

Joe Steinert, head chef at Vintage Tavern, one of Hampton Roads' top-ranked restaurants, prepares the warmed apple slaw that will be a base for his stuffed pork loin. Pork is a good option for folks who don't want the hassle of preparing a turkey dinner, he said, as it retains a bit of the traditional flavor important for holiday meals.

**'I like to take three or four ingredients and make something simple but with good ingredients.'**

JOE STEINERT — CHEF, VINTAGE TAVERN

# Keep it simple

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## Traditional holiday flavors satisfy most palates

When it comes to planning holiday meals, Joe Steinert likes to stick with the classics and keep things simple.

Vintage Tavern, the North Suffolk restaurant where he serves as head chef, may be known for its grilled bison ribeye, its tavern-cured pork belly and its jumbo lump crabcake with tasso rice and smoked tomato tartar, but you won't find those things on Steinert's holiday table.

Steinert said most people have their own definition of holiday fare, and they are looking for certain flavors. Omit those things, and the hostess could face a mutiny.

But keeping the holiday menu traditional doesn't mean one can't be a little creative.

As a child in Pennsylvania, Steinert said, his family always had the turkey dinner for Thanksgiving and a ham feast for Christmas. But after they moved to Virginia, when he was about 10 years old, Steinert

became acquainted with Southern cooking. "It was just biscuits and gravy, and I loved it," he said. "That was my first real taste of Southern food."

Now, Steinert, who lives in Suffolk, puts a little Southern accent on most of the food he makes, whether it's for the restaurant or for his family.

As a professional chef, he said, the holiday cooking is normally his job.

"I usually get roped into it," he said.

Celebrating the holidays with his parents, siblings and grandmother, he has become sensitive to the desires of his family.

His non-negotiable for the season: "Probably wine," he said, laughing.

Sweet potato ham biscuits also make an appearance on every Thanksgiving menu. Those savory little sliders offer the perfect play of salty-and-sweet.

The pink meat peeks from underneath the biscuit, which has the slightest orange

tint from its special ingredient. Every bite of the biscuit pops with a hint of sweet potato, which perfectly balances perfectly balances the ham's salty nature.

But there's another sudden surprise of sweetness slathered between the pork and the dough — a bed of grape jelly hidden between the layers.

Sweet potato is a staple in holiday cooking, he said, and it makes a dish like ham biscuits seem more appropriate to be piled next to the stuffing and across the table from the turkey.

As a chef, Steinert said, he aims to make simple food taste extraordinary.

"I like to take three or four ingredients and make something simple but with good ingredients," he said.

His favorite part of cooking a holiday feast, however, is the one that strikes fear into the hearts of many young chefs hosting their mothers-in-law for the first time.

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### BRUNSWICK STEW

#### Ingredients

- ▶ 1/4 cup olive oil
- ▶ 1 cup onion, medium diced
- ▶ 1 cup celery, peeled and medium diced
- ▶ 1/2 cup carrots, peeled and medium diced
- ▶ 1 tablespoon minced garlic
- ▶ 1 tablespoon thyme, chopped finely
- ▶ 4 cups red potatoes, medium diced
- ▶ 2 cups frozen corn
- ▶ 2 cups frozen lima beans
- ▶ 2 quarts chicken stock or broth
- ▶ 1 tablespoon soy sauce
- ▶ 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- ▶ 2 teaspoons salt
- ▶ 1 1/2 cups diced tomatoes
- ▶ 2 tablespoons cornstarch
- ▶ 2 tablespoons water
- ▶ 2 cups tomato juice

#### Directions

In a large stock pot, cook onion, celery, carrots and garlic over medium heat for about 10 minutes or until soft. Add potatoes and thyme. Stir and cook for about 10 minutes. Add salt. Stir in tomato juice and simmer. Add corn, lima beans and stock or broth and simmer. Cook until potatoes are done. Add Worcestershire sauce and tomatoes then simmer. Add cornstarch slowly to thicken. Taste and allow to cool.

### WARMED APPLE SLAW

#### Ingredients

- ▶ 1/2 head of small green cabbage, shredded finely
- ▶ 1/4 head of small green cabbage, shredded finely
- ▶ 8 oz. bacon cut into short, thin strips, cooked until crispy, reserve fat
- ▶ 1/2 medium sweet onion cut into short, thin strips
- ▶ 1 apple cut into short, thin strips
- ▶ 1/2 cup apple cider

#### Directions

In 1/4 cup of reserved bacon fat, wilt all ingredients except apple cider until vegetables soften. Add apple cider and serve.

### SAUSAGE AND CORNBREAD STUFFED PORK LOIN

#### Sausage and Cornbread Stuffing

#### Ingredients

- ▶ 2 cups crumbled cornbread
- ▶ 1/2 pound country sausage, loose
- ▶ 1/4 cup chopped onion
- ▶ 1/4 cup chopped celery
- ▶ 1/2 cup chopped apple

- ▶ 1/4 cup fresh sage, chopped
- ▶ 2 tablespoons fresh thyme, chopped
- ▶ 2 1/2 to 3 pounds boneless center cut pork loin with sausage and cornbread stuffing
- ▶ Salt
- ▶ Pepper

#### Directions

For stuffing, brown sausage – add onion, celery and apple. Cook until onions are translucent. Allow mixture to cool slightly. Then, mix in cornbread and fresh chopped herbs. Refrigerate until needed.

For pork loin, preheat oven to 350 degrees. Lay pork loin on large cutting board and make a long even cut 1/2-inch thick on the front of the pork loin to within 1/2 inch from the bottom. Flatten the flap and proceed by cutting across the bottom toward the back of the loin to within 1/2 inch. Roll the loin back and continue to make cuts until the loin is a flat sheet.

Cover counter top with plastic wrap and lay out sheet of pork. Season both sides with salt and pepper. Cover 2/3 of the pork loin with the stuffing and carefully roll the loin up, like a jellyroll, with the plastic on the outside. Wrap tightly in plastic wrap, then again in aluminum foil (shiny side in). Place on a sheet pan and bake for 40 to 50 minutes at 350 or until internal temperature of 155 degrees is reached. Allow to rest for 20 minutes. Then, remove foil and plastic and slice.



### SWEET POTATO BISCUITS

#### Ingredients

- ▶ 2 cups flour
- ▶ 3 teaspoons baking powder
- ▶ 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- ▶ 3/4 teaspoon salt
- ▶ 3 tablespoons brown sugar
- ▶ 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ▶ 1/2 cup or 4 oz. butter, cubed and cold
- ▶ 1 cup sweet potato puree (see recipe)
- ▶ 1/2 cup buttermilk

#### Directions

Preheat oven to 425 degrees. Sift dry ingredients. Add butter cubes to the dry mixture. Heat the puree until loose and mix with the buttermilk. Fold the wet ingredients into the dry. Be careful not to overwork. Pat out mixture to about 1-inch thickness and cut biscuits. Bake at 425 degrees for 10 to 12 minutes. Yields about 12 to 14 biscuits. Serve as slider with ham and grape jelly.

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“I enjoy roasting the turkey,” he said.

Steinert said after years of loathing the task, he has learned to love it.

His tradition is to head down to Bennett’s Creek Farm Market to pick up a plump bird.

“I tried to cook heritage breeds for a while,” he said. “But they never tasted very good.”

Now, he looks forward to the long process of perfecting the poultry.

But for people who might not have the time or the skill to roast turkey, Steinert offers a different solution — pork loin stuffed with sausage and cornbread.

Plated, his dish looks like a giant beige jellyroll, with a spiral of savory, yellow and green-speckled filling stuffed inside.

Each savory bite gets a spicy kick from the sausage in the filling.

Despite the other strong flavors featured in the dish, the cornbread shines through. Its buttery tinge asserts itself, and the texture is reminiscent of a crumbly muffin.

Steinert opts to serve the pork over warmed apple slaw, which features another Southern specialty, cole slaw, along with a flavor of fall — apples.

A holiday feast that draws on Southern traditions would hardly be complete without Brunswick stew, and it’s a staple of the fall and winter menus both at Vintage Tavern and at Steinert’s home.

Steinert said the stew is traditionally made with rabbit or squirrel, but the answer to the best meat for the stew depends on whom you ask. In fact, even Vintage Tavern’s chefs disagree about the best protein for the homey stew.

Steinert thinks pork makes the best addition, but his associates argue beef or chicken are better options. But, he said, there’s really no need to worry about the “right” meat for Brunswick stew. “Any meat will work in it,” he said. Or even skip the meat entirely and enjoy the medley of veggies by themselves.

A good holiday feast delights all the senses, and Brunswick stew helps meet the need. Its sweet aroma and complex flavors are only part of the experience. Especially for a Thanksgiving table, Brunswick stew’s orange shade is as attractive to the eye as its flavors are to the mouth.

But no matter what you’re cooking during the holidays, Steinert said, at the end of the day, the food on the table is all about the shared experience.

“It’s the glue that brings everyone together,” he said. ◀