

The Livin' is Easy

CHEF KEVIN JOHNSON CREATES A LOW-STRESS
SUMMER DINNER PARTY MENU

By Helen Mitternacht

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JONATHAN BONCEK



Johnson's menu may be lengthy for the home cook, but it's made to be tailored, he says. "You could be just as successful doing two or three of these sides and it would be great."

SNAP BEAN SALAD
WITH PICKLED SHRIMP
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SHAVED SUMMER SQUASH
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LEG OF LAMB WITH
GREEK PANZANELLA
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CHARRED BROCCOLI WITH
ROMAN VINAIGRETTE
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CERAMIC TABLEWARE COURTESY OF CBFB TABLESCAPES

IF YOUR DINNER PARTIES involve a disappearing act while you juggle hot pans for half the evening, Kevin Johnson has a better solution. The executive chef and owner of the Grocery in Charleston, South Carolina, offers a summer menu that will allow you to relax as guests arrive. “If you’re going to have a great dinner party, stress yourself out a day or two before, so when guests arrive, you can hang out and enjoy yourself,” Johnson says. “With a bit of planning, a lot can be done ahead.”

Good planning may be why the 2014 James Beard semi-finalist has time to be a board member for the Charleston Wine + Food Festival teach at the Culinary Institute of Charleston, and work on behalf of Lowcountry Local First, promoting locally-owned businesses.

Johnson’s Mediterranean-themed dinner marries fresh side dishes with a leg of lamb that he promises won’t add to the stress. Greek feta vinaigrette, he says, is refreshing, bright, and brings a lot of acidity and crunch to cut through the lamb’s richness. The key is to put the feta in the dressing. “Feta can be kind of intense so if you put it in the vinaigrette rather than tossing it onto the salad, you can use quite a lot less while still permeating the salad with the feta flavor. You can make the vinaigrette a couple of days ahead.” Planks of grilled broccoli bring more crunch and acidity when tossed with a roman vinaigrette featuring anchovies, chile, lemons, and garlic. “This is one of the few dishes you’ll toil over at the last minute. I really like getting some nice rustic char on broccoli; it adds sweetness but at the same time, just a little bitterness,” says Johnson. “The vinaigrette is very assertive. You add salinity with some capers and olives, put it all in a bowl and toss and then arrange it on a plate. You can serve it room temperature.”

Traditional eggplant caponata calls for simmering eggplant until it’s soft and brown—“not the prettiest,” Johnson says. Instead, he layers grilled eggplant slices with raw tomato and sliced mozzarella, gratin-style, pops it into the oven, and then drizzles with a rich caponata sauce.

Blanched snap beans and shaved radish pair well with coin-like slices of Charleston’s ubiquitous pickled shrimp, dressed by the pickling juice. Shaved summer squash with lemon juice, olive oil, pecorino, Marcona almonds, and lots of mint does double duty by using up a notorious bumper crop and creating more crunch. It’s countered by a chewy tabbouleh, made with farro rather than the traditional cracked wheat so it can be made ahead.

The dinner’s star is the leg of lamb. “I chose

lamb because I think it’s reserved too much for special occasions,” Johnson says. “People are a little bit intimidated by it, but why not celebrate with lamb instead of throwing a bunch of steaks on the grill?” Johnson’s lamb is rubbed with North African spices and then basted with rosemary, lemon, and olive oil. For the home griller, Johnson advises lighting one side of the grill and putting the lamb on the other side so it cooks slowly over indirect heat. “You want to cook it low and slow. You don’t want to take a big hunk of meat and just slap it on the grill,” he says.

The main thing is that the dishes don’t have to be served piping hot, which means that you can relax at your dinner party, and pour yourself a cocktail. This is Charleston, after all.

“The idea with serving cold or room temperature dishes is they all have room for error. You don’t want to be stressed out about having something at the perfect temperature.”



FARRO TABBOULEH
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FARRO TABBOULEH

Serves 6-8

2 cups farro piccolo
 3 tomatoes, peeled, seeded, and minced
 2-3 cucumbers, diced small
 2 small spring onions or 8 scallions, minced
 1 large bunch Italian parsley, minced (about 1 cup)
 1 large bunch mint, minced (about 1 cup)
 Zest and juice of 2 lemons
 ½ cup olive oil (preferably unfiltered extra virgin)
 Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

1. Cook farro in salted boiling water according to package directions, drain, and chill.
2. In large bowl, combine chilled farro and rest of ingredients, and season with salt and pepper.

SHAVED SUMMER SQUASH

Serves 6-8

For the vinaigrette:

Zest and juice of 2 lemons
 1 clove garlic, minced
 ½ cup olive oil (preferably unfiltered extra virgin)

For the squash:

6-8 small summer squash (not patty pan)
 1 pint cherry tomatoes, halved
 4 ounces pecorino cheese, shaved with a vegetable peeler
 ⅔ cup Marcona almonds
 1 bunch mint, leaves picked, chiffonade
 3 tablespoons minced chives
 Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

1. Make the vinaigrette: In a small bowl, combine zest, juice, and garlic, and season with salt and pepper to taste. Let stand for 10 minutes to mellow rawness of garlic. Whisk in olive oil.
2. Make the squash: With a mandolin or very sharp knife, slice squash thinly. Place slices into colander set over another bowl and season with salt. Let stand for about 15 to 20 minutes, or until pliable. Shake moisture from squash over sink. Place into a clean bowl and dress with vinaigrette.
3. Arrange squash slices in an overlapping pattern in a single layer on a serving platter. Season with pepper and scatter with tomatoes, pecorino, almonds, mint, and chives. Drizzle the platter with additional vinaigrette.



CHARRED BROCCOLI WITH ROMAN VINAIGRETTE

Serves 6-8

For the roman vinaigrette:

2 tablespoons olive oil
 2 anchovies, chopped
 1 garlic clove, chopped
 ½ shallot, chopped
 1½ tablespoons capers, rinsed and chopped
 1 tablespoon picholine olives, chopped
 1 Calabrian chile, chopped (reserve oil)
 Zest and juice of 2 lemons, plus additional ¼ cup lemon juice
 ¼ cup olive oil
 1 teaspoon reserved chile oil

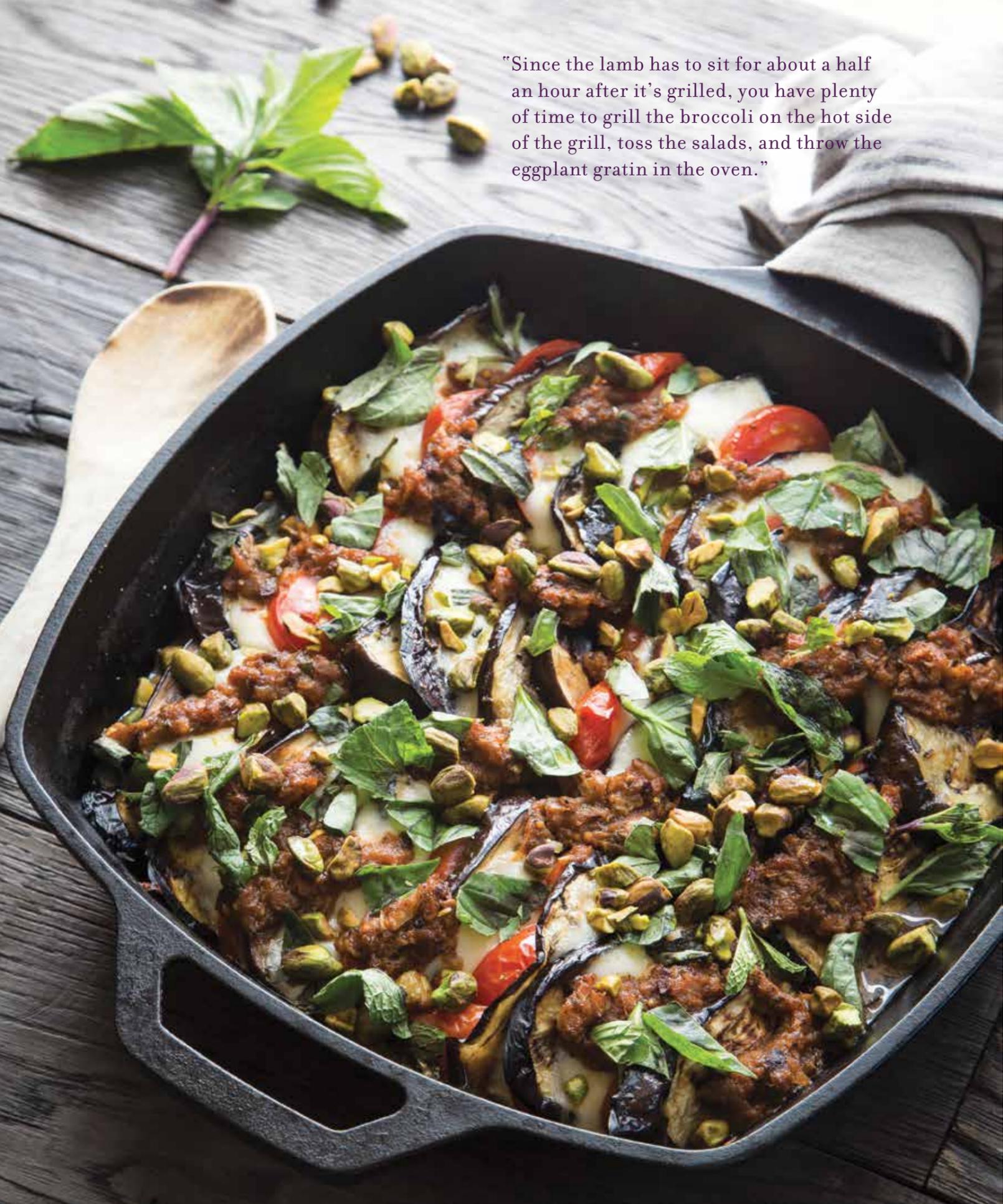
For the broccoli:

1½ pounds broccoli crowns, sliced lengthwise into ½-inch planks

2 tablespoons olive oil
 Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

1. Make the vinaigrette: Add all chopped ingredients to food processor with lemon zest and grind to a paste. Transfer contents to large bowl and add lemon juice. Whisk in olive oil until incorporated, and dash of chile oil to taste.
2. Make the broccoli: Preheat grill or broiler to high. Toss broccoli with olive oil, salt, and pepper. Grill or broil until nicely charred and tender but still toothsome, about 4-5 minutes.
3. Toss broccoli with vinaigrette until well coated. To serve, arrange on platter and drizzle any remaining vinaigrette over the top.

“Since the lamb has to sit for about a half an hour after it’s grilled, you have plenty of time to grill the broccoli on the hot side of the grill, toss the salads, and throw the eggplant gratin in the oven.”



GRILLED EGGPLANT CAPONATA GRATIN

Serves 6-8

For the caponata sauce:

1 red onion, minced
½ fennel bulb, minced
2 tablespoons minced garlic
¼ cup raisins or currants
2 tablespoons green olives, minced
2 tablespoons za’atar spice blend
1 pinch red chile flakes
1 tablespoon sugar
1 teaspoon cocoa powder
2 tablespoons minced thyme leaves
2 tablespoons minced oregano leaves
¼ cup red wine vinegar
2 cups tomato puree
2 cups vegetable stock
Olive oil
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

For the eggplant:

6-8 small Italian eggplants, sliced about ½-inch thick
6-8 small tomatoes, sliced about ½-inch thick
1 pound fresh mozzarella in brine, sliced about ¼-inch thick
1 cup pistachios, lightly crushed
1 heaping cup torn fresh herbs, such as Thai basil, mint, parsley, and basil
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

1. Make the caponata sauce: Heat olive oil in a sauté pan over medium heat, and sweat onion, fennel, and garlic until soft, about 10 minutes. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Add raisins, olives, za’atar, chile flakes, sugar, cocoa, thyme, and oregano. Sauté another 5 minutes. Deglaze with vinegar and add tomato puree and stock. Bring to a simmer. Taste and adjust for seasoning—the sauce should be a little sweet, a little sour, and a little salty. Puree in a blender or food processor until smooth.
2. Make the eggplant: Preheat grill to high. Drizzle eggplant with olive oil and season with salt and pepper. Grill over high heat for 1 to 2 minutes on each side. The eggplant should be tender but not cooked completely through.
3. Preheat oven to 425 degrees. Spread a thin layer of caponata sauce on bottom of large ovenproof dish. Alternate layering slices of eggplant, mozzarella, and tomato in a tight pattern until dish is full. Top with more sauce. Bake in oven until sauce is bubbling and cheese is melted, about 10 to 15 minutes. Sprinkle pistachios and herbs before serving.



JOHNSON USES A ROSEMARY BRUSH TO BASTE THE LAMB. ABOVE: JOHNSON COOKS THE LAMB OVER A KUDU OPEN-FIRE GRILL, BUT A STANDARD CHARCOAL SET-UP WILL WORK FINE.