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Savour the New Season with a Bountiful Autumn Feast

Create a warm and cozy harvest table for the fall afternoons to come

BY SEBASTIEN AND SHEILA CENTNER **PUBLISHED** SEPTEMBER 2, 2026



There is something especially inviting about gathering around the table in early fall. With autumn arriving soon, the days will still carry a hint of summer, but the season's richest flavours are beginning to emerge: earthy beets, sweet figs, hearty sweet potatoes, along with the warm spices and citrus that make cooler evenings feel instantly cozier. It is the perfect time to rethink the traditional dinner party and embrace a "linner" – a leisurely meal that bridges lunch and dinner, beginning in mid-afternoon and stretching comfortably into the early evening before the chill sets in.

A fall harvest linner is less formal than a dinner party, but no less memorable. It gives guests time to mingle over cocktails, share small plates and enjoy a meal that feels abundant without being overly elaborate. The menu can follow the rhythm of the season, moving from fresh and colourful to warm and comforting, with just enough sweetness to finish.

This menu is designed around that idea. Start with a fragrant Sage and Fig Rum Punch, followed by elegant Beet and Feta Stacks. A golden Cornish hen with creamy sweet potato mash makes a beautiful main course, while Chocolate Fondant Cake with Syrup-Poached Oranges provides a decadent finale. Together, they create a relaxed, harvest-inspired gathering made for lingering.

SEB SAYS: *Check the weather forecast if you're hosting outside! Fall weather can be unpredictable and you want to be sure your linner won't get rained out. Remind your guests they'll be dining outside so they dress appropriately.*

SHEILA SAYS: *What we love most about a linner is that it gets everyone home early enough to start the next day fresh. Invite guests for 2 p.m. and be seated no later than 3 p.m. so that by 5 p.m., as it gets dark and the temperature drops, you're already done.*

THE COCKTAIL

BEGIN THE AFTERNOON WITH A COCKTAIL that tastes like fall in a glass. Fresh figs and fragrant sage bring an earthy sweetness to rum, while citrus keeps the drink bright and refreshing. It is sophisticated enough for entertaining, yet easy to prepare ahead.



Bruce Gibson Photography

Sage-Fig Rum Punch

YIELD: 1 cocktail | **PREP TIME:** 5 minutes

Ingredients:

2 oz white rum

1 oz Grand Marnier

2 tbsp sage-infused simple syrup

Juice of ½ lemon

Club soda

½ fig for garnish

• Place the rum, Grand Marnier, simple syrup and lemon juice in a stemmed rocks glass filled with ice, then stir gently to combine.

• Top with club soda and garnish with the fig.

SHEILA SAYS: *To make sage-infused simple syrup, bring 2 cups of water, 2 cups of sugar and 4 sprigs of fresh sage to simmer on a stove. Remove from the heat and leave to steep for an hour and then strain. It's good for up to three weeks if refrigerated in an airtight container!*

THE STARTER

COLOURFUL AND ELEGANT, these beet and feta stacks turn simple seasonal ingredients into a striking first course. The earthy sweetness of roasted beets pairs beautifully with creamy, salty feta, creating a bite that feels both fresh and indulgent.



Beet & Feta Stacks

YIELD: 6-8 servings | **PREP TIME:** 30 minutes | **COOK TIME:** 45 minutes

Ingredients:

4 medium beets, washed

1 cup crumbled feta cheese

¼ cup brick-style cream cheese

Black pepper

Honey, olive oil and grated lemon zest for garnish (optional)

Method:

• Place the beets in a pot and cover with cold water by 2 inches. Bring to a boil over high heat, reduce the heat, and simmer, uncovered, until the beets are fork-tender, about 45 minutes. Drain and let cool completely. Want to save some work? Buy pre-cooked beets so you just need to slice.

• In a large mixing bowl, mix together the feta cheese, cream cheese, and pepper to taste with a spoon or handheld mixer.

• Slice the beets into rounds about ¼-inch thick, or use a 1-inch cookie cutter to make perfect circles. You should wind up with about 60 rounds.

• Using your hands, roll ½ tsp of the feta mixture into a ball and place it on a beet round. Place another beet round on top and gently press together. Place another feta ball on top, followed by another beet round, and gently press together. Secure the layers with a short skewer or toothpick. Repeat until all the beet rounds have been used.

• Garnish with a drizzle of honey and olive oil and a sprinkling of lemon zest (if using). Serve immediately or refrigerate for up to 2 hours.

SEB SAYS: *For this dish, make sure to use small beets to keep it bite-sized or, if using full size beets, use a small round cookie cutter to get perfect circles.*

SHEILA SAYS: *The downside of beets – they stain – so make sure to wear a pair of disposable rubber gloves when you are assembling them.*

THE MAIN

FOR THE MAIN COURSE, Cornish hen instead of chicken makes the meal feel special without becoming overly formal. Served alongside velvety sweet potato mash, this comforting combination celebrates fall's natural sweetness while bringing warmth and richness to the table.



Cornish Hen with Sweet Potato Mash

CORNISH HEN:
YIELD: 6-8 servings | **PREP TIME:** 15 minutes | **COOK TIME:** 30-45 minutes

SWEET POTATO MASH:
YIELD: 6-8 servings | **PREP TIME:** 20 minutes + 20 minutes to cool | **COOK TIME:** 1 hour

Ingredients:

Cornish Hen:

5 garlic cloves, minced

2½ tsp sweet paprika

5 tsp herbes de Provence

2½ tsp black pepper

2½s tbsp olive oil

4 Cornish hens

Sea salt

1 tbsp grated lemon zest

1 tbsp Italian parsley, finely chopped

Sweet Potato Mash:

4 large sweet potatoes

4 large Yukon Gold potatoes, peeled and cut into 2-inch pieces

½ cup butter

1 cup heavy or whipping cream

2 tsp white pepper

Ground nutmeg

½ cup sour cream

2 tbsp maple syrup

Sea salt

Method:

Cornish Hen:

• Preheat the oven to 350°F.

• In a small bowl, combine the garlic, paprika, herbes de Provence, pepper, and oil to form a paste. Set aside.

• Pat dry the Cornish hens with paper towels. Cut them along the breast and backbone to halve them – keep in mind, this is different than spatchcocking. There are some excellent videos on YouTube on how to do this.

• Rub the hens with the seasoning paste.

• Heat a large cast iron pan on the stove over high heat. Sear the Cornish hens, skin side down, until the skin is crisp and releases easily from the pan, 3-4 minutes.

• Transfer the hens to a large baking sheet or dish and let cool enough to handle. Push the drumstick meat down the bone by about 1 inch.

SHEILA SAYS: *When you're serving these with the sweet potato mash, this will give the fancy effect of showing the bone sticking straight up on the plate as the mash serves as a perfect base in which to place the Cornish hen.*

• Cook the Cornish hens until their internal temperature is at least 160°F, but not more than 180°F. The timing can range from 25 to 40 minutes, depending on the size of the hens, so use a meat thermometer to be sure.

• Remove the hens from the oven and sprinkle with the lemon zest and chopped parsley. Reserve the cooking juices.

Sweet Potato Mash:

• Preheat the oven to 350°F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.

• Place the sweet potatoes on the baking sheet and roast until they can be easily pierced with a small knife, about 45 minutes. Let them become cool enough to handle, about 20 minutes, then slice each one lengthwise, scoop the flesh into a medium bowl and set aside. Discard the skins.

• Meanwhile, in a medium pot, cover the Yukon Gold potatoes with cold water by about 2 inches and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat to medium and simmer, uncovered, until the potatoes are soft but retain their shape, about 20 minutes. Drain into a colander and add to the bowl with the sweet potatoes.

• Place both potatoes, butter, cream, pepper and a pinch of nutmeg in a stand mixer fitted with the paddle attachment and mix on medium speed until evenly blended. Add the sour cream and beat on high speed until smooth. Season to taste with salt and transfer to an oven-safe dish large enough to hold everything snugly but without crowding.

SHEILA SAYS: *If you want to make this mash a few hours ahead, you can cover it with foil and reheat in the oven until hot. It's even great the next day for leftovers.*

THE DESSERT

END ON A SUITABLY INDULGENT NOTE with a chocolate fondant that is rich and molten at the centre. Syrup-poached oranges add brightness and a sophisticated citrus finish, balancing the chocolate and giving this dessert a distinctly seasonal feel.



Chocolate Fondant Cake with Syrup-Poached Oranges

CHOCOLATE FONDANT CAKE:
YIELD: 6-8 servings | **PREP TIME:** 20 minutes | **COOK TIME:** 20 minutes

SYRUP-POACHED ORANGES:
YIELD: 6 servings | **PREP TIME:** 20 minutes | **COOK TIME:** 20 minutes

Ingredients:

Chocolate Fondant Cake:

- 1 cup butter
- 7 oz dark chocolate (at least 70% cocoa)
- 5 large eggs, room temperature
- 1⅔ cups icing sugar
- 1 tbsp all-purpose flour

Syrup-Poached Oranges:

- 6 Valencia oranges (or other thin-skinned orange, not navel)
- 5 cups granulated sugar
- 4 cinnamon sticks
- 8 green cardamom pods
- ½ tsp whole cloves
- 2 tbsp cognac (optional)

Method:

Chocolate Fondant Cake:

- Preheat the oven to 375°F. Line the bottom of a 9-inch springform pan with silicone or parchment paper. Coat the sides of the pan and the parchment paper with cooking spray.
- Fill a medium saucepan with water and bring to a simmer over medium-high heat. Set a mixing bowl on top to create a double boiler. Ensure that the bottom of the bowl doesn't touch the water.
- Place the butter and chocolate in the mixing bowl and stir gently and consistently until melted and combined.
- Remove the bowl from the heat and let it cool for about 5 minutes, stirring occasionally.

SEB SAYS: *Melting chocolate in the microwave might be tempting, but it burns really quickly so watch it carefully. A double boiler is an easy trick to make sure you get that smooth velvety consistency and takes very little time.*

- Once cooled, add the eggs one at a time, whisking quickly and vigorously until they are fully combined – this will help prevent them from cooking in the warm chocolate.
- Stir in the icing sugar and flour until just combined. Pour the batter into the prepared pan.
- Bake until the top of the cake is set but the centre is still soft and wobbly, about 15 minutes. Allow the cake to cool slightly before removing from the pan and serving.
- This can be served warm or made earlier in the day and stored at room temperature.

SHEILA SAYS: *If you make this more than a few hours before, plan on keeping the cake refrigerated and removing it from the fridge 15 minutes before serving to allow it to come to room temperature.*

Syrup-Poached Oranges:

• Completely peel the oranges, removing as much of the stringy pith as possible.

• Place the oranges in a large stockpot, then add cold water to cover them by 1 inch. Add the sugar, cinnamon, cardamom pods and cloves. Stir once, then bring to a boil, uncovered and without stirring, over high heat.

• Once boiling, reduce the heat to a simmer, add the cognac (if using), and cook until the oranges are soft and feel heavy when lifted with a spoon (this means they have absorbed the syrup), 30-40 minutes.

SHEILA SAYS: *You can serve the oranges warm, or refrigerate them in the syrup in an airtight container for up to three days and serve cool. They are even great for breakfast the next day!*

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Linner is a great way to get together in the fall on a Sunday night without committing yourself and your guests to a late night. It is about giving people a reason to slow down, linger through the afternoon and enjoy the transition to fall while savouring the best the season has to offer. Set the table, pour yourself a drink and let the afternoon unfold naturally.



Seb and Sheila Centner

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