

Happy Birthday America! Celebrating 250 years!

Here are some great recipes for you to bring to your picnic, potluck or your staycation, that everyone is sure to enjoy!

Have a spectacular, fun and safe 4th of July!

Freedom French Toast

8 thick slices bread (brioche or challah)
8 oz. cream cheese, softened
1/4 C. strawberry jam
4 lg. eggs
1 C. whole milk
1 tsp. vanilla extract
1/2 tsp. cinnamon
Butter for cooking
Maple syrup and berries for serving

Mix softened cream cheese with strawberry jam until well combined. Spread mixture on 4 bread slices, about 2 T. each. Top with remaining bread slices to make sandwiches. Press gently.

In a shallow dish, whisk eggs, milk, vanilla, and cinnamon until smooth.

Heat griddle or large skillet over medium heat. Add butter to coat.

Dip each sandwich in egg mixture, turning to coat both sides. Let excess drip off.

Cook 3-4 min. per side until golden brown and heated through.

The filling will be hot, so let cool slightly before serving.

Cut diagonally and serve with maple syrup and fresh berries.

These can be assembled the night before, wrapped, and refrigerated. Add 30 seconds per side if cooking from cold.

Patriotic Punch (Kid-Friendly)

2 C. cranberry juice
2 C. blue sports drink (like Powerade®)
2 C. lemon-lime soda
1 C. pineapple juice
Star-shaped ice cubes
Fresh berries for ice cubes

The day before, make special ice cubes: Place berries in star-shaped ice cube molds, fill with water, and freeze.

In a clear pitcher or punch bowl, carefully pour cranberry juice first.

Slowly pour blue sports drink over the back of a spoon to create a layer.

Refrigerate for 30 min. to help layers set.

Just before serving, slowly add pineapple juice for a white layer.

Top with lemon-lime soda, pouring gently to maintain layers.

Add star ice cubes.

Serve immediately with a ladle, trying to get all colors in each glass.

The layers will eventually mix, which creates a purple color – still fun!

Note: For individual servings, layer in clear plastic cups for kids to carry around.

Watermelon Margaritas

4 C. seedless watermelon, cubed
1 C. silver tequila
1/2 C. triple sec
1/4 C. fresh lime juice
2 T. sugar
Coarse salt for rim
Lime wedges and watermelon triangles for garnish

Freeze watermelon cubes for at least 2 hr. This keeps drinks cold without diluting.

Run a lime wedge around glass rims, then dip in coarse salt. Set glasses aside.

In a blender, combine frozen watermelon, tequila, triple sec, lime juice, and sugar.

Blend until completely smooth, about 1 min. You might need to stop and stir once.

Taste and adjust – add more lime for tartness or sugar for sweetness.

If too thick, add a splash of water. If too thin, add more frozen watermelon.

Pour into prepared glasses.

Garnish with lime wedges and small watermelon triangles on the rim.

Serve immediately – these don't hold well as the watermelon separates.

For a frozen version, add 1 C. ice to the blender.

For a party, make multiple batches rather than doubling – blenders work better with smaller amounts.

Loaded Bacon Guacamole

4 ripe avocados
6 strips bacon, cooked and crumbled
1/2 C. sun-dried tomatoes, chopped
1/3 C. cotija cheese, crumbled
2 jalapeños, diced
1/4 C. red onion, finely diced
3 cloves garlic, minced
Juice of 2 limes
Salt and pepper to taste

Fresh cilantro for garnish

Start by cooking your bacon until it's nice and crispy. in the oven at 400°F for about 15-20 min. Let it cool on paper towels, then crumble into bite-sized pieces. Cut your avocados in half, remove the pits, and scoop the flesh into a large mixing bowl. Using a fork or potato masher, mash them to your desired consistency. Add your minced garlic to the avocados first and give it a quick mix. Now fold in the crumbled bacon (saving a handful for topping), chopped sun-dried tomatoes, crumbled cotija cheese, diced jalapeños, and finely diced red onion. Use a gentle folding motion to keep the avocado from getting too mushy. Squeeze the lime juice over everything. Start with one lime, taste, then add more if needed. Season with salt and pepper. Start with 1/2 tsp. salt and 1/4 tsp. pepper, then adjust to taste. Transfer to your serving bowl and top with the reserved bacon crumbles and fresh cilantro leaves. Serve immediately with tortilla chips. If you need to wait a bit, press plastic wrap directly onto the surface to prevent browning.

Patriotic Fruit Pizza

1 roll refrigerated sugar cookie dough
8 oz cream cheese, softened
1/3 C. sugar
1 tsp. vanilla extract
2 C. strawberries, sliced
1 C. blueberries
1 C. raspberries
2 T. apricot jam

Press cookie dough evenly into a 12-in. pizza pan or round baking sheet, leaving a small rim like a pizza crust. Bake according to package directions until golden brown. It'll puff up – that's normal. Let cool completely on pan. It'll deflate as it cools. Beat cream cheese, sugar, and vanilla until smooth and fluffy, about 2 min. Spread cream cheese mixture over cooled cookie, leaving 1/2 in. border. Arrange fruit in a flag pattern! Create blue field with blueberries in upper left. Make alternating red stripes with strawberries and raspberries, leaving white cream cheese stripes showing. Warm apricot jam in microwave for 20 sec. until liquid. Using a pastry brush, gently glaze the fruit with jam. This makes it shiny and keeps fruit fresh. Refrigerate at least 30 min. before serving. Cut into wedges with a pizza cutter. Best served within 2 hr. of assembling so cookie stays crisp.

Frozen S'mores

Prep: 35 min.
Cook: 5 min.
Servings: 12

14 to 15 whole graham crackers, divided
10 oz. miniature marshmallows
1/2 gal. vanilla ice cream, softened
1 pkg. (3.9 oz.) instant chocolate pudding mix
2 C. cold whole milk
2 C. frozen whipped topping, thawed

Preheat broiler for high. Line a 13x9-in. baking pan with parchment, letting ends extend up sides. Arrange half the graham crackers in an even layer; set aside. Place marshmallows onto a parchment-lined rimmed baking sheet. Broil 3-4-in. from heat until marshmallow tops are well browned, 30-45 sec. Let cool. Combine toasted marshmallows and softened ice cream in a large bowl. Freezer until mostly firm, but still spreadable, about 20 min. Meanwhile, in a large bowl, whisk together chocolate pudding mix and cold milk until combined, about 2 min. Fold in thawed whipped topping until no streaks remain; set aside. Remove marshmallow-ice cream mixture from the freezer; spread evenly over graham crackers. Spoon pudding mixture evenly over ice cream mixture. Top with remaining graham crackers in an even layer. Cover; freeze at least 4 hr. or overnight. To serve, lift edges of the parchment paper to remove from baking dish to a cutting board. Use a sharp hot knife to slice into 12 bars. Serve immediately.

4th of July Flag Cake

Prep Time: 2 hr.
Cook Time: 1 hr.
Total Time: 3 hr.
Servings: 12

Vanilla Cake

2-1/2 C. cake flour
2-1/2 tsp. baking powder
1 tsp. baking soda
1 tsp. salt
4 eggs
1-1/2 C. sugar
1 T. pure vanilla extract
1 C. vegetable oil
1 C. buttermilk

Cream Cheese Frosting

1/2 C. unsalted butter set at room temp about 10 min. but should still be cool
8 oz cream cheese directly from fridge
1 tsp. pure vanilla extract

4 C. powdered sugar
1 to 4 T. heavy cream

Vanilla Cake: Preheat oven to 350°F. Prepare cake pans (line the bottom of the pans with parchment paper, butter and flour the sides of the pans)

In a medium bowl, add cake flour, baking powder, baking soda and salt. Stir together with whisk, and set aside.

In the bowl of an electric mixer, add eggs and beat 10-20 sec. Add sugar and continue to beat on medium speed about 30 sec. Add vanilla and oil, beat.

Reduce mixer speed to low and slowly add about half of the flour mixture. Add half of the milk, then the rest of the flour and the rest of the milk. Beat until just combined. Scrap down the side of the bowl.

Cream Cheese Frosting: Place butter in a large mixing bowl and beat until smooth. Add cream cheese and blend until fully combined and smooth, about 30 sec.

Add vanilla extract and powdered sugar and blend on low speed until combined. Increase to medium speed and beat until it begins to get fluffy. Slowly add the heavy cream, a little bit at a time until desired consistency is met.

Beat until fluffy, about 1 min.

Assembly: Prepare two 8 in. cake pans by coating with a small amount of butter and flour, and placing parchment paper in the bottom.

Prepare one batch of batter and color it red. Divide the batter equally and pour into the two prepared pans. Bake for 22 - 30 min. at 350 °F.

While the red cakes are baking, prepare another batch of batter. Divide the batter into two bowls and color one of the bowls of batter blue. Leave the remaining bowl of batter uncolored.

When your red cakes have baked and cooled, remove from pans. Wash and then prepare pans for the white and blue batter. Bake.

Slice the two red cake in half (horizontally), so you'll have a total of 4 red layers. Set aside one layer, this will not be used for the cake. Cut a 4 in. circle out of one of the layers. So you want to have two 8 in. round layers and one 4 in. round layer.

Cut the white cake in half as well. Then use a 4 in. cookie cutter to cut a circle out of one of the halves.

Use a 4 in. cookie cutter again (or make a 4 in. circle of cardboard and use that as your template) to cut out the center of your blue cake.

Assemble cake with a thin layer of frosting between each layer of cake, starting on the bottom with red cake, then white, then red, then blue. Add some frosting along the inside "ring" of the blue cake to hold in the next two layer which will fit inside the opening. Fill the hole in the blue cake with a 4 in. round layer of with cake, some frosting, then the 4 in. round of red.

Patriotic Popcorn

12 C. popped popcorn (about 1/2 C. kernels)

12 oz white chocolate chips

1/4 C. red candy melts

1/4 C. blue candy melts

Star-shaped sprinkles

Red and blue M&Ms®

Pop popcorn and spread on large parchment-lined baking sheet. Remove any unpopped kernels.

Melt white chocolate in microwave in 30-sec. intervals, stirring between, until smooth.

Drizzle white chocolate over popcorn, tossing gently with hands to coat.

Melt red and blue candy melts separately.

Drizzle colored melts over white chocolate popcorn.

Immediately add sprinkles and M&Ms® while chocolate is wet.

Let set at room temperature for 30 min. until chocolate hardens.

Break into clusters and store in airtight container.

This keeps for up to 5 days at room temperature.

For easier cleanup, use disposable gloves when mixing.

Quote of the Week:

"I believe in America because we have great dreams, and because we have the opportunity to make those dreams come true."

~ Wendell L. Wilkie