

MEATY MUSHROOMS ARE COOKOUT OPTION

It used to be that a vegetarian at a backyard cookout was considered a bit of a killjoy. But now you'll likely have several on the guest list.

For those of the omnivorous persuasion, the only "problem" with entertaining vegetarians is that if you make something special for them, EVERYONE will want it. The delicious meatless cuisine looks fresh, gorgeous and appealing. Meanwhile, the burgers are burning on the grill, the potato salad with bacon is getting the fish-eye from guests, and the chicken wings are congealing in a pool of sticky glaze.

One solution is to host an entirely meat-free cookout. Or you can make up a bunch of vegetarian options and simply share them around. Obviously, most salads will fit the requirements of vegetarians, as long as you don't add the aforementioned pork product. Likewise, desserts pass the test (unless you insist on making chocolate-bacon cupcakes). It's the main course that needs attention if you are going to make your non-meat-eating guests happy.

As a person who has tried a zillion recipes for vegetarian burgers, who has spent hours grinding soybeans and bulgur and mashing ingredients together with nut butters and oils, I am happy to report that "simple" works. Slather some olive oil on a portobello mushroom cap, slap it on the grill, serve it on some good bread and you have a vegetarian burger that can't be beat.

Well, actually it CAN be beat, as the inimitable Rachael Ray has done in her new "The Book of Burger" (Atria, 2012). She has grilled a portobello burger with spinach pesto that is exceptionally tasty. The pesto acts as a silky counterpoint to the sometimes leathery chewiness of the mushroom "burger" and adds tons of flavor as well.

Just remember to make enough for everyone.

PORTOBELLO BURGERS WITH SPINACH PESTO

Yield: 4 servings

For the pesto:

2 packed cups baby spinach

1/4 cup walnut pieces, toasted

1/4 cup grated pecorino-

Romano or Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese



Don't be surprised if portobello burgers beat beef at your next barbecue. Credit: Photograph by Romulo Yanes for "The Book of Burger," copyright 2012 by Rachael Ray; Atria Books, a division of Simon & Schuster Inc.

1 clove garlic, peeled and grated
A few grates of fresh nutmeg
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
1/4 to 1/3 cup extra-virgin olive oil

For the "burgers":

4 large portobello mushroom caps
1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil
2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce
2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh rosemary
1/2 pound fresh mozzarella or fresh smoked mozzarella, thinly sliced

For serving:

4 crusty rolls, split
Baby spinach leaves
4 thin slices red onion

Make the pesto: Place spinach in the bowl of a food processor and add nuts, cheese, garlic, nutmeg, salt and pepper. With the motor running, stream in enough oil to make a thick paste, scraping down the sides as needed. Transfer to a bowl, taste, add more salt and pepper if needed, cover and set aside.

Make the "burgers": Clean mushroom caps by wiping gently with a damp paper towel. (It is not necessary to remove the dark gills on the underside of the cap; they add flavor. If you want to remove them, scoop them out with a spoon.) In a large plastic food storage bag, combine the oil, Worcestershire, vinegar and

rosemary. Close the bag and shake gently to combine the ingredients. Place mushroom caps in the bag, close the bag and slosh to coat mushrooms with seasonings.

Heat a grill pan or large skillet over medium-high heat. (To grill, see note below.) Shake marinade off the mushrooms and cook, turning once, 10 to 13 minutes or until well-browned on both sides. Season with salt and pepper. Top with mozzarella slices, remove pan from the heat and cover loosely with aluminum foil. Let stand 1 to 2 minutes to melt the cheese.

To serve: Place mushrooms on the roll bottoms and top with pesto, a mound of baby spinach leaves and a slice of red onion. Set the roll tops in place and serve.

Note: To grill, oil the grill racks and prepare the grill for direct grilling over medium heat. Follow the recipe to the point where you have shaken the marinade off the mushrooms. Grill the mushrooms about 12 minutes, turning once, until they are well-browned and softened. Move the mushrooms to the coolest part of the grill, top with cheese and either cover the grill or tent the mushrooms loosely with aluminum foil. Let sit a minute or two until cheese melts. Remove from the grill and proceed.

Recipe from "The Book of Burger," copyright 2012 by Rachael Ray; Atria Books, a division of Simon & Schuster Inc.