

Food

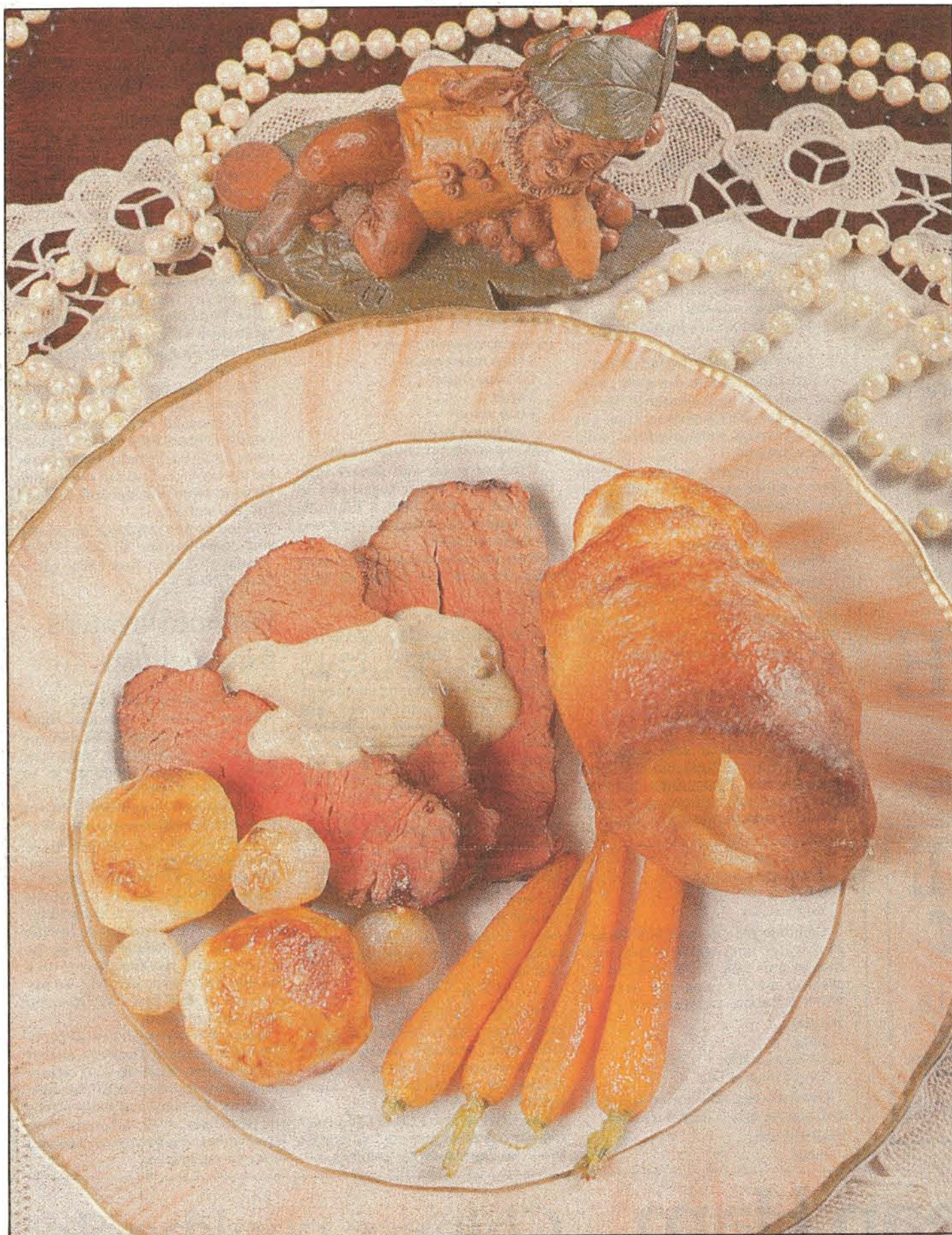
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WILD OVER POPOVERS

With Beef on the Side



—Staff Photos by Art Meripol

By Marilyn Myers
GAZETTE STAFF

The holiday season is fraught with fantasy. Decking the halls, being good, ringing sleigh bells — it's enough to make your eyes glaze over.

And speaking of glaze, I'm reminded that food also is a favorite reverie this time of year. Visions of sugarplums, a roast goose and plum pudding all vie for attention in my dream world. But my most cherished image is of popovers — that quasi muffin that's nothing but a gigantic air hole surrounded by an thin crust that's crisp on the outside, eggy on the inside.

Popovers are really what this story is all about, not Christmas. For three months now I've been wanting to make popovers, and finally the season has given me a reason for wandering off onto this subject. Popovers (sometimes called Yorkshire pudding when baked in a pan with the hot drippings from a roast) normally accompany a standing rib.

Actually, I planned a Christmas menu spotlighting that legendary combination made famous by the British. A standing rib roast used to be purchased back in the days when beef marbling and surface fat weren't health concerns. As it is now, this museum piece is seldom seen anymore in the meatcase.

But that doesn't mean you can't have your popovers — and eat them too, for that matter. Just change the cut of beef and serve a

slow-roasted tenderloin instead. Slow roasting is the key here because it keeps weight loss on this lean cut of meat to a minimum, a fortuitous fact that will stretch your fillet farther at the dinner table — or so claims a restaurateur friend. It also ensures that the inside of the meat will be delicately pink throughout.

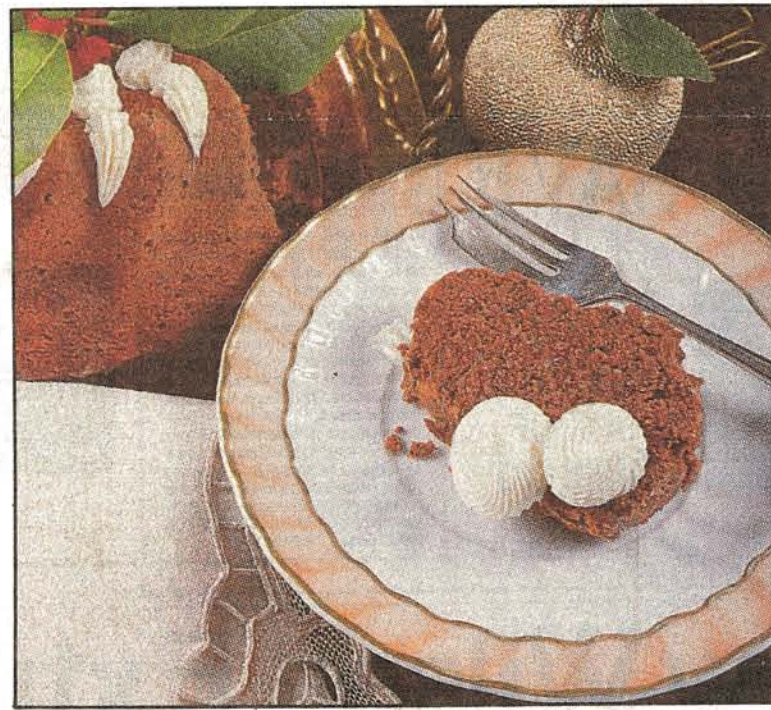
Unfortunately, this means you won't have any hot beef drippings for the popovers. Not to worry, however. They get perfectly lovely and crispy when the pans are greased with shortening.

Making them so they turn out with virtually no interior wasn't nearly as easy as I had imagined. How astonishing that only slightly altering the proportions of a mere four ingredients can create such different end results. Also, how the batter is mixed turns out to have more impact on the finished product than I would have thought.

Anyway, the popovers I finally achieved were just as I had envisioned them. To make them spectacularly tall, use special popover cups. But you also may bake them in muffin pans. These are placed in the oven just as the beef comes out, but you also could bake them for a little less time in an already hot oven.

To accompany the popovers, and beef, round out this festive plate with other traditional accompaniments — pan-roasted potatoes, carrots and pearl onions. Once you've peeled the vegetables, you'll be pleased at how effortless this dinner is to make. And how nice that is. You'll have plenty of time for reverie.

Tenderloin and vegetables (left) and torte (right) are displayed on Salmon Swan plates by Mottahedeh, from Et Cetera. Gnome and pearl garland (left) also are from Et Cetera, and the brass tray and apple tree ornaments (right) are from Fifth Season.



Dinner for Eight

Slow-roasted Tenderloin With Popovers and Roasted Potatoes, Carrots and Pearl Onions

Tenderloin of Beef:
2 pound beef tenderloin, cut from the middle section
3 medium garlic cloves
2 teaspoons good-quality olive oil
Freshly ground or cracked white or black pepper

Vegetables:
24 pearl onions
16 tiny red potatoes, peeled
32 baby carrots, peeled
¼ to ½ cup vegetable oil
Salt

Green Peppercorn Mustard Sauce:
3 tablespoons green peppercorns, drained
¼ cup Dijon mustard
1½ cups whipping cream

Popovers:
¾ cup unbleached all-purpose flour
¼ teaspoon salt
2 large eggs
¾ cup whole milk

To cook the tenderloin: If necessary tie the tenderloin with kitchen twine. Heat the oven to 275 F.

Finely mince the garlic and blend it with the olive oil. A mortar and pestle are perfect for creating this thin paste, or use a blender or food processor. Smear this mixture all over the tenderloin and then sprinkle on the pepper. Place on a rack in a low-sided roasting or baking pan and slowly cook in the

oven for about 2 hours or until a meat thermometer reads 145 to 150 F. This will produce a fillet that's medium-rare to medium throughout. Cook another 30 minutes for a medium to medium-well roast.

Remove from the oven and place in a warm spot loosely covered with aluminum foil. The fillet will hold its heat and continue cooking while it rests. It should stand 20 to 30 minutes before carving so that the internal juices have a chance to redistribute. Slice into ¼-inch servings.

To cook the vegetables: Drop the unpeeled onions in boiling water for 3 minutes. Drain and cool under running water. Carefully trim the root end of each onion, not quite cutting off the base, and slip off the outer skin.

Place the peeled potatoes in a steamer over boiling water and cook, covered, for 10 minutes. Add the peeled carrots and onions to the basket and continue steaming for 5 minutes. The vegetables should be barely tender. Remove them from the steam and let them cool naturally. Hold vegetables, oil and salt for further, last-minute cooking.

To make the popovers: Place the flour and salt in a mixing bowl and make a well in the center. Drop the eggs into the well and use a whisk to gradually mix the flour into the eggs. When all the flour has been absorbed, continue to beat the thick paste for 2 minutes then gradually stir in the milk. Let the batter

rest for 10 minutes while you grease 12 muffin cups or 8 popover cups.

Pour the batter into the cups, filling no more than half full, and set aside until the roast comes out of the oven.

As soon as the roast comes out, turn the oven to 425 F. and place the popovers on the lowest rack in the oven. Bake for 25 minutes until brown and crisp on the outside.

To make Green Peppercorn Sauce: Using a mortar and pestle or the back of a spoon in a mixing bowl, smear the green peppercorns until they are flattened and almost a paste. Blend in the Dijon mustard and cream and transfer the mixture to a small saucepan. Hold until 10 minutes before serving.

At that time, turn the heat to medium and let the sauce bubble for 4 or 5 minutes until it has reduced and thickened. If you would like to add a little beef flavor to this, stir in a little of the crusty drippings from the beef pan. Pour a little of the sauce over each serving of sliced beef.

To finish cooking vegetables: About 15 minutes before the popovers are done, heat the oil in 2 large frying pans until hot. There should be enough oil in the pan to cover the bottom by about ¼ inch. Add the vegetables and cook over medium heat, turning them as necessary, until the vegetables are golden brown all over. Drain on a wire rack and sprinkle lightly with salt. Hold in a warm spot, if necessary.

Intoxicating Delight

Bourbon-soaked Pecan and Cocoa-Torte With Whiskey Hard Sauce

The last shall come first, especially if you plan to serve a whiskey-flavored cake with today's holiday meal. A soaked cake needs to mellow and age, just like the fine whiskey that goes into it. So make it several days before you plan to serve it.

This smooth and elegant bourbon-soaked cake uses ground pecans for a torte effect. It's magnificently potent and decidedly decadent since it's also flavored with cocoa. You should find it exceedingly pleasing and possibly it will become part of your food fantasy for next year's holiday season.

Cake:
1 medium orange
6 tablespoons butter, softened
1 cup granulated sugar
2 eggs
¾ cup cake flour
½ cup unsweetened cocoa
1 cup finely ground pecans
¾ cup bourbon whiskey, divided

Hard Sauce:
¼ cup butter, softened
2 cups confectioners' sugar
2 or 3 tablespoons bourbon whiskey

To make the cake: Generously grease a 4- to 5-cup tube cake mold and dust with flour. Heat the oven to 325 F.

Grate and save the dark orange skin of the orange, leaving the bitter white rind. Squeeze the juice from the orange and reserve ¼ cup.

Beat the butter in a mixing bowl until creamy, then gradually beat in the

sugar, mixing until thoroughly blended and smooth. Add the eggs one at a time, beating after each addition until the mixture is smooth and silky.

Sift the flour and cocoa into the butter and sugar, and add the pecans, the reserved orange rind and juice and ¼ cup of the bourbon and stir until completely blended.

Pour into the prepared cake pan and bake for 1 hour to 1 hour 10 minutes or until a toothpick stuck well into the cake comes out clean. Let the cake rest 10 minutes out of the oven before turning over onto a wire rack placed over a baking sheet with sides.

Slowly pour the remaining ¼ cup of bourbon over the top and sides of the cake, collecting any that lands in the baking sheet and pouring this over also. When the cake is completely cool it should be loosely wrapped in foil and left to age in the refrigerator or on the counter.

To make the hard sauce: Beat the butter in a mixing bowl until creamy. Gradually sift the confectioners' sugar over this and beat in a little at a time for the fluffiest results. When about half the sugar has been added, beat in 2 tablespoons of bourbon and then gradually mix in the remaining sugar. This topping keeps well unrefrigerated and sealed with plastic wrap. Simply stir before using the hard sauce to decorate the cake the day it will be served and as rosettes with each serving. Or blend in a little additional bourbon for a looser sauce to spoon over individual portions.