EGGCELLENT EGGS

EGGS ARE ONE OF THE MOST BASIC INGREDIENTS in the kitchen. They're great on their own, whether coddled; scrambled; fried; boiled; or simply accented in omelets, quiches, and custards. They serve to bind savory ingredients together, as in meat loaf, meatballs, croquettes, and so on. They make baking possible, forming a protein base for everything from cookies to cakes to pancakes to crepes to soufflés and beyond. Eggs are probably the single most versatile ingredient a cook works with. They're also fast-cooking, full of nutrients and easily digested protein, and delicious. What more can any chef ask for? I work long hours, so I frequently fix myself breakfast for dinner after a long day in the kitchen. There's just nothing better than a fried egg sandwich for a late-night meal when I don't feel like rustling up something complicated to eat. I refuse to apologize for it these days. Whenever I mention my little secret of eating breakfast food at night, my friends all confess to loving breakfast for dinner, too. It's even become something I deal with in my job, because the First Family actually asks for breakfast for dinner about once a month, so I've added it to the official White House First Family Meal Rotation. I never thought my secret fetish for breakfast at night would become a job requirement. But eggs are comfort food, so I can see why they remain perennial favorites, especially in the White House. Here are a number of good egg recipes to try for yourself, ranging from the simple to the refined. Eggs don't have to be confined to breakfast or brunch. Try them for dinner. I bet you'll find, as I have, that the people you're feeding will love them. Happy noshing!

CHOCOLATE SOUFFLÉ

Soufflés, by definition, are temperamental. If something goes odd, or somebody bumps the oven wrong, or the phone rings at the wrong time, the thing can deflate like a kid's balloon. So go into this knowing that it will taste good, even if it doesn't look good. But it's actually pretty easy to make—it just isn't always goof-proof. But it will usually look fantastic, and it will impress your guests like almost nothing else will. *3 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened*
½ cup sugar, divided use
6 egg whites
4 ounces best-quality dark chocolate, chopped
½ cup very cold water
cup cocoa powder
Confectioner's sugar, for garnish (optional)
Berries, for garnish (optional)

Preheat oven to 350 degrees F.

Coat the insides of 6 individual soufflé dishes completely with ½ tablespoon butter. Refrigerate until the butter is set, about 3 minutes. Place a teaspoon of sugar into each dish. Shake and turn the dishes until sugar completely coats the butter. Tip out any excess. Add more sugar if needed.

Place prepared dishes on a baking sheet and set aside.

In a very clean mixing bowl (any fat will keep the eggs from whipping well), beat the egg whites on medium to high speed until foamy. Gradually add the remaining sugar a little at a time, and beat until eggs are glossy and soft peaks form when beaters are lifted. Set aside.

Place a large metal mixing bowl over a pan of simmering water. Place the chocolate into the bowl, and stir until melted, glossy, and smooth. Remove from heat. Add the water and the cocoa powder. Stir until smooth. Let cool 1 minute. Add about of the egg-white mixture to the cooled chocolate mixture, folding together gently.

Add the folded mixture to the remaining egg whites. Fold together gently.

Spoon into prepared dishes. Using a straight-edged knife, level the egg mixture in the dishes even with the tops of the dishes. Wipe the edges of the dishes with a dampened towel to clean them.

Bake until soufflés puff up and are cooked through but still moist in the center, 12 to 14 minutes.

Sprinkle with confectioner's sugar and garnish with berries, if using, and serve immediately.

PASTA PRIMAVERA

6 ounces bow tie pasta
2 tablespoons olive oil
2 cloves garlic, smashed, peeled, and minced
2 chicken breasts, de-boned, skinned, and chopped into 1-inch cubes
½ pound of asparagus, trimmed, washed, and sliced into 1-inch pieces
½ pound cherry or grape tomatoes, rinsed and halved
½ pound baby squashes, rinsed, trimmed, and halved
¼ cup fresh basil leaves, julienned
Kosher or sea salt, to taste
Black pepper, to taste
¼-½ cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, or to taste

Serves four. Bring a large saucepan of salted water to a boil over high heat. Add bowtie pasta and cook according to package directions.

While pasta is cooking, place olive oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add garlic and chicken to the pan, cook until garlic is soft and chicken is browned, about 5 to 8 minutes. Add vegetables and cook until vegetables are warmed through and beginning to soften but still retain a little bite, about 6 to 8 minutes.

Stir in fresh basil and remove mixture from heat. Season with salt and pepper, to taste.

Drain cooked pasta. Toss chicken and veggie mixture with pasta. Top with cheese. Serve warm.

WARM BRIE TOPPED WITH WALNUTS, MAPLE SYRUP, AND BERRIES

This looks great, tastes better than it looks, and takes almost no effort. *1 small round Brie, at room temperature*
1 cup peeled, chopped walnuts
1 cup good-quality maple syrup, divided
1 quart rinsed berries, any type
Assorted crackers

Serves four. Preheat oven to 300 degrees F.

Cut the top rind off a small circle of Brie. Place on an oven-safe serving platter. Top with walnuts and ½ cup maple syrup. Turn oven off. Turn broiler on high. Broil cheese until nuts are toasted and cheese is soft. This is something you'll have to watch closely—the nuts can burn quite quickly. Remove from oven.

Add remaining syrup. Surround Brie wheel with alternating pools of berries and crackers. Serve immediately.

EGGS BENEDICT

8 eggs
4 egg yolks
2 tablespoons cream
Juice of ½ lemon (around 1 tablespoon)
½ teaspoon kosher or sea salt
Pinch cayenne pepper or paprika (optional)
1 cup (2 sticks) butter, melted and still hot
4 English muffins, fork split, buttered and toasted
8 slices warm Virginia ham (or Canadian bacon, if you prefer) cut to fit the muffins
Chopped parsley to garnish (optional)

Serves four. Bring a medium saucepan full of salted water to a rolling boil. Reduce heat to a gentle simmer. Crack 1 egg into a small bowl, taking care not to break the yolk. Gently slip the egg into the saucepan filled with hot water, and repeat with 3 more eggs. (You can usually fit 4 eggs at a time in the hot water. Too many, and the eggs won't poach correctly.) Gently coddle to doneness, about 3 minutes, until the whites are set and the yolks remain runny. Remove the eggs from the hot water with a slotted spoon. Set on warmed plate to hold. Repeat with remaining 4 eggs. *Make Hollandaise Sauce:* This blender recipe takes a lot of the angst out of the process of making the sauce the traditional way, which is over a double boiler with a wire whisk. I find it's a lot easier for home cooks to get perfect hollandaise sauce this way. Place egg yolks in a blender container. Add cream, lemon juice, salt, and a pinch of cayenne or paprika (optional, but it adds a nice bite). Cover and pulse on low until blended. Remove the middle insert from the lid, and while continuing to blend on low, slowly and gently add the hot butter to the egg mixture, in a gradual stream. The sauce should thicken and smooth about the time the last of the butter goes in. (The hot butter cooks the egg yolks and the blender emulsifies the lemon juice and melted butter with the yolks.) On warmed serving dish, top each toasted English muffins half with a warm slice of Virginia ham. Place a poached egg gently on top of the ham. Pour hollandaise sauce over eggs. Sprinkle with paprika and chopped parsley to garnish. Serve warm. This recipe sounds a lot more complicated than it is, and it's a restaurant favorite because it used to be a lot harder to make at home. In fact, eggs Benedict used to be a bear to make—especially getting the sauce right. Doing it on the stove, the sauce had a tendency to curdle in inexperienced hands. Thanks to the wonder of modern blenders and a good stove, you should be able to have this on the table in less than 20 minutes.

HERBED SCRAMBLED EGGS

Six eggs
2 tablespoons olive oil, divided
3 tablespoons chopped chives
1 clove garlic, smashed, peeled, and minced (see note, below)
1 teaspoon fresh thyme leaves, or ½ teaspoon dried thyme leaves
1 cup fresh spinach, washed, de-stemmed, and patted dry
Kosher or sea salt and pepper, to taste

Serves two. Break eggs into a bowl. Stir with a fork or whisk gently to break up, but not to blend totally. Set aside.

Heat a large skillet over medium heat. Add 1 tablespoon olive oil and gently rotate the pan to coat the bottom. Add chopped chives, garlic, thyme, and spinach. Stir until spinach wilts and the garlic cooks through and softens, about 2 to 3 minutes.

Transfer mixture to warmed serving plate.

Add remaining olive oil to the same skillet. Gently rotate the pan to coat the bottom. Pour beaten eggs in oiled skillet. Allow bottom to set. Bring in the edges to the center, letting the remainder of the uncooked eggs pour across the pan to cook. Add cooked herbs and greens. Stir slowly until eggs are cooked and the greens and herbs are roughly incorporated, 1 to 2 minutes. Top with salt and freshly grated pepper, to taste. Slide onto warmed serving plate. Serve warm.

The easiest way to deal with fresh garlic is to place a clove on a cutting board, place the broad end of the blade of a chef's knife over it so the blade is parallel to the cutting board surface, and smash your fist against the smooth metal of the knife—carefully! Don't let your flesh get too close to the knife's cutting edge—kitchen accidents are bad. The pounding will smash the garlic and burst the clove free of its papery wrapping, which you can pull off and discard. You can then chop the clove easily.

CINNAMON FRENCH TOAST

4 eggs
1 cup half-and-half
2 tablespoons brown sugar
1 tablespoon cinnamon, plus extra for serving
1 teaspoon vanilla
1 small loaf French bread, raisin bread, or whole wheat bread, sliced
½ cup (1 stick) butter
Maple syrup
Confectioner's sugar
Fruit to garnish (optional)
Ice cream or whipped cream (optional)

Serves four. Preheat oven to 200 degrees F. Break eggs into a flat-bottomed square casserole dish. Whisk until uniform and yellow. Stir in half-and-half, brown sugar, cinnamon, and vanilla. Whisk till blended. You will need to whisk lightly before each dip; the cinnamon tends to float. Dip slices of bread into the egg mixture, one at a time, on both sides. Heat griddle over medium-high heat. Place pats of butter on griddle, one for each space on which you plan to cook a slice of toast. Place dipped bread slice on top of each pat of butter. Cook until browned, about 2 minutes. Top with another small pat of butter. Flip slices onto butter to cook other side of toast until browned. Remove to warmed serving plate. Place completed toast slices in oven to keep warm while you continue cooking. Plate slices onto a small pool of maple syrup. Sprinkle with cinnamon and confectioner's sugar. Add a side of fresh fruit to garnish. Serve with more maple syrup on the side. For true decadence, serve with ice cream or whipped cream.

SCOTCH EGGS

This is a hearty recipe that is the old Scotch equivalent of a modern breakfast sandwich—portable, easy to eat on the run, and filling enough to see a working person through a busy morning. This is not diet food, but it is amazingly tasty. *6 eggs*
1 pound breakfast sausage, thawed
1 cup seasoned bread crumbs

Serves three. Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. Hard-boil the eggs: Place the raw eggs in a saucepan with enough room-temperature water to cover about 1 inch over the top of the eggs. Bring the water to a boil over medium-high heat. Remove from heat and let sit for 15 to 20 minutes. When the pan, water, and eggs have cooled enough to safely handle, pour off water. Rattle the eggs in the pan to bash the eggshells against the side. This will break them and leave the eggs easy to peel. Peel off eggshells and discard.

Divide breakfast sausage into 6 pieces. Roll each piece into a ball and flatten it. Put the sausage patty on your hand, place a hard-boiled egg on the sausage and gently roll the sausage around the egg with both hands until it is covered in an even layer of sausage. Roll the sausage-covered eggs, one at a time, in seasoned bread crumbs. Place the crumb-covered eggs on a cookie sheet or in an uncovered casserole dish and bake until sausage is cooked through, about 25 minutes. To serve, cut each egg in half lengthwise. Lay the two halves on a plate, side by side, cut side up, to show layers of crumbs, sausage, egg whites, and egg yolks.

Serve warm.

A FAT-FREE, CHEESE-FREE, YOLK-FREE, HIGH-FIBER OMELET

Given that almost every recipe in here is likely to send a cardiologist into palpitations, here's the exception. *½ cup broccoli florets, cleaned and chopped*
1 cup fresh spinach leaves, cleaned and de-stemmed
½ cup fresh mushrooms, thinly sliced
1 plum tomato, chopped
1 green onion, rinsed and thinly sliced
¼ cup fat-free ham, cubed
1½ cups egg substitute
Salt and pepper, to taste

Serves two. Coat a nonstick skillet with nonstick cooking spray and place over medium heat. Add the vegetables and the ham to the skillet. Sauté until the veggies are cooked through, the spinach has wilted, and the broccoli is tender, about 3 to 5 minutes. Remove from heat to a warmed plate and set aside. Rinse and dry the skillet. Spray again with nonstick cooking spray. Add egg substitute to pan. Roll the pan around, spreading the egg substitute evenly across the skillet surface. Reduce heat. Cook over medium heat until bottom is well set, about 2 to 3 minutes. Flip egg in pan to cook other side. Place vegetable-ham mixture on half of the egg's surface. Fold cooked egg round gently over veggies. Slide out of skillet onto warmed plate. Season with salt and pepper, to taste. Serve warm.

DEVILED EGGS

6 hard-boiled eggs
3 tablespoons Dijon mustard
½ small onion, very finely minced
1 tablespoon white wine
2 tablespoons mayonnaise
Paprika, for garnish
Chopped chives, for garnish

Serves four.

Cut hard-boiled eggs in half lengthwise. Scoop out yolks into a medium bowl. Set whites aside on serving tray. Refrigerate. Whisk the egg yolks with Dijon mustard, onion, white wine, and mayonnaise. When well blended, pipe or spoon the egg yolk mixture back into centers of cooked whites. Sprinkle with paprika. Top with chopped chives. Serve chilled.

A IOLI (GARLIC MAYONNAISE)

3 egg yolks
4 cloves garlic, mashed, peeled, and very finely minced
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
¾ cup olive oil (not extra virgin)
1 teaspoon white wine vinegar
½ teaspoon kosher or sea salt
¼ teaspoon white pepper (You can use black pepper if you don't have this, but you'll see the flecks of it in the finished product. It gives it a rustic look, which isn't all bad.)
Juice of 1 lemon

This is a blender recipe, to take all the stress out of getting it to emulsify. Place the egg yolks, garlic, and the mustard in the container of a blender. Cover and pulse to blend completely, about 1 minute. Remove the center of the lid, and begin to pour the olive oil into the container in a thin stream, still running on slow. When the mixture comes together and looks like mayonnaise (usually about when half the oil is incorporated), stop pouring oil and add in the vinegar, salt, and pepper. Blend. Add in another thin stream of olive oil while blending. Stop when about 2 tablespoons of oil are left to add. Add a splash of lemon juice. Blend. Adjust seasonings to taste. Add the rest of the oil if needed. The sauce should be thick, creamy, and rich, with a lovely tang of garlic. *If you don't want to use raw eggs for this, don't worry. Start with a cup of good-quality regular mayonnaise. Whisk in ½ cup olive oil, 3 cloves finely minced garlic, and the juice of 1 lemon. It won't be as good, but it's close, and you won't have to worry about using raw eggs.*

SPINACH QUICHE

½ cup butter
3 cloves garlic, smashed, peeled, and finely minced
1 small onion, trimmed, peeled, and finely chopped
1 pint fresh mushrooms, cleaned and thinly sliced
1 (10-oz.) package frozen chopped spinach, thawed and drained
4 ounces herbed feta cheese, crumbled
8 ounces good-quality cheddar cheese, shredded, divided
½ teaspoon kosher or sea salt, or to taste
¼ teaspoon ground black pepper
1 deep-dish pie crust, unbaked
4 eggs
1 cup milk

Serves six. Preheat oven to 400 degrees F. Melt butter in a large skillet over medium heat. Add minced garlic and onion. Stir gently and cook until onion is soft and slightly browned on the edges, about 5 minutes. Add mushrooms and stir until warmed through and reduced, about 3 minutes. Add spinach, feta cheese, and half of the cheddar cheese. Add salt and pepper, to taste. Place mixture into unbaked pie shell. In a medium bowl, whisk eggs until blended, add milk, whisk to combine well. Pour into pie shell over vegetable mixture. Place filled pie shell on cookie sheet to keep it from overflowing. Place into preheated oven. Reduce oven heat to 375 degrees F. Bake for 20 minutes. Top quiche with remaining cheddar cheese. Return to oven and bake for and additional 30 to 40 minutes. Quiche is done when the eggs are set and firm in the center. Remove from oven and let sit for 10 minutes. Serve warm.