

BEHOLD THE EGG

Give yourself or others a gift that is one of life's **most inexpensive luxuries**. (If it were as rare as a truffle, it would be wrapped and under the tree.) Here are three ways to cook it to perfection
BY JANE DANIELS LEAR RECIPES BY PAUL GRIMES PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROMULO YANES





This is the start of an absolutely transcendent meal. (1) Have a pot of gently simmering water on the stove. Break one farm-fresh egg—with its tall, rounded yolk and cohesive white—into a small bowl or cup. Slide the egg into the water and repeat with each remaining egg, working clockwise to space them evenly. Remove the eggs in the same order. (2) Perfectly poached: The white should be set, the yolk should be soft to the touch and completely cocooned in the white. Transfer each poached egg to a bowl of cold water to stop cooking. For ease of handling, trim off the thin white flap before proceeding. (3) Before frying poached eggs (recipe on page 156), coat in flour, beaten egg, and bread crumbs.

POACHED EGGS The thought of poaching an egg makes a lot of people nervous—once the egg hits the water, they reason, it's out of control. But a poaching egg is actually quite good at taking care of itself, especially if you use very fresh eggs. In fact, it's worth a trip to a farmers market to buy just-laid ones; if your eggs have been sitting in the refrigerator for a week or so, you'll have better luck hard-boiling them. The fresher the egg, the sturdier the yolk membrane (which keeps the yolk together) and the thicker the white (which helps it cling to the yolk and protect it during cooking). Acid makes the whites set faster, so add a little vinegar to the cooking water. On page 156, we've given a basic procedure that will never fail you, as well as an admittedly over-the-top recipe for fried poached eggs and serrano ham on creamed spinach.

Now, frying poached eggs sounds challenging, and if you're having a bad day, this might not be the dish you want to make. But, in all honesty, it's not really that hard: To minimize the fraught factor, poach the eggs ahead of time and hold them in cold water—they even keep that way overnight. Make the creamed spinach and shove it on a back burner. Then, after you've heated the oil (you will need a deep-fat thermometer) and fried the ham, gently blot the eggs dry and carefully, lovingly dredge them in a classic anglaise coating: first flour, then beaten egg, then fresh bread crumbs. Fry the eggs two at a time, drain them, and serve them for brunch (if you go in for that sort of thing) or for Sunday night supper. It is hard to describe just how wonderful this is. And your guests will utter cries of joy and think you are a genius. >



(1) Our filling includes croutons, Gruyère, and a mixture of finely chopped parsley and garlic. (2) The fat in the pan should be sizzling hot before you begin. (3) After pouring the beaten eggs into the pan, stir them in a circular pattern while keeping the pan moving back and forth. (4) Spread the eggs out into little hills and valleys and cook them undisturbed for a few seconds. (5) Add the filling, cook until the eggs are just set, then fold one third of the omelet (the part nearest the handle) over the filling. (6) Reversing your overhand grip on the handle for better leverage, slide the unfolded part of the omelet onto a plate and fold the omelet over itself, tilting the pan so that its sloped side does most of the work.

OMELETS An omelet is a cook's best friend. Once you get the hang of making one (and it is entirely a matter of practice, as Julia Child famously said, because there is no time at all to stop in the middle and pore over a recipe), you will never want for a fast, nourishing, inexpensive meal again. Cook omelets to order and don't limit them to morning hours. They are an excellent reason to invite friends for a light late-night supper; seat everyone around your kitchen table and open a bottle of rosé (one of the most egg-friendly wines) that's left over from the summer. To make the best possible omelets, buy a traditional 24-centimeter (9½-inch) carbon-steel French pan with gently sloping sides (see photos above), available at many cookware stores and at Fante's Kitchen Wares Shop (800-443-2683; fantes.com). Be aware that omelet pans have to be seasoned;

because manufacturers are notoriously skimpy when it comes to seasoning instructions, we've given you a short tutorial on the Web (visit gourmet.com). A nonstick pan with sloping sides works fine, too, but the texture of the cooked egg will be a little tougher and not as light; the fact that you can't get a nonstick surface as hot as iron or steel makes a difference. You can put just about anything you like into an omelet. We went for an element of playfulness in the recipe on page 160 by putting the toast—in the form of freshly toasted croutons—inside the omelet: We loved the clean contrast between their golden crunchiness and the tender, moist softness of the eggs. The filling is enriched with nutty Gruyère, and, in a take on the classic *fines herbes* filling, with the mixture of finely chopped parsley and garlic called *persillade* ("pair-see-YAD"). ▶



(1) The eggshell is quite extraordinary. It can have as many as 17,000 pores, and, to prevent bacteria from entering, it's covered with a natural coating, called the cuticle, made of proteins. That barrier helps keep the egg fresh. The color of the shell depends on the breed of chicken it comes from, and has no bearing on the egg's flavor or nutritional value. (2) Take a look at the hard-boiled eggs above: Starting from the left, you'll see a yolk that is underdone, one that is velvety perfection, and one that is overdone (the longer it cooks, the greater the chance of the chemical reaction that causes the green ring). (3) A sieve is all you need to turn a hard-boiled egg into a mimosa garnish for asparagus (recipe on page 160).

HARD-BOILED EGGS There are endless variations on how to hard-boil eggs, but we're happy with the procedure on page 160. It produces consistently great results whether you're cooking for 4 or 40. Hard-boiled eggs are an exception to the fresh-is-always-best caveat because they are easier to peel if they're at least a week old before you cook them. (Ease of peeling depends on pH—a measure of acid and alkaline levels—and eggs become more alkaline the older they get. Because you want to keep a high degree of alkalinity, don't add vinegar to the cooking water.) If you are going to peel the eggs immediately after cooking, here's a no-nonsense tip: Pour off the hot water and (this is really satisfying) shake the pan so that the eggs turn into little bumper cars. Once they are thoroughly cracked, fill the pan with cold water and let the eggs sit in it

for about 15 minutes. That will stop the cooking (preventing that harmless-but-unappealing green halo shown in the photo at top right) and allow water to seep between the shells and the whites, making peeling even less of a chore. We chose to make asparagus mimosa (page 160) with the result. (Asparagus has become the newest seasonless vegetable.) Some people dismiss the bright yellow garnish as froufrou decoration, but they're missing the point: As the sieved egg absorbs the vinaigrette, it turns light and fluffy, like the mimosa blossoms that grace a mild Provençal winter. The egg also tempers the sharpness of the vinaigrette, giving it a wonderfully rich, creamy mouthfeel. In fact, the dish is a perfect example of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. You will be stunned that something so simple can taste so delicious. >



Take eggs out of the breakfast category and see what happens: The crisp outside of a fried poached egg yields to a rich, soft interior (creamed spinach and bits of serrano ham bring it all home); asparagus mimosa feels like Provence; and a classic omelet has a crunchy surprise inside.

POACHED EGGS

SERVES 2 TO 4

ACTIVE TIME: 5 MIN START TO FINISH: 15 MIN

- 1 teaspoon vinegar
- 4 very fresh large eggs

▶ Combine 1½ inches water (about 2 quarts) and vinegar in a wide 3-quart heavy saucepan (preferably about 9 inches wide) and bring to a simmer.
 ▶ Break 1 egg into a small bowl or cup and slide egg into water. Repeat with each remaining egg, spacing them evenly in saucepan, and poach at a bare simmer until whites are firm and yolks are still runny, 2 to 3 minutes. Transfer eggs as cooked to paper towels using a slotted spoon.

COOKS' NOTES: Poached eggs keep overnight. Transfer eggs as cooked with a slotted spoon to a bowl of cold water, then chill in water. To reheat eggs, lower them into simmering water with a slotted spoon and cook 20 to 30 seconds. Transfer to paper towels.

• The eggs in this recipe will not be fully cooked, which may be of concern if salmonella is a problem in your area.

DEEP-FRIED POACHED EGGS WITH CREAMED SPINACH AND SERRANO HAM

SERVES 4

ACTIVE TIME: 1 HR START TO FINISH: 1 HR

A crisp bread coating and savory serrano ham put a new spin on eggs Florentine.

- 1 cup heavy cream
- ½ cup plus 2 teaspoons all-purpose flour
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped shallot
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- 1 (10-oz) package frozen chopped spinach, thawed and squeezed dry
- ⅛ teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- 1½ cups coarse fresh bread crumbs (from firm white bread)
- 4 poached large eggs (recipe precedes)
- 3 oz thinly sliced serrano ham or prosciutto
- 7 to 8 cups vegetable oil
- 1 large egg, lightly beaten with ¼ teaspoon water

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT: a deep-fat thermometer

▶ Whisk together cream and 2 teaspoons flour in a small bowl until just combined.
 ▶ Cook shallot in butter in a 9- to 10-inch heavy skillet over moderately low heat, stirring occasionally, until shallot is softened, about 3 minutes. Add spinach, nutmeg, ½ teaspoon salt, and ¼ teaspoon pepper and cook, stirring constantly, until excess liquid is evaporated, about 2 minutes. Stir cream mixture, then add to spinach and cook, stirring occasionally, until cream is slightly thickened, about 2 minutes. Remove from heat.
 ▶ Stir together bread crumbs, ¼ teaspoon salt, and ⅛ teaspoon pepper in a shallow bowl. Spread remaining ½ cup flour on a plate and set aside for dredging.

▶ Gently blot any water from top of poached eggs with paper towels, then sprinkle with remaining ¼ teaspoon salt and ⅛ teaspoon pepper.

▶ Carefully dredge 1 poached egg in flour, dusting off excess. Transfer to beaten egg, spooning to coat completely, then transfer with a slotted spoon to bread crumbs, letting excess egg drip off. Coat with crumbs and transfer to a plate.

Repeat with remaining poached eggs, 1 at a time. ▶ Cut sliced ham crosswise into ¼-inch-wide strips.

▶ Heat 1½ inches oil in a 3- to 4-quart heavy saucepan (about 1½ inches deep) over high heat until deep-fat thermometer registers 375°F. Fry ham in oil, stirring occasionally with a clean slotted spoon to separate strips, until crisp, 15 to 20 seconds. Transfer ham to paper towels to drain.

▶ Return frying oil to 375°F.

▶ Lower 2 eggs (1 at a time on slotted spoon) into hot oil and fry until golden brown, 15 to 20 seconds. Transfer fried eggs to paper towels to drain. Repeat with remaining 2 eggs.

▶ Reheat spinach over low heat, stirring constantly and adding more cream or water to loosen mixture if necessary, about 1 minute.

▶ Divide creamed spinach among 4 plates, then top with poached eggs and ham.

COOKS' NOTE: The eggs in this recipe will not be fully cooked, which may be of concern if salmonella is a problem in your area.

For MORE RECIPES, see page 160.

BEHOLD THE EGG

Continued from page 156

PARSLEY-CROUTON OMELETS WITH GRUYÈRE

SERVES 4

ACTIVE TIME: 30 MIN START TO FINISH: 45 MIN

Who needs toast when you have golden croutons in this otherwise classic omelet?

FOR FILLING

- 2 cups cubed (½-inch) firm white bread
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ½ cup finely chopped fresh parsley
- 1 small garlic clove, finely chopped
- 3½ oz Gruyère cheese (1 cup)

FOR OMELETS

- 12 large eggs
- 4 teaspoons water
- 1 scant teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- ½ stick (¼ cup) unsalted butter

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT: a well-seasoned 9½-inch carbon-steel French omelet pan (for sources, see page 154)

MAKE FILLING: Put oven rack in middle position and preheat oven to 350°F.

►Toss bread cubes with butter in a shallow baking pan, then bake until golden and crisp, 10 to 15 minutes. Sprinkle with salt.

►Stir together parsley and garlic in a small bowl. Coarsely grate cheese (1 cup).

MAKE OMELETS: Beat together 3 eggs, 1 teaspoon water, scant ¼ teaspoon salt, and ⅛ teaspoon pepper in a bowl with a fork until combined. ►Heat omelet pan over moderately high heat until hot, then add 1 tablespoon butter and heat, swirling pan, until foam subsides and begins to brown near edge of pan. Pour beaten eggs into skillet, then cook, shaking pan back and forth quickly with one hand while stirring eggs in a circular pattern with a heatproof rubber spatula with the other hand, until eggs begin to set.

Quickly spread set eggs evenly in skillet and sprinkle with ¼ cup cheese and 1 tablespoon parsley-garlic mixture, then cook until omelet is just set, about 30 seconds to 1 minute. Add one fourth of croutons (about ⅓ cup) across center of omelet. Holding handle of pan near you, lift edge of omelet closest to handle using a rubber spatula and fold one third of omelet over croutons. Grabbing handle from underneath (see photo, page 154), tilt pan over plate until unfolded part of omelet slides onto plate, then immediately invert skillet, as if trying to cover plate, to make omelet fold over itself onto plate. Make 3 more omelets in same manner.

HARD-BOILED EGGS

MAKES 4

ACTIVE TIME: 5 MIN START TO FINISH: 30 MIN

4 large eggs

►Put eggs into a 1-quart saucepan, then add enough cold water to cover them by ½ inch. Bring water to a boil over high heat, then reduce heat to moderately high and cook eggs at a gentle boil, uncovered, 10 minutes. Pour off hot water. If using eggs right away, shake pan gently so eggs bump into one another (to crack shells). Run cold water into pot to stop cooking. Let eggs stand in cold water 15 minutes, adding more cold water or ice to keep water cold.

COOKS' NOTE: Hard-boiled eggs keep, chilled, 5 days.

ASPARAGUS MIMOSA

SERVES 4

ACTIVE TIME: 20 MIN START TO FINISH: 35 MIN

This timeless dish is a beautiful, delicious, easy beginning to dinner. You can also think of mimosa as a nice way to add a little inexpensive protein to a vegetable side or leafy green salad.

1½ lb medium asparagus, trimmed and lower half of stalk peeled

2¼ teaspoons salt

2 tablespoons tarragon vinegar

1 tablespoon finely chopped shallot

1 teaspoon Dijon mustard

⅛ teaspoon black pepper

⅓ cup extra-virgin olive oil

2 hard-boiled large eggs (recipe precedes) at room temperature

►Prepare a bowl of ice and cold water.

►Put asparagus in a 12-inch heavy skillet, then cover with cold water. Bring water to a boil and add 2 teaspoons salt, then reduce heat and simmer asparagus, uncovered, until just tender, 6 to 8 minutes. Transfer with tongs to ice water, then to a clean kitchen towel. Pat dry.

►Whisk together vinegar, shallot, mustard, pepper, and remaining ¼ teaspoon salt in a small bowl, then add oil in a slow stream, whisking until emulsified.

►Halve eggs, then force through a medium-mesh sieve into another small bowl. Toss asparagus with 1 tablespoon vinaigrette in a large shallow bowl, then divide asparagus among 4 plates. Spoon additional vinaigrette over asparagus and top with egg.🍷