



Culinary Corner

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FEATURE



Neil Asher/CW photo

Black bean soup and a hearty vegetarian chili are a great start to fine football fare.

A Super Bowl spread

Score big entertaining gridiron guests

by Heidi Billotto
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The ambiguous combination of letters and numbers 02.04.07 SBXLI may look like an Internet password, but its meaning is no mystery to football fans. It's the handle for the Super Bowl, scheduled for Sunday, Feb. 4.

Diehard football fans tune in each year to watch the game no matter which teams are playing. Average followers watch the event to stay in the know, catch half-time entertainment and watch the debut of possible award-winning commercials. Those completely uninterested in the game get into the spirit by using the annual occasion as an excuse to entertain.

First-quarter huddle

A successful Super Bowl party is nothing without theme-inspired decorations. Actual party color schemes may vary from year to year, based on participating teams. If you have no strong feelings as to whether the Indianapolis Colts or the Chicago Bears will sport the coveted rings at the end of it all, a simple green, white and brown party color palette will suffice.

Use lengths of Astroturf or other green textured fabric as tablecloths. Cut and apply white duct tape to the tablecloth to resemble yard lines. Finish the look with brown toy or regulation-sized footballs placed among serving dishes.

If you are not into do-it-yourself decorations, party supply, grocery and even local drug and discount stores

have football-themed plates, cups, tablecloths and football lights readily available this time of year.

The halftime spread

When it comes to food, follow this mantra: Keep it simple. Football enthusiasts want food that tastes good and is easy to eat. Finger foods like chips, chicken wings and stuffed potato wedges are always a fashionable choice, with hearty soups and stews a close second. This week's recipe for jalapeño poppers from locals Rick Haefle and Linda Sacra is a favorite among the Super Bowl partiers I know.

Don't ignore the recipe's caution to wear rubber or latex gloves to protect skin from the hot jalapeño oil. Without gloves, you won't feel the burn on your fingers initially, but the minute you touch your eyes, nose or mouth – even after you've washed your hands – the potent oils will make their mark.

CHEESE-STUFFED JALAPEÑOS

- 8-10 whole jalapeños
- 1 cup feta cheese, crumbled
- 1 (8-oz.) block cream cheese
- 1 cup shredded Monterey Jack or muenster cheese
- 1/4 cup dry seasoned bread crumbs

Wear rubber gloves and slice jalapeños in half lengthwise, scraping out the seeds and ribs.

Place the chilies open side up on a baking sheet.

Combine the three cheeses in a food processor or blender. Stuff jalapeños with the cheese mix. Top with a sprinkling of bread crumbs. Bake in a preheated

350-degree oven for 30-40 minutes.

Black bean soup always scores. It's at its best prepared ahead of time and then reheated on game day.

CUBAN BLACK BEAN SOUP

- 2 lbs. canned black beans, with liquid
- 4 cups water
- 4 cups chicken or vegetable broth
- 2 Tbsp. olive oil
- 2 medium onions, diced
- 2 cloves garlic
- 2 Tbsp. malt vinegar
- 1 tsp. ground cumin
- 1 tsp. sugar
- Sea salt and pepper to taste
- Cooked white rice
- Sour cream
- Fresh minced cilantro or parsley

Place beans, water and broth into a large stockpot. Bring to a simmer over low heat.

Meanwhile, heat the olive oil in a separate skillet over high heat and brown one diced onion with the garlic. Add browned onions and garlic to the beans; simmer 30 minutes more. Add the vinegar, sugar and cumin. Continue to simmer another 15-20 minutes. Season with salt and pepper. Ladle into bowls; top with rice, remaining onion and sour cream.



Homemade sugar cookies, decorated in your team's colors, make a super sweet treat for the big game.

Photo courtesy of Wilton Enterprises Inc.

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For football fanatics whose tastes are more traditional, try serving a big pot of chili. It's likely to satisfy armchair quarterbacks, even if the game doesn't go their way. This version is low-fat and vegetarian. Mince the mushrooms and the carrots in a food processor fitted with a steel blade and they will take on the texture of ground beef. Serve chili in bowls or mugs or over baked potato halves. Garnish with grated cheese, chopped onions, diced avocado and low-fat or fat-free sour cream.

If guests aren't watching waistlines and would rather dine by dip, then blend a mix of cream cheese and Velveeta into the recipe and serve with tortilla chips for chili cheese dip.

HEIDI'S VEGGIE CHILI

1 minced green bell pepper
2 Tbsp. extra virgin olive oil
1 tsp. dried red pepper flakes
1 lb. whole mushrooms, finely minced
4-5 whole carrots, finely minced
1 (10-oz.) can Ro-tel tomatoes, drained
2 (14.5-oz.) cans diced tomatoes, with liquid
1 (27-oz.) can dark red kidney beans, drained
2 Tbsp. chili powder
1 Tbsp. ground cumin
Sea salt and black pepper to taste

Sauté the minced green pepper and dried pepper flakes in olive oil over high heat until lightly browned and limp. Add minced mushrooms and carrots and sauté 3-4 minutes, stirring well. Add tomatoes, kidney beans, chili powder and cumin. Blend well; reduce heat to low and simmer 15-20 minutes. Season to taste with sea salt and pepper.

For chili cheese dip, stir in one eight-ounce block of cream cheese and a four-ounce portion of Velveeta processed cheese. Stir chili until cheese melts.

Third-quarter sweets

Before the final touchdown, call a time-out for football player cookies decorated in team colors. Use a teddy bear cookie cutter to cut the dough. Remove the bear's ears and, with a little imagination, you instantly have a helmet-clad linebacker ready for action. If you're pressed for time, use refrigerated cookie dough as a substitute for homemade.

Huddle around to decorate cooled cookies with ready-to-use icing and edible color markers. These colorful sugar cookie cutouts will have everyone running back for more.

To order cookie cutters, icing and FoodWriter edible markers, visit www.wilton.com.

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Gridiron

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FOOTBALL PLAYER COOKIES

1-1/2 cups butter, softened
1 cup sugar
1 egg
1 tsp. vanilla
1/2 tsp. almond extract
3 cups all-purpose flour
2 tsp. baking powder
Ready-to-use icing, tinted in team colors
FoodWriter edible color markers

Cream butter and sugar together with an electric mixer. Beat in egg and vanilla and almond extract. Combine flour and baking powder; add to butter mixture,

one cup at time, mixing well after each addition. The dough will be very stiff. If necessary, add a little more water, but just a teaspoon at a time. Do not chill dough. Divide dough into two balls. On a floured surface, roll each ball into a circle approximately 12 inches in diameter and a quarter-inch thick. Dip teddy bear-shaped cookie cutters into flour first and then into the dough. Cut off the ears to form the shape of a helmet. Bake cookies in a preheated 400-degree oven on an ungreased cookie sheet 6-7 minutes or until edges of cookies are lightly browned. Cool completely on wire rack before decorating.

Recipe courtesy of Wilton Enterprises. □

What's cookin'

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The uptown and SouthPark locations of Morton's The Steakhouse will offer a choice of Super Bowl dining packages Feb. 4. Uptown, Morton's kicks off at 6 p.m. serving a championship menu that includes a choice of beverages and appetizers, a dinner buffet and a choice of desserts. The local United Way chapter will receive nearly 20 percent of the event's \$85-per-person cost. At SouthPark, Morton's offers a slightly different menu priced at \$65 per person. Each location features state-of-the-art digital technology that provides guests with a theater-style experience created with nine-foot drop-down screens, a high-definition projection system and a surround-sound sensory system of 11 speakers. To make reservations or for more information, call the uptown Morton's at 704-333-2602 or the SouthPark location at 704-365-1330.



Ratcliffe on the Green, a popular Charlotte restaurant located uptown in the historic Ratcliffe Florist building, is now open under new ownership. The restaurant's menu primarily will feature products indigenous to North and South Carolina. Co-owner and executive chef Mark Hibbs will bring more than 20 years of experience to the restaurant. Hibbs is well known in Charlotte for having been the executive chef at Cosmos Café and Bistro 100 and for bringing the first James Beard Foundation dinner to Charlotte. Much of the produce featured at Ratcliffe on the Green will be grown in Hibbs' organic garden. Native Charlottean and Johnson & Wales University culinary student Zach Goodyear is the majority owner. Brian Stockholm, formerly the general manager and executive

chef of Cosmos Café and the first executive chef at Noble's restaurant, will be the general manager. Ratcliffe on the Green, which opened in February 2004, occupies the space in which Ratcliffe Florist operated for more than 60 years. Constructed in 1929, the beautifully appointed Tryon Street building was saved from demolition in the 1990s by First Union National Bank and incorporated into retail and residential space. The restaurant features Tiffany glass windows and interior columns with embedded gaslights that once lined the streets of Charlotte. Ratcliffe on the Green is now a 65-seat restaurant that offers contemporary Carolinas cuisine in an intimate and relaxed environment.



James Bazzelle, owner of Mert's Heart and Soul restaurant, is pictured with Congressman Melvin Watt (D-NC, 12th District)



Congratulations to Mert's Heart and Soul restaurant owner James Bazzelle and his wife, Renee, awarded the "Bigger and Better Business Legacy Award" by the Charlotte Alumni Chapter of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, during the organization's annual Founder's Day Celebration on Jan. 6 at the Westin Hotel in Charlotte. □