

THE CHEF

Diane Forley



Daniel Pelavin

THIS is a dish from my childhood, one of those home-entertaining concoctions from the 1960's, but I tweaked it. When my mother used to serve a rolled soufflé — a rectangle of airy, baked egg that is formed into the shape of a jellyroll — it was filled with chopped spinach and ricotta cheese.

I wanted to recreate it in a more refined way, with the spinach smooth rather than chopped, and flavored with tarragon and fresh pot herbs, or soft herbs, that work well as vegetables or cooked greens.

Spinach is the binder, the neutral ingredient that stretches the herbs. This purée is sweet and sharp. You get sweetness and a mint-like quality from the tarragon, and an oniony counterpoint from the chives.

The roll is almost like a soufflé omelet, and it goes really well with greens, allowing them to be the primary actors. The smoothness of the purée allows the herbs to infuse the soufflé. Since the purée is intensely flavored, you get only a little of it.

I also wanted a soufflé with some longevity; a real soufflé has to be served right

This is the third of eight columns by Diane Forley, the chef and owner of the Manhattan restaurant Verbena. Her collaborator on these columns is William Grimes.

 Updating mother's
rolled soufflé.

away. This has more staying power. It won't fall, and you can keep it overnight and reheat it, either by steaming or by baking. It won't settle, and it retains its lightness.

Semolina will add a little flavor and texture. I used it originally because I also made this as a corn soufflé, with fresh corn in the mix. You can serve it with sautéed baby vegetables. In spring, I sauté English peas, bibb lettuce and leeks in butter, chicken stock and herbs. In summer, I serve it with corn succotash: lima beans, corn, yellow and green squash and pearl onions. Another idea: make a sauce by adding butter and chicken stock to some of the filling. It's a great light dish for lunch.

There are a couple of things to remember. Be sure to add the herbs in the blender; otherwise they turn black. Rolling is the tricky part. You cannot let the soufflé cool, and once you begin rolling, you cannot stop. No hesitation!

ROLLED SOUFFLÉ

Time: 1 hour

Nonstick baking spray
 ¼ pound (1 stick) butter
 ¾ cup all-purpose flour
 ½ cup semolina (also sold as pasta flour)
 2½ cups milk
 1 cup heavy cream
 10 large eggs, separated
 ⅛ teaspoon cayenne pepper
 Salt and freshly ground black pepper
 ½ cup grated Parmesan cheese
 ¼ teaspoon cream of tartar
 1 tablespoon sugar (optional)
 Spinach filling (recipe follows).

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Line a half-sheet (17 by 12 inch) jellyroll pan with parchment paper, and coat with nonstick baking spray. In a large (4 quart) saucepan over medium heat, melt the butter. Using a wooden spoon, mix in the flour and semolina; stir constantly for 3 minutes. Stir in a little milk to thin and smooth the mixture. Add the remaining milk and cream, beating with a whisk until smooth. Remove the pan from the heat, and slowly pour in the egg

yolks while whisking vigorously. Whisk for 2 minutes. Season with cayenne, and salt and pepper to taste. Stir in cheese; set aside.

2. Using an electric mixer on low speed, beat the egg whites until frothy, and add the cream of tartar and sugar. Increase speed to medium-high, and continue to beat just until very soft peaks form. Gently but thoroughly fold the whites, a third at a time, into the batter. Pour onto the parchment-lined sheet, filling pan three-quarters full. Bake 15 minutes, turn pan and bake 5 minutes, or until surface is golden brown.

3. Run a knife inside the edge of the baking pan to free soufflé. Place a sheet of waxed paper or cotton cloth over the baking sheet, and invert onto a counter. Remove the pan and parchment paper. Spread the spinach filling to within an inch of the edges; lift a short end of the waxed paper or cloth until end curves, then roll soufflé into a log shape. Transfer, seam side down, onto a plate, and serve cut into eight slices.

Yield: 4 main-course servings.

SPINACH FILLING

Time: 15 minutes

½ pound fresh spinach
 1 tablespoon butter
 Salt
 2 tablespoons chopped fresh tarragon
 4 tablespoons chopped fresh chives
 4 tablespoons chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley
 Freshly ground black pepper.

1. Wash and drain spinach, but do not dry.

In a large (4 quart) saucepan over low heat, melt the butter, and add spinach and ½ teaspoon salt. Cover, and steam until wilted, 3 to 5 minutes.

2. Transfer spinach and its liquid to a blender or food processor while hot. Add tarragon, chives and parsley. Purée until smooth, and season with salt and pepper to taste.

Yield: about 1½ cups.