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10 Steps to an Easy, Elegant Brunch

An acclaimed New Orleans breakfast mecca knows a thing or two about indulging your guests

by SALLY KILBRIDGE



Set out a big display of bakery pastries and success is guaranteed.

Traveling to New Orleans and missing an eggy masterpiece at Brennan's is like taking a trip to Paris without seeing the Eiffel Tower. Known for its boozy breakfasts that stretch into late afternoon, the restaurant has been king of daytime excess for 75 years. We asked current owner Ralph Brennan for advice on hosting a sumptuous brunch at home.

1 Give in to excess. "Brunch is easy, relaxed, and festive. There is even sanctioned day-drinking! I believe that people really like breakfast food; however, our busy lives don't always allow for cooking a proper breakfast. Weekends and non-workdays offer the opportunity to enjoy this food at a leisurely pace and special place. The

advantage for the home cook preparing brunch is that many menu items can be prepared in advance."

2 Keep the menu and setup achievable. "For a home cook, I'd recommend a buffet-style setup. A beautiful egg casserole served with a variety of family-style sides like fresh fruit, bacon,

sausage, bakery breads and spreads, and pecan pie squares is an easy way to entertain and still enjoy your company. And don't forget brandy milk punch!"

3 Cook what you know. "Trying out a new recipe when entertaining is too stressful. Do what you do well and can easily manage."

4 Supplement with prepared platters.

“Some of your favorite bakeries and restaurants now offer platter-style versions of their popular menu items for pick up or delivery, ready to heat and serve. This is a terrific way to augment your brunch menu and to support local businesses. When entertaining, there is a direct correlation between how much work you have to do and how much you will enjoy yourself.”

Eggs Benedict and Eggs Sardou are Brennan's classics; lemon squares satisfy sweet teeth while keeping things light.



5 Choose dishes you can make ahead.

“Try not to cook à la minute the day of. It’s better to reheat and serve. Grillades and Grits is a great southern brunch tradition and can easily be made ahead of time. In fact, it even tastes better after a day or two. Casseroles can be made and frozen ahead of time. Eggs can be poached and chilled the day before, held in water, and reheated in a pot of simmering water. Gumbo and soup also reheat beautifully.”

6 Put some thought into the drinks.

“An informal start to your soirée with a pre-mixed or themed cocktail is the best way to entice your guests to mix and mingle. A sparkling rosé is always a crowd-pleaser — Billecart Salmon Brut Rosé and Veuve Cliquot Brut Rosé are my personal favorites. Non-alcoholic spirits and shrubs are also a way to shine with your brunch guests.”

7 Never forget dessert.

“You must have something sweet with brunch. It’s part of the indulgence. Bananas Foster, bread pudding, pecan pie, and lemon squares are four tasty options. Bread pudding, pie, and squares can be made ahead of time and reheated to serve.”

8 Set a festive table.

“You want your guests to know that you made a special effort to bring joy to the meal, but setting a festive table doesn’t have to cost a lot. Break out the wedding china. Purchase a special tablecloth or colorful place mats. Incorporate place cards into a keepsake gift. For example, tie each card to a small succulent or a box of chocolates. Add a treat like a themed decorated cookie or a customized glass to each place setting. It’s not just how the table looks, but how it makes you feel.”

9 Be true to tradition — to a point.

“Brennan’s specialty is modernizing classic dishes at both brunch and dinner, walking that tightrope between preservation and progress. A superior hollandaise sauce will never go out of style; however, when we elevate this iconic classic by offering seasonal variations, such as a satsuma hollandaise, it re-energizes the dish and delights our repeat guests. Pastries and breads, preserves and butters — there are infinite ways to innovate these perennial brunch favorites.”

10 Enjoy yourself.

“Above all, relax, be yourself, and spend quality time with each of your invited guests. Don’t try to overdo it. Make sure you eat too!”



FROM LEFT: Classic milk punch, a variation of pain perdu served with peaches and basil, decadent Bananas Foster.

CARIBBEAN MILK PUNCH

(Serves 1)

INGREDIENTS

- 1 ounce (2 Tbsp.) Smith and Cross or Mt. Gay “Black Barrel” Rum
- ½ ounce (1 Tbsp.) Maker’s Mark or Buffalo Trace Bourbon
- 1 ounce (2 Tbsp.) vanilla bean-infused simple syrup*
- 1 ounce (2 Tbsp.) heavy cream
- Hand-shaved nutmeg

DIRECTIONS

Combine all ingredients in a mixing glass with ice. Shake until frothy

and strain into a coupe glass without ice. Garnish with nutmeg. Enjoy!

**To make vanilla bean-infused simple syrup, place one cup granulated sugar and one cup water in a saucepan. Slice open a vanilla bean pod and scrape seeds into the pan, then add the empty pod. Boil for 2 minutes until the sugar dissolves. Cool, then pour simple syrup into a glass jar (add the pod if you like). Keeps refrigerated for up to two weeks.*

PAIN PERDU

(Serves 4)

INGREDIENTS

- 1 large loaf of brioche, challah, or French bread, cut into eight 1-inch slices

- 8 egg yolks
- ¾ cup sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1 quart heavy cream
- 4 ounces unsalted butter
- Powdered sugar, for dusting

DIRECTIONS

Preheat a griddle or large skillet.

Using a large mixing bowl, whisk together egg yolks, sugar, vanilla, cinnamon, and heavy cream until thoroughly combined. Add slices of bread to mixture and gently squeeze to help absorb egg mixture. Place each soaked slice

of bread on a sheet pan until needed.

Melt butter on pre-heated griddle or skillet and add the soaked bread slices. Cook on each side for 3 minutes or until gold brown.

Place 2 slices on each plate. Dust with powdered sugar.

BANANAS FOSTER

(Serves 4)

INGREDIENTS

- ¼ cup unsalted butter
- 1 cup brown sugar
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¼ cup banana liqueur
- 4 bananas, peeled,

cut in half lengthwise, then halved

- ¼ cup dark rum
- 4 scoops vanilla ice cream

DIRECTIONS

Combine butter, sugar, and cinnamon in a large sauté pan. Place pan over low heat and cook, stirring, until sugar dissolves.

Stir in banana liqueur, then place bananas in pan. When bananas soften and begin to brown, carefully add rum. Continue to cook sauce until rum is hot, then tip pan slightly to ignite rum. When flames subside, lift bananas out of pan and place four pieces in a dish with a scoop of ice cream. Generously spoon warm sauce over ice cream and serve immediately. 🍌