

# AMUSE-BOUCHE

Little Bites that Delight  
Before the Meal Begins

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Rick Tramonto  
and  
Mary Goodbody



R A N D O M   H O U S E

# *amuse-bouche*

RICK TRAMONTO

with MARY GOODBODY

*little bites that delight  
before the meal begins*



RANDOM HOUSE NEW YORK

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*To my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who always leads me down the right road  
and who brings me through every storm every time.*

*To my son, Giorgio Montana Gand Tramonto, who keeps me laughing and  
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## introduction

### AMUSE:

*To entertain or occupy in a light, playful, or pleasant manner; to appeal to the sense of humor; to supply amusement or diversion by specially prepared or contrived methods.*

### AMUSE-BOUCHE:

*Little bites of food to amuse the mouth, invigorate the palate, whet the appetite.*

I vividly recall my first trip to France in 1980. After the plane landed, I waited impatiently in line at immigration. As soon as I left the terminal, I grabbed a cab and raced into Paris, worried that I might miss my reservation at Jamin, Joël Robuchon's famed restaurant. I had booked the table at least six months earlier, and during my flight across the Atlantic, my taste buds were primed for the meal to come. Once I was seated in the beautiful, flower-filled room, a tiny bite of ethereal food was placed in front of me. It was my very first exposure to the custom of greeting a diner with *amuse-bouche*.

I was completely charmed, and immediately made *amuse-bouche* part of my own menus. Over the years, I have become well known for them, which is a reputation I am happy to have. I especially appreciate the high level of hospitality that an *amuse* conveys, because for me, hospitality is the bedrock of a great restaurant.

Everyone who walks into my restaurant, Tru, is greeted with an *amuse-bouche*—an intriguing bite of absolutely delicious food that is my way of saying, “Welcome, I hope you enjoy your meal.” Other fine restaurants practice this very French tradition, but I have a true passion for it. These little treats are so tasty, so exquisitely rendered, so beautifully presented and jewellike, that today I offer eight selections. We recently served four customers at a single table twelve *amuse* each, an event that turned their evening into a kind of sit-down cocktail party. This led to the creation of our *amuse* tasting menu.

At Tru, we are so well known for our *amuse*, that we prepare more than five hundred pieces of six to eight different ones every day. The selection changes constantly, depending on the season, the availability of ingredients, and, I freely admit, how whimsical I am feeling. All of the offerings receive the same attention to detail and fine ingredients that you will find in the recipes on these pages.

Until now, no book has focused on these tiny culinary treasures. There have been books about hors d'oeuvres, tapas, and appetizers. Made a

little larger, many of my *amuse-bouche* are lovely when served in these ways. I do hope, though, that you will kick off your next dinner party or holiday feast with an *amuse* or two, and delight in the enchantment they will bring to your table.

## THE FUN OF THE AMUSE

I love the *amuse* because it allows me to both create dishes that are absolutely perfect and beautiful and to have a zany sense of fun. At Tru, we like to call our cuisine “fine dining with a sense of humor.” The *amuse* appeals to my philosophy that no one should take food too seriously, even while they are serious about food. I cook as a way to express love, nurturing, and comfort. I don’t approach it intellectually, although I admire those who do. To me, food should, above all else, taste good. If it does not, you run the risk of cooking soulless food. What could be sadder?

I am not formally trained, although I have apprenticed my craft with some of the best chefs in the business and have learned in some of the finest kitchens. Because of this, I have come to appreciate the spectrum of what is the best—be it the best burger or the best foie gras, the best French fries or the best caviar. My culinary education has been a movable feast, a school without walls. This encourages me to think outside the box. I may be grounded in proper technique but I am not tethered to it, which explains why I so love the *amuse*.

None of the *amuse* recipes is particularly complicated, although many rely on ingredients you might not use every day. I cherish cooking with all that the good green earth has to offer, often straying from the known to create little gems with foods with which I may not be as familiar. But, let’s face it, at the end of the day, beyond tasting good, food’s mission is to bring joy, excitement, and pleasure to the heart, soul, and all five senses. I hope these recipes inspire you—I do not mean for them to intimidate in any way. These recipes are simple, delicious, and accessible. Have fun!

## THE BEST INGREDIENTS

An *amuse* is meant to tickle the palate, to bewitch the eye and tongue, but because it is not the main course or even the first course, it can also be lighthearted and provocative. The concept may be new to you, but once you grasp it, let your imagination run wild. Add your own creative twists and turns, and use this tiny first course to indulge in exotic or expensive ingredients, to try new cooking techniques, or to use those plates and cups that don’t quite fit with the rest of your dinnerware.

An *amuse* should explode in the mouth with flavor and texture. After

meeting this criterion, it can be elegant or casual, made with expensive or everyday ingredients. For example, the [Forest Mushroom Terrine](#) is a great way to try the cream-, beige-, and mahogany-colored mushrooms overflowing in greenmarket baskets every fall. On a more humble level, if you've never cooked grits, try the [Creamy Corn Grits with Butternut Squash and Sweet Corn](#) and discover their wonderful versatility and kinship with polenta.

Both the [Red, Gold, White, and Candy-Striped Beets with Beet Juice Reduction](#) and the [Heirloom Tomatoes, "Panzanella Style"](#) exemplify how I exalt in exploiting the seasons. When beets or tomatoes are at their best, I buy every variety I can lay my hands on for the sheer joy of experiencing their colors, textures, and subtle differences in taste.

Nothing beats a carefully tended fruit or vegetable at its peak, and this explains why I organized the recipes according to season. As do many chefs and farmers, I feel passionate about respecting the seasons. How else can we avoid depleting the planet and guarantee that there is abundant and pure food for our children and grandchildren? It's no hardship to wait for spring for plump, juicy strawberries or fall for crisp apples. The anticipation only serves to make the experience that much more enjoyable. I wait all year for perfectly ripe watermelon so I can serve [Watermelon Cube with Aged Balsamic Vinegar](#). No dish is purer than this one and no recipe underscores better how the best ingredients conspire to create the most pristine and best-tasting food.

## EXPERIMENT WITH LUXURY

If many of these recipes allow the home cook to experiment with fresh, simple flavors and seasonal foods, others are opportunities to luxuriate in ingredients that may be too expensive, too intense, or too foreign to serve on a large scale. Ocean-fresh squid, sweet-tasting lobster, inky imported caviar, voluptuous foie gras, heady truffles, sumptuous sweetbreads, tiny quail eggs, aged balsamic vinegar, and delicate zucchini blossoms qualify as foods many home cooks would love to serve but are not sure how to do so. The same is true for crumbly imported cheeses, sushi-quality tuna, Norwegian salmon, rich smoked goose breast, fruity extra-virgin olive oil, and juicy, deep-red blood oranges.

This, then, is the glory of the *amuse*. It can be made with nearly anything that catches your fancy. For the curious cook, this is thrilling because it means that the small bottle of rich nut oil, the seductive fat-streaked Italian Parma ham, the plump, briny oysters, the fresh sardines, and the passion fruit puree can find a place at the dinner party, regardless of what is planned for later. An *amuse* does not necessarily have bearing on the rest of the meal.

This is reassuring, but so is the reality that many of these *amuse* can become significant players. For instance, the [Chilled Asparagus Soup with](#)

[Crème Fraîche](#) offers an intense sip of liquid asparagus when served as an *amuse*, yet the recipe can be doubled and served as a first course or very light main course; ditto for the [Bulgur Salad with Watercress and Toasted Walnut Puree](#). The [Asian Soba Noodle Fork with Water Chestnuts](#) could be a substantial first course, and the [Ahi Tuna Cube with Toasted Black and White Sesame Seeds](#) makes an outstanding passed hors d'oeuvre.

This is true of many of the *amuse*. I feel that if an *amuse* is more than a bite and a half, it ceases being an *amuse* and becomes an appetizer. When it's only a bite, it can be an hors d'oeuvre, so elusive is the line between *amuse* and hors d'oeuvre. Hostesses and caterers who complain that they have run out of good ideas for party food need look no further!

## TECHNIQUES AND STYLE

For anyone interested in learning new cooking techniques, these recipes are a feast of ideas. Foams seem to be the rage in restaurants coast to coast—and I have an entire chapter devoted to them. I tell you how to make savory sorbets, which are lovely *amuse* as well as palate cleansers and accompaniments for fruit and cheese. I use paper-thin potato slices to wrap fish, make vinaigrettes and infuse oils with truffles, dry summer's tomatoes in the oven, and rely on sheets of gelatin to make the new, lighter aspics so popular now. I garnish these little dishes with pretty greens, fresh herbs, edible flowers, sliced citrus fruit, and glistening caviar. Again, let your own creativity be your guide.

Some of the recipes call for unassuming ingredients such as lentils, kohlrabi, and celery root. If you can cook cabbage, you can cook kohlrabi—so why not try it? The same holds for other foods. Take razor clams: The mollusk may be unfamiliar, but anyone who is comfortable with cherrystones or littlenecks can cook these.

Many of these recipes have evolved from very personal memories of my life, my travels, and other aspects of this great journey that defines my blessed career. [Charred Lamb with Truffle Vinaigrette and Oven-Dried Tomatoes](#) transports me immediately to the south of France, where I first tasted its ingredients on one plate. I am fascinated by how cooking is a process of re-creating memories in the kitchen. Unlike the artist who has one shot at a particular painting or sculpture, the cook can conjure up a palette of tastes, colors, and textures many times over.

Some of these recipes require special equipment, but most ask only that you work with good, sharp knives and other basics, such as fine-mesh sieves, heavy saucepans, a heavy-duty blender, and a food processor. For the juices, you will need a juicer. This does not have to be a superexpensive model, but make sure it is a juice extractor—not a gizmo for squeezing citrus fruit. For the foams, you will need a foam canister, which can be found at fine kitchenware shops. And I highly recommend everyone invest in a mandolin, which will allow you to make

exceptionally thin slices. No need to buy the most expensive—the plastic sort, called a Japanese mandolin, is perfect.

I find that half the fun of the *amuse-bouche* is in the presentation—good news for anyone who likes to poke around in antique stores, building-supply stores, garage sales, and Grandma’s attic. It’s gratifying and good fun to come up with oddball and unorthodox ways to serve these little jewels dramatically and playfully.

At Tru, I use pristine white plates, Asian-style bowls and spoons, sparkling shot glasses, sleek black trays, long-handled spoons and forks, mirrors, and granite and marble tiles. I sometimes serve small *amuse* in old-fashioned demitasse cups, finger bowls, heavy glass ashtrays, votive-candle holders, Depression juice glasses, and odd-sized cut-glass glasses, as well as on green-rimmed glass shelving, old-time wooden checkerboards, and small silver trays. I offer *soba* noodles, microgreens, and hamachi tartare on highly polished, mismatched flatware, and salads on diminutive colorful plates from Chinatown. As with the food, the sky is the limit here—get your party off to a charming start with quirky fun or old-school elegance.

## CHAPTER ONE

## **soup** *amuse*

- *Chilled Asparagus Soup with Crème Fraîche*
- *Chilled Velouté of Sunchokes with Pickled Sunchokes and Sevruga Caviar*
- *Chilled Sweet Pea Soup with Lobster*
- *Chilled Fava Bean Soup with Seared Scallops*
- *Carrot Soup with Hawaiian Ginger*
- *Roasted Garlic Soup with Lovage*
- *Chilled Cucumber Soup with Lemon Oil*  
Lemon Oil
- *Blistered Corn Soup with White Corn Ice*  
White Corn Ice
- *Tomato Soup with Basil*
- *French Lentil Soup with Bacon*

*spring*

## CHILLED ASPARAGUS SOUP WITH CRÈME FRAÎCHE

*serves 8*

*Ever since I tasted gazpacho, I have been a huge fan of all chilled soups, and none is better than one made with green or white asparagus. You can make this with the asparagus stems and save the tips for another use. Vegetable stock forms the base of the soup, which I garnish with pretty swirls of crème fraîche. The only other ingredients are orange juice and orange zest—tasty flavor accents with asparagus. I ladle the soup into demitasse or other small cups for a refreshing start to a meal.*

1 pound green asparagus, trimmed and cut into 1½- to 2-inch pieces

4 cups [Vegetable Stock](#) or water, plus more as needed

1 tablespoon grated zest of 1 orange

¼ cup juice of 1 orange

½ teaspoon salt

1 cup crème fraîche, [homemade](#) or store-bought, or sour cream, for garnishing

1. In a large pot of boiling water, blanch the asparagus for 5 to 10 minutes or until fork-tender. Drain and immediately submerge in cold water. Drain again.
2. Transfer about a quarter of the asparagus pieces to a blender and add about ½ cup of the stock. Puree until smooth. Pour into a larger bowl. Continue pureeing the remaining asparagus and stock in batches. Strain through a *chinois* or fine-mesh sieve into the bowl.
3. Stir the orange zest and juice into the soup. Gently stir in more stock until the soup is the consistency you prefer. Season to taste with salt. Cover and chill.
4. Serve the chilled soup in small bowls or demitasse cups, each garnished with a spoonful of crème fraîche.

## CHILLED VELOUTÉ OF SUNCHOKES WITH PICKLED SUNCHOKES AND SEVRUGA CAVIAR

*serves 10*

*Credit for this soup goes to Elliot Bowles, one of my former sous-chefs at Tru, who grew up in a military family and lived all over the world. He attributes his love for sunchokes to the years he spent in Hawaii. I had barely heard of them before I met Elliot and was bowled over when I tasted this soup. You will be, too. The sunchokes give it a mild nuttiness, somewhat like water chestnuts. I add the caviar for saltiness and elegance.*

*Sunchokes are also called Jerusalem artichokes and, despite this moniker, are tubers from a native American sunflower and are not related to artichokes. When you buy them, there is no hint of the glorious sunflower, but instead the chokes are beige-colored knobs that resemble fresh ginger. Like potatoes, they darken, or oxidize, when sliced, so keep them in acidulated water while you work. This recipe requires some preparation a day ahead.*

1/2  
cup fresh lemon juice  
1/2  
cup sunchokes (Jerusalem artichokes)  
1/2  
cup Pickling Spice Blend  
1/2  
cup Simple Syrup  
1/2  
cup white wine vinegar  
1/2  
cup  
1/2  
cup heavy cream  
1/2  
cup Vegetable Stock, plus more as needed  
1/2  
teaspoon freshly ground white pepper  
1/2  
teaspoon sevruga caviar

1. A day before you plan to serve this, fill a large nonreactive bowl with water and add 1 teaspoon of the lemon juice to make acidulated water.
2. Peel and cut the largest sunchoke into 10 thin slices, dropping the slices into the acidulated water as they are cut. This will prevent them from turning brown.
3. Cut an 8-inch square of cheesecloth and mound the pickling spices in the center of the square. Bring the corners of the cloth together and tie the sachet with kitchen string.
4. Combine the syrup and vinegar in a medium-sized glass or ceramic bowl. Drain the sunchoke slices and add to the bowl along with the spice sachet. Season to taste with salt. Cover and refrigerate for at

least 24 hours.

5. Remove and discard the sachet and drain the sunchoke slices before serving.
6. Fill a large nonreactive bowl with water and add the remaining lemon juice to make acidulated water.
7. Peel and coarsely dice the remaining 6 sunchoke, dropping the dice into the acidulated water as they are cut.
8. Combine the cream and vegetable stock in a large saucepan. Drain and add the sunchoke dice. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat, reduce the heat, and simmer for 10 to 15 minutes or until the sunchoke are tender.
9. Transfer the soup to a blender and puree until smooth. You will have to do this in batches. Strain the batches through a *chinois* or fine-mesh sieve into a large bowl. Stir in more stock until the soup reaches the consistency you prefer. Season to taste with salt and white pepper. Cover and chill.
10. Serve the chilled soup in small bowls or demitasse cups with a slice of pickled sunchoke and a garnish of caviar.

## CHILLED SWEET PEA SOUP WITH LOBSTER

*serves 6*

*Although I remember my grandmother's sweet pea soup with affection, she made it with bacon—lots of bacon—much like she made split pea soup. When I decided to make my own, I lightened it by eliminating the bacon, chilled it, and served it with mint. Delicious! But I couldn't leave well enough alone and so turned it into a seafood soup by adding lobster. More delicious! You could replace the lobster with crab or mussels, too.*

*Sweet peas are also called English or garden peas. Shell them right before making the soup to keep the peas from drying out. Remove any strings from the pods, slit the pods open, and then push out the little round peas with your thumb. If you must shell them ahead of time, wrap them in a damp towel and refrigerate for no more than a few hours.*

**one 2-pound lobster**

**3 cups shelled fresh sweet peas, 6 pea pods reserved**

**½ cups water, plus more as needed**

**salt and freshly ground white pepper**

1. Plunge the lobster headfirst into a large pot of rapidly boiling salted water. Cover and boil for 8 to 12 minutes or until bright red and cooked through. Using a pair of long tongs, remove the lobster from the pot and immediately submerge in cold water. Drain the lobster and allow to cool.
2. When cool enough to handle, crack the lobster and remove the meat from the tail, claws, and knuckles. Put the meat into a bowl, cover, and refrigerate until thoroughly chilled. You should have about 6 ounces of lobster meat.
3. In a large pot of boiling water, blanch the peas for 2 to 5 minutes or until tender when bitten into. Drain and immediately submerge in cold water. Drain again.
4. Transfer half of the peas and  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup of the water to a blender. Puree until smooth. Strain through a *chinois* or fine-mesh sieve into a large bowl. Puree the remaining peas and water and strain into the bowl. If needed, gently stir in more water until the soup reaches the consistency you prefer. Season to taste with salt and white pepper. Cover and chill.
5. Cut the lobster meat into 6 equal portions. Stuff each portion of meat into a reserved pea pod.
6. To serve, pour  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup of the chilled soup into a small glass and