

SEA URCHIN AND QUAIL EGG BOWTIE PASTA

Admittedly, this dish may not be for everyone. But for those of us that love sea urchin, otherwise known as *uni* at your local sushi bar, this dish is a rich treat—rich in flavor, but unfortunately rich in expense. I had purchased a tray at my local fish store with hopes of making my favorite sushi at home—uni with quail egg. But as you may have read earlier this week, things didn't work out as planned. So, I found myself left with a half tray of uni and a half-dozen quail eggs that I was determined not to waste. So, I put it to good use in this dish.

INGREDIENTS (serves 2)

5 ounces fresh sea urchin (uni)

1/2 cup crème fraîche

½ pound bowtie pasta

2 tablespoons olive oil

3 cloves garlic, finely minced

1 small shallot, finely minced

1 teaspoon red pepper flakes

1/2 cup dry sake

6 quail eggs, beaten

Freshly ground black pepper

Salt to taste

Parmesan cheese, grated (optional)

PREPARATION

Reserve 2-4 pieces of sea urchin for the garnish. Put the remaining sea urchin, and crème fraîche into a blender and blend until smooth. Set aside.

Cook pasta as per box or bag instructions, remembering to season the water with salt. Cook until al dente.

In a large skillet, heat the olive oil. Add the shallots and garlic and cook until translucent, about 2-4 minutes. Add salt and pepper to taste. Add in red pepper flakes. Do not allow to burn.

Strain the pasta, reserving a cup of the pasta water if needed later. Add a $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of the pasta water into the blender and pulse the uni mixture.

On a medium flame, add the pasta to the skillet and using tongs, toss lightly to combine. Add the uni mixture and gently toss to combine. Bring pan up to high heat and pour the eggs over the pasta and toss. If sauce seems too dry, add some more of the pasta water, a $\frac{1}{4}$ cup at a time, until the consistency is creamy. (Go slowly so that you don't add too much water to the sauce.)

Re-season to taste with salt and black pepper.

Serve pasta in bowls and garnish with the reserved sea urchin.

OPTIONAL: Garnish with grated parmesan. There's a huge debate about whether to mix seafood with cheese. Classically it's a no-no, but I leave it up to your tastebuds.

DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME

I know we've all felt the pinch of inflation over the last few years. When eating out, I find myself ordering half as much, yet everything costs twice as much as it used to. Sadly one of my favorite dishes at our local sushi restaurant has gone over the top. \$18 for one piece of uni and quail egg sushi. Granted, for me it's one of the best bites on earth, but it does seem a little steep. So I decided to try my hand at making it on my own.

I'm always trying to rationalize buying extravagant things. A tray of uni (sea urchin) from our local fish store is \$50. But, that will make at least 12 pieces of uni sushi. So, had I eaten 12 pieces at my local sushi bar, I would have paid \$216. So \$50 seems like a bargain. (You see how my mind works?)

Quail eggs, sushi rice and nori are relatively reasonably priced, just good luck finding them when you need them. I had noticed my local gourmet shop was carrying quail eggs, so I didn't think to buy them until I needed them and of course, when I did, they were out. So I had to schlep to their sister store a half-mile away. Of course, I live in a trendy neighborhood in Brooklyn that of course would have quail eggs. I do realize that outside of my NY bubble, that might not be the case, so plan ahead.

Back home with all the ingredients, it was time to give it a go. I have great respect for sushi chefs and know that it takes years of practice to make it correctly. I had no illusions that mine would look as appealing as theirs, but I had hoped that at least it would taste as good. I have my trusty sushi mat, my Japanese rice cooker, some pre-cut nori. How hard could this be?

I've been studying how our local sushi chef creates his delectable bites for over thirty years. So why can't I

remember if he molds the rice first and rolls the nori around it or if he makes the nori circle and then adds the rice into it. Oh boy. I try both ways, but the rice is still so hot I can't really mold it tightly. Eventually I make some semblance of a base with my goal that it doesn't collapse. I add in a few pieces of uni on top. Ok, so far, it's holding. Now I need to separate the quail egg yolk from the whites. Our sushi chef just opens the egg in his hand and lets the whites drip out under his fingers. It sort of works, but there's still too much white left as I gently plop the yolk next to the uni.

Now for the true test—tasting it. Normally this dish transports me to another universe. The unctuous taste of the uni paired with the creaminess of the quail egg is so sublime, I usually sigh when eating it. So, there's a high bar I'm hoping to reach. I raise the first piece to my mouth, and take it in whole as I gently bite down for the taste explosion—and—nothing. It's not that it's bad, it's just not anywhere near as good as I had hoped. First of all, the rice isn't right. I did use sushi rice, but it probably wasn't as high a grade as it needed to be and I didn't have the right vinegar seasoning. It was way too bland. The nori was a little soggy because I don't have the experienced touch. The uni was good, but not as great as it could have been. Although I spent \$50 on the tray, one could pay up to \$150 for superior quality uni. And lastly, there was too much of the whites from the quail egg muddying up the flavor.

So, now I have a half tray of of uni and six quail eggs left and nothing to do with them. Wait a minute—do I smell a pasta dish coming on?

ORANGE CHOCOLATE RICOTTA CAKE

I love a good sale, and when I found a 32 oz. tub of ricotta cheese in the market for \$2.99, I couldn't just pass it by. So after making a lasagna, I still had tons of the ricotta left. So although I'm not much of a baker, I thought maybe a dessert would be nice. Who doesn't like orange and chocolate? This recipe worked out surprisingly well. Give it a shot and let me know what you think.

INGREDIENTS (Serves 8)

1 $\frac{1}{2}$ sticks unsalted butter, softened (room temperature)

1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups sugar

15 ounces whole milk ricotta cheese (room temperature)

3 large eggs (room temperature)

1 teaspoon vanilla

1 tablespoon Cointreau

2 large oranges, zested, plus the juice of one orange

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon baking soda

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt

1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups flour

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup chocolate chips

powdered sugar and chocolate shavings for dusting top of cake (optional)

PREPARATION

Grease a 9-inch springform pan with butter and powdered sugar. Set aside.

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Cream together the butter and sugar until combined in a large stand mixer using the whisk attachment. Add in the ricotta cheese and blend until light and fluffy, about 4 to 5 minutes.

Mix in the eggs, one at a time. Add in the Cointreau, orange zest, orange juice, and vanilla. Mix to combine. Add in the baking soda and salt and combine. Lastly, add in the flour and mix until all of the ingredients are fully combined, scraping the sides of the bowl if necessary. Remove the bowl from the stand and fold in the chocolate chips.

Pour the batter into the prepared springform pan. Bake for 45-55 minutes, or until the cake is set and a toothpick inserted in the middle of the cake comes out clean.

Let cool in pan for 20 minutes before removing from the springform pan. Cool an additional ten minutes and dust with powdered sugar and chocolate shavings before serving.

LAMB STEW GREEK STYLE

Looking for a new idea for your Easter lamb? Here's a hearty dish that got a thumbs up from my neighbors. I often use this cut of lamb for a cassoulet, but I wanted to try a different flavor profile. By simply changing some of the spices to a more Mediterranean leaning and subbing out orzo instead of beans, this transformed into a completely different dish. It's also a great meal if the family is coming over. You can make most of it the day before and just add the orzo 20 minutes before you're ready to serve. Now you'll have more time to spend with everyone at cocktail hour. (And no, those aren't mini-marshmallows on top in the picture. It's feta cheese!)

INGREDIENTS (Serves 6)

2 pounds lamb shoulder, fat trimmed, cut into 1" cubes

3 tablespoons olive oil

salt and pepper

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup flour

2 onions, sliced

1 large carrot, diced

2 ribs celery, diced

4 cloves garlic, minced

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon cinnamon

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon nutmeg

1 teaspoon oregano

1 teaspoon paprika

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon cayenne pepper

2 bay leaves

1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups white wine

1 28-ounce can fire roasted crushed tomatoes

1 cup orzo pasta

fresh parley, chopped for garnish

1 lemon, zested for garnish

Feta cheese, for garnish

PREPARATION

Generously season the lamb with salt and pepper. Dredge in flour, making sure to shake off any excess.

Add olive oil to a large Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Brown the lamb pieces, making sure not to crowd them. You may need to do them in batches. Each batch should take about 8 minutes to brown. Transfer the meat to a plate and set aside.

Add the onions, carrots and celery and sauté for six to eight minutes. Add the garlic, cinnamon, nutmeg, oregano, paprika, cayenne pepper and bay leaves and stir to combine for one minute. Season with salt and pepper.

Add the lamb back in along with the white wine and crushed tomatoes. Cover and bring to a boil and then reduce to a simmer for one-hour. (If you're making the day ahead, stop here. Let cool and refrigerate overnight. The next day, reheat by bringing back up to a boil and then reduce to a simmer.)

Add orzo to the pot, cover, and stir to combine. Allow to cook for twenty minutes. Remove the bay leaves.

When done, stir to combine.

Serve in bowls and garnish with parsley, lemon zest and feta cheese.

GRILLED SALMON OVER FRIED RICE

I hate wasting food, so when I found some leftover rice, a half package of spinach and some other bits and pieces in the fridge, I knew I had the makings of a quick fried rice. I topped it with some grilled salmon and I had dinner on the

table in less than thirty minutes. Quick, easy and yummy—enjoy!

INGREDIENTS (Serves 2)

MARINADE:

2 tablespoons soy sauce

1 tablespoon of mirin

1 teaspoon of fish sauce

1 tablespoon of maple syrup

2 pieces of salmon filet (6 oz each)

salt and pepper

RICE:

2 tablespoons olive oil, (plus 2 to cook salmon)

1 onion, diced

3 cloves garlic, minced

6 cremini mushrooms, sliced

1 cup cooked rice

1 tablespoons soy sauce

1 teaspoon of mirin

1/2 teaspoon of fish sauce

2 cups spinach

1 egg, beaten

salt and pepper to taste

Scallions for garnish

PREPARATION

Season the salmon filets with salt and pepper and place in a Ziploc bag. Combine the other marinade ingredients in a bowl. Pour into Ziploc bag and seal, making sure to let out the air. Massage the marinade around the fish. Place in refrigerator for two hours.

Heat a wok or a large skillet. Add two tablespoons of olive oil. Add onion and sauté until it begins to brown, about 6-8 minutes. Add in the mushrooms and garlic and cook for one minute. Add in the cooked rice, soy sauce, mirin and fish sauce and stir. Simmer for five minutes. Add the spinach and allow it to wilt down. Stir into rice mixture. Turn off heat.

Heat a grill pan on medium high. Add 2 tablespoons of olive oil and spread on grates with a paper towel. Place the salmon filets skin side up on the grill pan. Cover pan with a pot lid. Cook for 4 minutes. Flip salmon filets over, cover and cook for another 4 minutes. (There still should be a little pink on the salmon. If you like it well done, cook for six minutes each side).

While the salmon is cooking, reheat the rice. Add the beaten egg and combine with rice mixture. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

To serve, place rice in center of plate and top with salmon filet. Garnish with scallions.

CHEESY MASHED POTATOES

This recipe had me at “cheesy.” I’ve never been a big mashed potatoes fan until I had them with cheese. Although decadent,

it's worth the splurge once in awhile. I love to serve these as a side for steak or roast dishes. It's also great to use the leftovers—if there are any—on top of a chicken and vegetable casserole. Enjoy!

INGREDIENTS (serves 8 – 10)

8 large Yukon gold potatoes (4 or 5 lbs)

2 teaspoons kosher salt

6 tablespoons butter

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup whole milk

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup Half and Half

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup grated parmesan

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup grated gruyere

chopped fresh parsley (for garnish)

red pepper flakes (for garnish)

PREPARATION

Peel potatoes (or leave skin on if you prefer). Cut into 1" squares and place in a large pot. Add enough cold water that the water line is 1-inch above the potatoes. Stir in one teaspoon of sea salt.

Turn the heat to high and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium and continue to cook for about 10 minutes or so until a fork can be inserted into the potatoes easily.

Drain out the water and then put the potatoes back in the pot and turn the heat to low for about one minute. This helps the remaining water evaporate. Shake the pot a few times so the potatoes don't stick.

In a small pot, add the milk and half and half. Melt the

butter. As soon as the butter is completely melted, set aside until ready to use. Don't allow the milk to boil.

Mash the potatoes in the pot with a potato masher. Add in the melted butter and milk mixture, the two cheeses and one teaspoon of salt. Fold all the ingredients together until the liquid has been soaked up by the potatoes.

Taste the potatoes and re-season adding more salt if necessary.

Garnish with chopped parsley and red pepper flakes. Serve immediately.

MUSHROOM BARLEY SOUP

We're deep into soup season now, so I'm always looking for variations on a theme. Every week I make a big batch of bone broth and I'm always trying different ways to use it. My husband is a big barley and mushroom fan, so this one is for him. Enjoy!

INGREDIENTS (serves 6-8)

1 cup of hulled barley

3 cups of water

2 tablespoons of olive oil

1 onion, sliced

1 cup of cooked chicken, turkey, or beef cubed

8 cremini mushrooms, sliced

3 cloves of garlic, minced

2 quarts of bone broth, turkey or chicken stock

1 teaspoon red pepper flakes

salt and freshly ground pepper

fresh dill for garnish

PREPARATION

Rinse the barley through a strainer. Place in a large pot and add the water. Add 1 teaspoon of salt. Bring up to boil, then down to a simmer. Simmer for 45 minutes, stirring occasionally. Strain out any remaining water and set aside.

Wipe out and dry the large pot. Heat 2 tablespoons of olive oil. Add the onion and sauté until translucent, about 7 minutes. Add the chicken, mushrooms and garlic and cook for another two minutes.

Add in the cooked barley, bone broth or stock, and red pepper flakes. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Bring to a boil and then simmer for 20 minutes.

Ladle the soup into bowls, garnish with a fresh dill.

GARLIC BREAD

Whenever I need a quick side dish that everyone loves, I default to garlic bread. It's great with steak or pasta dishes. I've also used it as the base for a really decadent sandwich.

Rather than melting butter, I like to infuse olive oil with

minced garlic. I strain the oil before using to avoid eating raw garlic, yet the flavor remains.

INGREDIENTS (serves 6-8)

3 cloves of garlic, minced

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup olive oil

1 large baguette

salt

fresh thyme or chives for garnish (optional)

PREPARATION

Mix the minced garlic and olive oil in a bowl and let rest on counter for at least one hour. Then strain out flavored olive oil and discard the garlic.

Cut the baguette lengthwise in half. Generously brush the flavored oil on the soft side of the bread, allowing the oil to drip down into the holes. Lightly season with salt.

Place on a baking sheet and broil on high. Keep an eye on it and remove once the edges start to brown. Depending upon your oven and how far away the bread is from the heating element, this can take between 30 seconds to two minutes. Don't walk away because it can easily burn.

Cut loaf into 2-inch sized pieces. Garnish with fresh thyme or chives.

DRAGON FRUITINI

The dragon fruit is an odd, yet fascinating fruit. At first glance, it's a bit scary looking with its spikes jutting out of its skin as if it's a holdout from prehistoric times. Once cut open, its beautiful white flesh dotted with tiny black seeds is a surprising juxtaposition against its redish-pink exterior.

It's a popular fruit in parts of Asia, as well as Mexico and Central America where it's also known as a pitaya. You've probably passed them by in markets not knowing what to do with them. Well, next time you see one, buy it and try this cocktail. The fruit itself has a mild, sweet flavor – just enough to balance the botanicals in a good gin.

INGREDIENTS (1 Cocktail)

$\frac{1}{2}$ dragon fruit, flesh removed from skin and chopped into small pieces

2 oz gin

1 oz Cointreau

1 slice dragon fruit for garnish

Ice

PREPARATION

In a shaker, muddle the dragon fruit flesh with the gin and Cointreau. Fill the shaker with ice $\frac{2}{3}$ of the way full.

Shake vigorously.

Using a large mesh strainer, pour everything – except the ice cubes – into a martini glass. You'll want some of the pulp and the black seeds for flavor and presentation.

Garnish with a half slice of dragon fruit. Enjoy!

CHOCOLATE WALNUT CAKE

I had the most delicious chocolate walnut cake in of all places, Penang Malaysia. I'm not a huge chocolate cake fan, but this one was fudgy, chocolatey and very moist. I've tried a million recipes to try to recreate it and finally found one that comes very close. I can't take any credit for it – it's by [Pastry Wishes](#) but hopefully they won't mind me sharing it. I rarely use other people's recipes, but this one is so good, I couldn't improve on it and it needs to be shared.

INGREDIENTS

FOR THE CAKE

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup + 1 teaspoon unsweetened cocoa powder

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup hot strong coffee

1 cup all-purpose flour

1 cup sugar

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon baking powder

1 teaspoon baking soda

$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt

1 medium egg, room temperature

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup milk

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup light vegetable oil

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped walnuts + 1-2 tablespoons extra for garnish

FOR THE FROSTING

4.4 oz semisweet chocolate

$\frac{2}{3}$ cup unsalted butter, room temperature

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup + 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoons powdered sugar

2 $\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoons unsweetened cocoa powder

$\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoon milk

PREPARATION

FOR THE CAKE

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

Grease an 8-inch pan and line it with parchment paper.

In a small bowl, mix the cocoa powder and hot coffee together. Set it aside to cool.

In another medium bowl, mix together the flour, sugar, baking powder, baking soda and salt. Set it aside.

In a large bowl, whisk together the egg, milk, oil and the cocoa/coffee mixture. Make sure everything is well combined.

Add the dry ingredients and whisk until it's smooth.

Fold in the chopped walnuts, but don't overmix.

Pour the cake batter into the prepared pan and bake for about 30-40 minutes or until a toothpick inserted in the middle comes out clean.

Let the cake cool completely before topping it with the fudge frosting.

FOR THE FROSTING

Chop the dark chocolate and then melt it either over a double boiler or in 10-15 increments in the microwave. Set it aside to cool.

In another bowl, beat the butter together with the cocoa powder and sugar using a hand mixer until it's creamy, about 2-3 minutes.

Add the cooled, melted dark chocolate and beat again until it's smooth.

Add the milk and continue beating until it's creamy and your desired consistency. For thicker frosting, add more powdered sugar, for thinner frosting, add more milk, half a tablespoon at a time.

Then dollop the cooled cake with the frosting and make swirls using the back of a spoon or an offset spatula.

Sprinkle some more chopped walnuts all over the frosting.