

A quiche by any other name . . .

Savory French toast hits all the right notes for summer dining

BY GARRETT MCCORD

Once upon a time, in a decade far, far away, quiche was the epitome of sophisticated dining. It appeared on the menus of the finest dining establishments and the tables of the most de rigueur dinner parties. But like so many overexposed foods, it descended into the mundane and was banished to the farthest reaches of the culinary galaxy.

That's too bad, because good quiche is good eating. It can be tricky to make, the major downfalls being curdled eggs, insipid crust, and weird filling combinations. And it does require turning on the oven and heating up the kitchen, not high on the to-do list when summer temperatures soar.

So how can this much maligned but really quite lovely gastronomic creation be resurrected? How about French toast? Make that savory French toast.

When you think about it, French toast is almost deconstructed quiche. The bread — which stands in for the crust — is soaked in a rich egg custard. If you switch your thinking from sweet to savory, the panoply of fillings and toppings is extraordinary — just keep it understated, include some great cheese, and turn a few simple ingredients into a light summer meal — that doesn't turn your kitchen into a kiln.

The French call it *pain perdu*, or lost bread, essentially bread that's no longer soft enough to eat. When food was scarce and its preparation arduous, no one threw out anything because it has passed its peak. Stale bread soaked in a liquid was edible, if not particularly tasty. By the time the Romans ruled Europe, stale bread was soaked in milk, cooked in oil and served with honey. Recipes that date to the Middle Ages call for the addition of eggs and spices.

Even though maple syrup and breakfast may spring to mind when you think French toast, savory lunch and dinner

variations have been around for years. Perhaps the most famous version is the Monte Cristo, a ham and cheese sandwich dipped in egg custard and fried in oil or butter.

At San Diego Desserts bakery in San Diego, Calif., savory French toast is a popular menu item. House-made French bread is dipped in an egg and milk custard laced with salt and pepper. Then it's fried, dusted with Parmesan cheese, and served with tomato chutney spiced with garlic and ginger. The dish is a hit with the local college crowd.

"People who had it loved it," beams chef and owner Mark Leisman. "The trick was getting it in their mouths. Luckily, the people here in San Diego are adventurous." Initially, many diners were skeptical. "I mean it's savory French toast. For dinner. As an appetizer. But people really enjoyed it."

do it yourself

To make savory French toast at home, first choose the bread. Challah and brioche are good choices because their texture and taste make great French toast. Both are egg breads but brioche is enriched with butter. Pain de mie, aka Pullman bread, is another good choice. Whole-grain breads also work well but they do produce a denser, heavier result.

The next step is making the custard. A simple custard base of eggs, milk and cream can be customized with salt, pepper and herbs or spices such as thyme, ground mustard, chipotle, or herbs de Provence to highlight the savory flavor.

After pan-frying the bread or cooking it in a panini grill, sprinkle it with grated cheese. A hard cheese, such as Parmigiano Reggiano, Grana Padano or Mimolette, may be the most common choice, but semi-firm cheeses, such as Abbaye de Belloc, Grafton Village Classic Reserve Vermont