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Birthday fun, birthday fare

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I hadn't set out to be the oldest birthday celebrant ever at Red Green Blue, the drop-in arts and crafts studio on Hulfish Street in Princeton, but I believe I now hold that title. It all began back in the spring of '06, when I escorted two of my youngest friends, both under the age of 5, to the studio for afternoons spent custom-painting and -decorating boxes shaped like a heart (her choice) and a star (his).

Red Green Blue offers a variety of craft media ranging from painting cardboard or wooden boxes, picture frames and other accessories, to painting T-shirts and making mosaics, with projects for all ages. Clearly, as I and my young buddies were there painting our boxes and gluing on sparkly tiles, I noticed that for the slightly older and more sophisticated crowd (7-year-olds and up), making fused-glass plates was one of the more challenging and, in my opinion, aesthetically pleasing activities.

So that summer I and my two 20-something daughters spent a pleasant hour or so each designing a one-of-a-kind fused glass sushi plate. The creative process turned out to be even more fun and more engaging than I had anticipated. During that session, a child's birthday party happened to be taking place in the semi-enclosed section at the rear of the store, which is dedicated to group activities.

"Hmmm ..." I commented to my daughters, with characteristic eloquence. "I think it would be fun to have my friends here to celebrate my birthday this fall. We could all design plates and sing 'Happy Birthday' and eat pizza and drink soda, just like they are doing."



Long story short, I did not follow through on my musings. But last Christmas I received from my family the gift of a Red Green Blue party for me and my best buddies, to include making a craft at the "green" level. Fused-glass plates of various sizes and shapes are just one of the green crafts, and I decided that the curved-edge sushi plates would be my group's activity.

So there we were a few weeks back, nine predominantly middle-aged women and two 20-some-things, alternately acting up and paying close attention to our party helpers, Juli and Lauren, who patiently instructed us in the finer points of cutting and arranging bits of colored glass. We tried not to pout when they made us wear unattractive safety goggles.

Just as at every Red Green Blue birthday party, I, the birthday girl, received a T-shirt with the Red Green Blue logo, while my buddies regaled me with a rendition of "Happy Birthday." Each made a crayon drawing for my keepsake folder. As a group project, my guests covertly decorated a fused-glass picture frame - Red Green Blue's secret surprise for me - into which I would subsequently insert a commemorative photo of the occasion.

Instead of pizza and pop, though, I served Earl Grey tea, mini-cupcakes from Princeton's bent spoon, and my favorite tea sandwiches, two of the recipes for which follow. My guests and I agreed that the party was, to use the appropriate vernacular, one of the funnest things we had done as so-called adults.

I'm sure it was memorable for the staff at Red Green Blue, too, but perhaps for other reasons. So thank you, Juli, Lauren, and proprietor Karyn Greco, not only for making my party special, but also for tolerating a group of loud, talkative, unruly middle-agers. I'm sure after we departed you were more than relieved to welcome back the 7-year-olds.

MINI HAM & CHEESE BISCUITS

1-3/4 cups all-purpose flour (preferably Lily White)
2 teaspoons baking soda
1 teaspoon salt
3 tablespoons vegetable shortening, such as Crisco
1/2 cup shredded Cheddar
1/2 cup scallions, minced
3/4 cup buttermilk
1/8 teaspoon Cayenne pepper, or to taste
Butter, softened

1/2 pound thinly sliced Black Forest ham or prosciutto

1. Preheat oven to 425 degrees. Butter 2 cookie sheets. In a bowl combine flour, baking powder, and salt. Add shortening and cut in with pastry blender or your fingers until the mixture is the texture of coarse meal. Stir in cheese, scallions, and buttermilk and mix into a dough.

2. Turn dough out onto a lightly floured surface and roll or pat to a thickness of 1/2 inch. Cut out biscuits using a round 1-1/2-inch biscuit cutter. (I use the top of a glass spice jar.) Gather scraps and re-roll to make additional biscuits.

3. Place biscuits on the cookie sheets and bake about 15 minutes, until light gold in color. Let cool.

4. To assemble sandwiches, split the biscuits and butter lightly. (A dab of chutney or mustard can be substituted.) Fold a piece of ham onto the bottom of each biscuit and cover with the top.

EGG AND CHUTNEY CANAPES

adapted from Gourmet Magazine

8 ounces cream cheese, softened
1/2 cup mango chutney
1 teaspoon curry powder
1 teaspoon Dijon mustard
9 slices of cocktail pumpernickel bread or very thin slices of whole-grain bread, quartered and crusts removed
36 slices of hard-cooked egg (about 6 eggs)
1 tablespoon snipped fresh chives or minced fresh parsley, for garnish (optional)

In a food processor or blender blend well the softened cream cheese, the chutney, the curry powder, and the mustard. Transfer the mixture to a small bowl and chill it, covered, overnight. Spread the mixture on the bread slices and top each slice with one of the egg slices and a pinch of chives.

Makes 36 canapes.