returns to a boil, adjust the heat to a simmer and cook until crisp tender, 4 to 5 minutes. Drain well. (The broccolini may be prepared to this point up to 1 day ahead and refrigerated.)

Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add the garlic and cook until softened, about 1 minute, taking care not to let it get any color. Add the olives and capers and cook for 1 minute more. Add the broccolini and toss to coat. If the broccolini was cooked ahead, keep tossing until heated through. Season to taste with salt and pepper, and serve.



photo: Christopher Hirsheimer

# Gingerbread Cake with Root-Beer-Poached Pears

by Bruce Aidells

Root beer's aromatic, spicy sweetness makes it a great poaching liquid for pears. Serve both the gingerbread cake and the pears warm or at room temperature.

Serves 8 (with leftover cake)

## ingredients

### For the gingerbread

1/2 oz. (1 Tbs.) unsalted butter, softened  
2 Tbs. granulated sugar  
1 cup vegetable oil  
1/4 cup unsulfured molasses  
3 large eggs  
9 oz. (2 cups) unbleached all-purpose flour  
2 tsp. baking soda  
1 tsp. ground ginger  
1 tsp. ground cinnamon  
3/4 tsp. table salt  
1-3/4 cups packed dark brown sugar  
1 cup root beer, preferably an artisanal brand

### For the pears

4 firm-ripe Bosc pears, peeled, halved, and cored  
Four 12-fl.-oz. bottles root beer, preferably an artisanal brand  
Freshly grated zest of 2 medium lemons

### For Serving

1 cup heavy cream  
1 Tbs. confectioners' sugar)

## how to make

### Make the gingerbread

Position a rack in the center of the oven and heat the oven to 350°F. Coat an 8-inch square cake pan with the butter and lightly dust with the granulated sugar. In a small bowl, stir the oil, molasses, and eggs until combined. In a large bowl, whisk the flour, baking soda, ginger, cinnamon, and salt.

In a small pot, bring the brown sugar and root beer to a boil. Meanwhile, add the molasses mixture to the flour and stir to combine. Add the hot root beer mixture and quickly beat until combined. Pour the batter into the prepared pan and bake until a toothpick inserted in the center of the cake comes out clean, 35 to 45 minutes. Let cool in the pan on a wire rack until warm, about 40 minutes. Invert the pan to remove the cake and turn the cake right side up. (The cake may be prepared up to 4 hours ahead.)

### Poach the pears

In a medium saucepan, combine the pears, root beer, and lemon zest. Bring the mixture to a slow simmer over medium-low heat and cook until the pears are tender, 20 to 30 minutes. With a slotted spoon, carefully transfer the pears to a plate. Bring the poaching liquid to a boil and boil until reduced to a syrup, about 15 minutes (watch carefully towards the end because it can burn quickly); you should have about 3/4 cup. (The pears and syrup may be prepared up to 4 hours ahead. If the syrup thickens, reheat before serving.)

### To serve

In a chilled medium bowl, beat the cream and sugar with a hand mixer until soft peaks form, about 3 minutes. Cut the gingerbread into 8 pieces of whatever size you choose and place one on each of 8 plates. Arrange a pear half against each piece of gingerbread and drizzle each with the syrup. Top with a dollop of whipped cream and serve.



photo: Christopher Hirsheimer