

Popcorn's A-maize-ing Versatility

Popcorn, a type of maize, has been delighting Americans for centuries with its magical transformation from seed to snack, as well as for its delicious taste and healthy, wholesome appeal. Last year's rediscovery of popcorn's whole grain status catapulted it to the top of many "good for you" snack lists. But eating popcorn isn't necessarily the challenge; it's more a question of *How?*

Ask a popcorn lover how popcorn is best eaten and you'll get a range of answers from "lightly salted," "a sprinkle of parmesan cheese," "tossed with herbs and spices," to "drizzled with chocolate and almonds." The best answer, perhaps, is "quickly."

Popcorn doesn't stay around for very long after it's been popped.

The ability of popcorn to support a wide variety of flavors is part of its appeal. The following recipes illustrate how popcorn can play a leading or supporting role in any meal. The first series features comfort foods, the second takes on an exotic theme and the third, continental cuisine.

Comfort

FIRST COURSE:

Herbed Popcorn Soup Topper

Yield: 4 cups



4 cups air-popped popcorn
Butter or original flavor cooking spray
1/4 teaspoon parsley flakes
1/4 teaspoon thyme
1/4 teaspoon dried basil
1/4 teaspoon dried oregano
1/4 teaspoon Cajun Creole seasoning or chili powder

- Place popcorn in a large, clean paper bag. Spray popcorn lightly with cooking spray, about 5 quick sprays. Sprinkle parsley, thyme, basil, oregano and Cajun Creole seasoning onto popcorn. Close bag and shake to distribute seasoning.
- Sprinkle on soup of your choice at serving time.

ENTRÉE:

Popcorn Diner Meatloaf

Yield: 6



5 cups popped popcorn
1 1/4 pounds extra lean ground beef or turkey
1/4 cup chopped celery
1/4 cup chopped onion
1/4 cup 2% milk
1 egg
2 tablespoons chopped parsley
1 clove garlic, minced
1 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon pepper
1/4 cup chili sauce or ketchup

- Preheat oven to 350° F. Spray an 8x4-inch loaf pan with cooking spray; set aside.
- Process popcorn in a blender or food processor until finely ground; pour into a large bowl. Add ground beef, celery, onion, milk, egg, parsley, garlic, salt and pepper. Mix until thoroughly blended.
- Press meat mixture into pan; spread chili sauce over top. Bake for 1 hour, or until cooked through. Allow to cool 15 minutes before slicing.

SIDE DISH:

Cheesy Popcorn Corn Bread

Yield: 9 squares



4 cups popped popcorn
1 cup yellow corn meal
2 tablespoons sugar
2 teaspoons baking powder
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 egg
1 cup 2% milk
1/4 cup vegetable oil
1 cup shredded jack or pepper jack cheese
1 (4 ounce) can mild, diced green chilies, drained, optional

- Preheat oven to 400° F. Spray an 8-inch square baking pan with cooking spray; set aside.
- Process the popcorn in a blender or food processor until finely ground. Pour ground popcorn into a large bowl and stir in corn meal, sugar, baking powder and salt until blended.
- Beat egg, milk and vegetable oil together in a small bowl and stir into popcorn mixture just until blended. Scatter cheese and chilies, if desired, over batter and stir just until evenly distributed. Pour batter into prepared pan and bake for 25 minutes or until lightly browned at edges and tester comes out clean. Cut into squares to serve.

DESSERT:

Popcorn Party Cake

Yield: 10 slices

4 quarts plain popped popcorn
3/4 cup peanuts
3/4 cup gum drops or gummi candies
1/2 cup (1 stick) butter or margarine
1/4 cup light corn syrup
1 cup brown sugar
1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
3/4 cup small sugar-coated candies (M&M's, Smartees, etc.) Assorted lollipops

- In a large bowl that has been sprayed with cooking spray, place popcorn, peanuts and gum drops; set aside.
- Lightly spray a bundt pan with cooking spray; set aside.
- Heat butter, corn syrup and brown sugar in a large saucepan over medium heat, stirring constantly. Bring mixture to a boil and cook, stirring constantly, 2 minutes. Remove from heat and stir in vanilla.
- Pour hot syrup over popcorn mixture and quickly stir to coat thoroughly. Add small candies and quickly stir just until evenly distributed. Spoon into bundt pan; gently pushing mixture into pan. Cover pan lightly and allow to cool at room temperature 4 hours or longer. Invert cake onto serving platter. Push lollipops into top of cake before serving.

Exotic

APPETIZER:

Sweet Garam Masala Kettle Corn

Yield: 10 cups



1/4 cup popcorn kernels
1/4 cup sugar
1/4 cup vegetable oil
1 teaspoon garam masala, Indian spice blend
1 teaspoon salt

- In a large heavy-bottomed pot (with a lid), place popcorn, sugar, oil, garam masala and salt. Cover and place over medium heat until corn begins to pop.
- Once corn begins to pop, shake pot constantly over heat. When popping slows, remove pot from heat and transfer popcorn to a bowl to serve.

ENTRÉE:

Thai Peanut and Popcorn Crusted Chicken

Yield: 4

2 cups popped popcorn
1/2 cup chopped peanuts
1 egg
1 teaspoon soy sauce
1 clove garlic, minced
1/2 teaspoon hot pepper sauce
3 tablespoons vegetable oil
4 (1 3/4 lbs.) boneless, skinless chicken breasts

For the Thai Peanut Sauce:

Mix 3 tablespoons peanut butter, 3 tablespoons honey, 2 tablespoons soy sauce, 2 tablespoons lime juice and 1/2 teaspoon hot pepper sauce in a small bowl until smooth.

- Preheat oven to 350° F. Process popcorn in a blender or food processor until ground. Pour ground popcorn into a shallow dish; stir in peanuts and set aside.
- In another shallow dish, whisk egg, soy sauce, garlic and hot pepper sauce until blended; set aside.
- Heat oil in a large, oven-proof skillet over medium-high heat. Dip chicken breasts first in egg mixture and then in popcorn mixture until well coated. Place in skillet and brown on both sides; about 3 minutes per side. Place skillet in oven 15 minutes or until chicken is cooked through. Serve with Thai Peanut sauce.

DESSERT:

Ginger Sesame Popcorn Brittle

Yield: about 2 pounds



8 cups popped popcorn
1/2 cup (1 stick) unsalted butter
1 cup light corn syrup
2 cups sugar
1/3 cup toasted sesame seeds
1 tablespoon black sesame seeds, optional
1/2 cup finely diced candied ginger
1 teaspoon vanilla
1/2 teaspoon salt

- Lightly butter a sheet pan or jelly roll pan; set aside. Spray a large metal bowl with cooking spray and place the popcorn inside. Measure all ingredients and have ready before cooking.
- Melt the butter in a large saucepan over medium heat. Stir in corn syrup and sugar until blended. Attach a candy thermometer to saucepan and cook, stirring often, until mixture registers 290° F. Remove pan from heat.
- Working quickly, stir in sesame seeds, candied ginger, vanilla and salt until blended. Pour sugar mixture over popcorn and stir to coat thoroughly. Pour mixture out onto prepared pan and spread into single layer. Allow to cool completely before breaking into chunks. Store in an airtight container.



Continental

APPETIZER:

Hot Wasabi Popcorn

Yield: 8-1 cup servings



8 cups popped popcorn, warm
3 tablespoons butter or margarine
2 teaspoons prepared wasabi
1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
1/2 teaspoon sugar, optional

- Place popcorn in a large bowl.
- Microwave butter 20 seconds or until melted; stir in wasabi until well blended.
- Drizzle wasabi butter over popcorn and mix.



ENTRÉE:

Mushroom Crusted Tilapia

Yield: 4

2 cups popped popcorn
1/2 cup dried shiitake or porcini mushrooms
1 teaspoon onion powder
1 teaspoon garlic powder
1 teaspoon salt
1 egg
1 tablespoon vegetable oil
4 (1 1/4 lbs) tilapia filets
Lemon wedges, for serving

- Place popcorn, mushrooms, onion powder, garlic powder and salt in a blender (or food processor) and blend until powdery and almost smooth; pour into a wide, shallow bowl.
- Beat egg in a shallow bowl; set aside.
- Heat oil in a large, non-stick skillet over medium-high heat. Dip tilapia into egg and then into popcorn mixture, coating both sides. Cook tilapia about 3 minutes per side or until fish is golden and center is cooked. Serve with lemon wedges.

Variation: Substitute boneless, skinless chicken breasts for tilapia and adjust cooking time as needed.

DESSERT:

Popcorn and Peanut Truffles

Yield: About 30 pieces



6 cups popped popcorn
1 cup roasted and salted peanuts
1 (12 ounce) package semisweet chocolate chips
1/2 cup honey

- Stir popcorn and peanuts together in a large bowl; set aside.
- In microwave-safe bowl, heat chocolate chips 10 seconds. Stir chips and repeat, stirring after each 10 seconds, until chips are melted. Warm honey in microwave 10 seconds and stir into chocolate until well blended.
- Pour chocolate mixture over popcorn mixture and stir until popcorn is evenly coated. Using a small ice cream scoop, push popcorn mixture into scoop and release onto wax paper to form "truffles". Refrigerate until firm. Store truffles in an airtight container up to 5 days.



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