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A Schmear Campaign

IT'S HAPPENED TO ALL OF US. THE PHONE RINGS.

“Hello?” Then that telltale click while the telecommunication device takes over. You can't even yell or get the satisfaction of slamming the phone on its cradle. No human is there. If you do happen to stay around for the recorded message, you might notice that you're being told just how terrible the other candidate is. It doesn't matter who the other candidate is; just that he/she is “the other”. I've never been advised what good fortune will befall if I vote for whomever is sponsoring the call; only that my taxes will be doubled, my school won't function, my well will run dry...who knows what else. Maybe my hair will turn green if I don't vote as the recorded message demands.

A smear campaign—a plan to discredit or damage the reputation of someone by slander or false accusations—is a plan to divide us. Instead, I'm advocating for a schmear campaign.

A schmear holds things together. As a noun, a schmear is a spread. A schmear of cream cheese holds the smoked salmon on the bagel. Two disparate parts coming together in one tasty whole.

Before COVID-19, when I was frequenting restaurants, I met a friend at an Italian restaurant in the Loop. We were having an early dinner before going to the theater. Our server had arrived from Italy just a few weeks ago. He

had a student visa and was here for the summer. What he lacked in mastery of the English language, he made up for in enthusiasm and hand gestures.

EATING PRETTY

We ordered a roasted vegetable dish that was divine. Wow. We asked our server how it was made.

“Oh, with a schmear of yogurt, then some (at this point, he flapped his arms and said bzzz). Bees, I yelled, getting caught up in this game of Charades. No, you fool. The dish was not made with bees. My friend said “honey”, which of course was correct, and brought a huge smile to our server's face.

What we had was a thin coat of yogurt, a schmear, if you will, on the bottom of a flat platter. The yogurt was drizzled with a full-flavored honey and sprinkled lightly with red pepper flakes. Florets of roasted and charred Romanesco were scattered across the platter. The dish was visually stunning. Had the vegetable been tossed with the yogurt, its appearance would have been diminished. Sure, the tasting notes would have been the same, but isn't eating pretty so much more exciting?

Recently, I was served the most beautiful, appealing citrus salad. Ruby grapefruit, oranges, and cucumbers were tossed in a light vinaigrette. Rather than being bunched together, they were stacked in small piles on a flat white

plate. What held them in place? A slick of avocado that had been pureed until smooth and creamy. The tastes melded together while the colors stayed bright and distinct. Magnifique!

How about a butternut squash puree being the backdrop for thin slices of veal or chicken? The meat is wonderful, but visually pretty dull. Watch what happens when its nestled on a schmear of bright orange. You almost don't want to mess the design, but trust me, you'll dig right in when the fragrance of browned butter and fresh herbs wafts your way.

That's my schmear campaign. My name is Kathy Harrison and I approve this message and these recipes.

YOGURT AND ROMANESCO SCHMEAR

Romanesco, part of the Brassica species, isn't easy to come by. Its chartreuse color and pyramid design make a striking presentation. Green cauliflower or broccoli florets would be good substitutes. Preheat your oven to 425 degrees. Toss the Romanesco, cauliflower, or broccoli florets in a little olive oil and spread in a single layer on a baking sheet. Sprinkle with kosher salt. Roast until the edges of the vegetable are charred and the florets are just tender. You want some crunch, not mush. Cover the bottom of a platter with some Greek style plain yogurt and drizzle it with honey. We have wonderful local honeys available to us. Sprinkle red pepper flakes over the yogurt. I'm a spice sissy, so I don't use too much. Then the darling green vegetable gets placed on the platter. Sprinkle with flaky salt, such as Maldon, and a few grinds of pepper. Serve it up and take your bow.

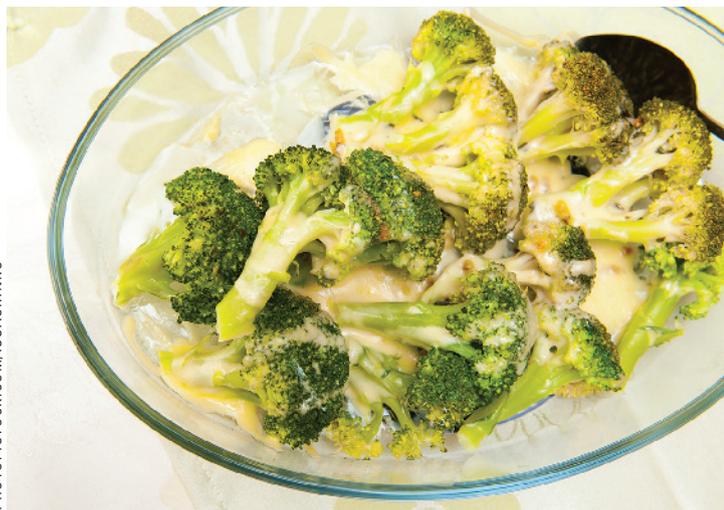


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CITRUS, CUCUMBER, AND AVOCADO SALAD

For the avocado puree, scoop the flesh of two ripe avocados into a food processor. Add a tablespoon of lime juice and two tablespoons olive oil. Puree until smooth, then season to taste with kosher salt and pepper. Make a light vinaigrette with three tablespoons lime juice and a large pinch of kosher salt whisked together with six tablespoons olive oil. Taste and adjust the seasonings, adding more olive oil or lime juice as needed. Cut a ruby red grapefruit into segments, then cut the segments into bite-size pieces. Place in a small bowl. Do the same with an orange, or blood orange. Place in another small bowl. Dice a seeded cucumber into the same size pieces as the citrus. I like to keep the skin on for color. Place the cucumber in a bowl. (I realize the push-back with the four bowls I've told you to use. You CAN combine all the citrus and cucumber together. The taste will still be terrific.)

Toss each citrus and the cucumber with a little vinaigrette. Slick the bottom of a platter or individual plates with a nice healthy layer of avocado puree. Either make stacks or one combination of the citrus and cucumber on the puree. Scatter some chopped cilantro and or chives over the top and serve. It's sweet and tart. What a nice combination.



PHOTO: ISTOCK.COM/PUSHENOK

BUTTERNUT SQUASH PUREE

The butternut squash puree is ethereal. Peel and seed a 1 ½–2 pound squash. Cut into pieces and place in a large pot with 2 ½ cups milk and 1 cup heavy cream. Add 1 teaspoon salt and 2 peeled garlic cloves. Bring to a simmer and cook until the squash is very soft and the liquid pretty much reduced. Use a slotted spoon to transfer the squash to a food processor or blender and use only enough of the cream mixture to allow the blender blades to move easily. Puree until very smooth. Taste and add more salt if necessary. Almost anything looks good with this color. A piece of roasted halibut or cod? Amazing. How about a beautiful, thick grilled pork chop or some tender slices of pan-fried chicken? You can't go wrong. Chopped parsley over the top brings everything together into a cohesive masterpiece. U



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