

Too Much

by Angie

"Enough is as good as a feast"

Old folk saying,

popularized by Mary Poppins in the movie of the same name

William looked despairingly at the stacks of cans on his larder shelves. For some reason cranberry sauce, both jellied and whole, came down by the caseload at this time of year. He usually had just enough for both Winterfest and the Yuletide turkeys. But this year, even with cold turkey leftovers, there was far too much of it for their community. He would have to think of something to do with it.

He went to his office and scrounged through an accordion file where he kept newspaper recipe clippings. He was sure he had seen something once upon a time for leftover cranberry sauce. That this wasn't strictly speaking leftover, bothered him not at all. It would expire if he didn't do something - and that he could not allow.

Perhaps a cake now, and then various other treats for Winterfest, he decided, and idea taking form in his mind. He grinned a little maliciously to himself.

His search came to a halt when he saw the magic word, followed by instructions that included the magic word 'simple'.

Cranberry Sauce Nut Bread. Yes, that sounded perfect.

As it happened, they always had a lot of nuts too, because Mr Wong sent down all the leftover whole nuts he had stocked but hadn't sold in the weeks following the holidays. So William knew he had a jar full of whole pecans, some from two years ago. They didn't go stale as long as the shells stayed intact. He would need some help to crack them, and a hammer for the more recalcitrant ones.

The children would love smashing them, he thought wryly. He would have to make sure they swept the floor properly afterwards or he would be crunching the shells for days.

The recipe settled, William sent a message on the pipes that he wanted five children and one adult to help crack pecans after lunch. Pascal confirmed his request and William shifted his attention to adding this and that to the lunchtime soup.

After lunch, a small crowd of children waited for the tables to be cleared and Vincent stood nearby. William's eyebrows rose.

"I was going to take them to dust the Great Hall, but they liked this idea better," Vincent explained.

"I just bet they did!" William remarked acidly.

He got out the jar of nuts and selection of nut crackers and Vincent produced a couple of rubber mallets. It wasn't long before there were shrieks of laughter and shells flying in all directions.

"Ouch," complained Samantha as a shard hit her in the cheek.

Vincent addressed the group. "Please try not to hit them too hard, children. We want enough pieces for William to use. Dust is no good to him."

The pounding became slightly less energetic after that, and the bowl of husked nuts filled up in direct proportion to the pile of discarded shells.

The really tough ones, which resisted the children's best attempts, were given to Vincent.

When all was done, Vincent regarded the floor and wasn't surprised to see a vast scattering of shell shrapnel on it. He rolled his eyes when William collected the results of their labour and went to find the broom. He knew William would complain loudly at any leftover shells on the floor, so he took it upon himself to sweep, getting the children to take turns holding the dustpan.

The shells went into a special dry container where a lot of peanut shells already resided, to be spread on the button mushroom farm Mouse had started a few months back. Mushrooms were Vincent's passion, and he was happy to see the farm was producing them in abundance.

William, meanwhile, regarded the bowl of pecan pieces with distaste. Heaving a great sigh, he extracted the pieces, eyeballing each one, then placing them in another bowl. That took him the better part of 15 minutes, but it was worth it to avoid getting shells, and subsequent broken teeth.

They didn't have a dentist among their helpers, more the pity, and no one wanted to submit to Father's dentistry, which usually resulted in one less tooth if the break was bad enough, since they didn't have the means or equipment to create caps or fancy fillings. Filing down rough edges was the extent of Father's remedial abilities.

Satisfied he had not transferred any shells or tough fibre, he decided to make four of the cakes, knowing quite well that they would be eaten the next day, during Winterfest. That would use almost four cans, which was a whole lot better than none. The cake would taste better for sitting a while.

He spent the next half hour mixing up two batches of the cake and then poured the batter into bundt pans and put them in his pre-heated oven. He settled back to wait, running over in his mind what else he could make.

Scones aspics tarts pies (meat and fruit) muffins ... jam punch ... cheese. Yes, he could make all of those. William smiled to himself. And if anyone complained, even silently, perhaps they would politely refuse a box or two of the stuff next time! This would teach them!

Winterfest dawned with children running down the tunnels, avoiding collisions only because they were more nimble than the adults. Father frowned from his chamber door, hoping he would not be bowled over if he ventured out. He saw Vincent approaching and waited. No one would knock his son over!

"Good morning, Vincent. Have you managed to avoid stepping on any midgets?"

Vincent chuckled.

"Barely, Father." He had proven solid against Catherine's running start into his arms some years ago, so a child certainly could not topple him. "I presume you'd like an escort?"

"Safety in numbers, Vincent."

They made their way to the dining hall without incident and both stopped in amazement when they saw the array awaiting them. The buffet table was piled with scones of an unusual luscious pink colour, pyramids of muffins which smelled delicious, and big bowls of some kind of red jelly. There were huge pitchers of red juice too.

Vincent looked at the bounty and a suspicion began to grow in his mind. He picked out a couple of

everything on offer, put a large scoop of jam on his plate, then took a glass of juice and an empty cup for the tea that would be passed around.

He sat down next to Catherine. He was somewhat surprised to find her ahead of him, but knew she and Mary wanted to get an early start on the entertainment arrangements.

She smiled at him. "Everything is delicious as usual, Vincent."

Vincent regarded the scones and broke one in half. The pink colour was explained quickly when he saw the red skins throughout. He looked at the jam on his plate and sighed. Then the muffins, when he cut one, seemed to have the same fruity ingredient. And the juice was the same, only concentrated.

He looked towards the kitchen and saw William standing in the doorway, looking like the cat which had swallowed the canary. He caught Vincent's eye and smiled broadly.

Vincent decided not to give the cook the satisfaction of saying anything, and calmly ate everything on his plate. It was delicious as usual, just as Catherine had said. But the cook's smile had told him all he needed to know. There was more to come.

William had found a way to use the surfeit of cranberry sauce. Vincent recalled at least three cases of it. He hoped William had been able to find something else to use as his principal ingredient, or there was sure to be some ... unhappiness ... later.

Father, meanwhile, had made the same discovery, and was equally silent, except for a sigh. Well, William had his own unique way of letting them know a little discrimination was called for. Surely, he had made his point now.

Later, Father had cause to regret his assumption at breakfast. In the Great Hall, William had prepared two enormous punch bowls, which presented a unique smell, but a quite familiar colour and taste.

Father took a cup and admitted it was tasty - ginger ale, cranberry juice and slices of orange - but found himself wishing that there was less of the red fruit on offer elsewhere. It seemed as if the stuff was in virtually everything. William had outdone himself.

There were cheese balls, an unusual aspic, loaves of bread, piles of buns, more muffins and scones, tarts, and the punch, of course. All were indisputably of a festive colour - red.

Father was reasonably sure the cook wouldn't have added it to his favourite sausage rolls. He took several and sat down, with his cup of punch. One bite of the meat told him he had been mistaken. The familiar tartness was present.

It was a nice combination, and no doubt very healthy, Father mused. He could hardly complain when William used the bounty instead of throwing it out. That would never do. He should be grateful - they all should.

William certainly would not have added the fruit to his beer, though, and Father rose to get a mug of that. It wasn't that he disliked cranberry. He knew it was healthy and normally loved the sweet-tart taste. But enough was enough. He wanted something that was free of it, just one thing.

The mug of beer was indeed good, and there was not even a hint of cranberry! Father sighed with relief and closed his eyes as he sipped it. As a result he didn't hear Vincent arrive at his side.

"Father? Is William's beer that good this year?"

Father looked at his son and smiled. "It is indeed, Vincent. I believe I have found the one thing he couldn't put cranberry in."

Vincent laughed so loudly that heads turned in their direction. It was rare for him to so expose his teeth - but the reaction around them was big smiles and knowing looks.

Catherine walked up and took his hand. She was pretty sure she knew what was so funny. She had never seen so many foods made with cranberry. They were all wonderful, no question, but she found

herself wishing for something without it, if it were only a cracker. She had found some of the latter, no doubt another gift from a helper. She gave a silent thanks to that helper, since William would not have felt obliged to make any cranberry crackers. She was munching on one as she looked at the two men, both of whom were laughing now.

Vincent got himself under control and Father managed to do so, after a second or two.

Father regarded Catherine and noted the crackers she held in her hand. So, there was something else without cranberry! Saints be praised!

“Father, you will have to make an announcement. Thank William for the bounty, but make it clear to our foraging teams that this must not happen again.”

Father sighed and nodded. He finished his beer, put down his mug on a nearby table, and manoeuvred around clusters of merrymakers to the front of the Hall, where a small stage had been set up for their musicians. The fiddle player finished his piece and paused when he saw Father approach. He knew determination when he saw it, and did not have to guess at the reason.

Father mounted the stage, then nodded to a trumpet player, who obligingly blew out a blast that would have raised the dead. Silence fell over the Hall and all eyes turned to the stage.

Father cleared his throat.

“Attention everyone. At this time, I think we should recognize the talents of our cook, William, and thank him for his usual innovative and bountiful selection of foods this Winterfest.”

He paused while the audience clapped - less enthusiastically than usual, Father noticed.

“This year, though, William has chosen to build on a theme, as I’m sure you’ve all noticed. No need for me to identify it - but I will anyway, just in case someone missed it. Cranberry! It’s in everything - with one notable exception. And it’s all delicious, of course, as usual.

“While we praise our cook for his imagination in this regard, we are all just a little ... less than enthusiastic by now.

“So let this be a lesson to our foragers. William is a man of great talents - but it’s unfair to expect him to deal with largesse of this kind. Wasting it is out of the question.

“So a little ... reticence ... is necessary. Let our helpers donate to a local food bank when they have such ... abundance. Our needs are not excessive.

“That’s all I have to say, except that William does have another barrel of beer tapped. And there isn’t a hint of cranberry in it! Enjoy!”

Father noted that a lot of the audience was already holding mugs of beer, and smiled.

Vincent helped him back to his chair.

“Nicely done, Father. I think we will all remember this Winterfest.”

“Yes, I’m sure we will. Now, would you mind getting an old man a beer - and some crackers?”

Vincent nodded and smiled as he went to do Father’s bidding. He decided to join him. He met Catherine approaching with three full mugs of beer, and balancing a plate of crackers on them. He removed the plate from her and one of the mugs.

“Thank you, Catherine,” he said, as he led the way back to Father.

“I figured there might not be much left if I wasn’t quick,” she confessed.

The three of them sat contentedly, enjoying the taste of something completely without cranberry. It was heaven, as their expressions made clear.

No words were necessary.

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