leek bread pudding

2 cups ½-inch-thick slices leeks (white and light green parts only)
Kosher salt
4 tablespoons (2 ounces) unsalted butter
Freshly ground black pepper
12 cups 1-inch cubes crustless Brioche (page 272) or Pullman sandwich loaf
1 tablespoon finely chopped chives
1 teaspoon thyme leaves
3 large eggs
3 cups whole milk
3 cups heavy cream
Freshly grated nutmeg
1 cup shredded Comté or Emmentaler

Just as custards work well in the savory portion of the meal, although they're more often served as a dessert, so do bread puddings. This one is a great complement to the Blowtorch Prime Rib Roast (page 56) and Pan-Roasted Duck Breasts (page 35). But you could also top it with Oven-Roasted Tomatoes (page 262) and serve it as a vegetarian meal.

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

Put the leek rounds in a large bowl of tepid water and swish so that any dirt falls to the bottom of the bowl. Set a medium sauté pan over medium-high heat, lift the leeks from the water, drain, and add them to the pan. Season with salt and cook, stirring often, for about 5 minutes. As the leeks begin to soften, lower the heat to medium-low. The leeks will release liquid. Stir in the butter to emulsify, and season with pepper to taste. Cover the pan with a parchment lid (see page 120), and cook, stirring every 10 minutes, until the leeks are very soft, 30 to 35 minutes. If at any point the butter breaks or looks oily, stir in about a tablespoon of water to re-emulsify the sauce. Remove and discard the parchment lid.

Meanwhile, spread the bread cubes on a baking sheet and toast in the oven for about 20 minutes, rotating the pan about halfway through, until dry and pale gold. Transfer to a large bowl. Leave the oven on.

Add the leeks to the bread and toss well, then add the chives and thyme.

Lightly whisk the eggs in another large bowl. Whisk in the milk, cream, a generous pinch of salt, pepper to taste, and a pinch of nutmeg.

Sprinkle ¼ cup of the cheese in the bottom of a 9-by-13-inch baking pan. Spread half the leeks and croutons in the pan and sprinkle with another ¼ cup cheese. Scatter the remaining leeks and croutons over and top with another ¼ cup cheese. Pour in enough of the custard mixture to cover the bread and press gently on the bread so it soaks in the milk. Let soak for about 15 minutes.

Add the remaining custard, allowing some of the soaked cubes of bread to protrude. Sprinkle the remaining ¼ cup cheese on top and sprinkle with salt.

Bake for 1½ hours, or until the pudding feels set and the top is brown and bubbling.

PHOTOGRAPH ON PAGE 213

SERVES 12 AS A SIDE DISH, 6 TO 8 AS A MAIN COURSE

brioche

⅓ cup very warm water (110° to 115°F)
One ¼-ounce package (2¼ teaspoons) active dry yeast (not quick-rising)
2⅓ cups cake flour
2 cups all-purpose flour
⅓ cup granulated sugar
2½ teaspoons fleur de sel or fine sea salt
6 large eggs, at room temperature
2½ sticks (10 ounces) unsalted butter, cut into 1-inch cubes, at room temperature

I've put this recipe in all our books as a tribute to the late Jean-Louis Palladin, my friend and colleague, because his brioche is so good, and so versatile. If you haven't ever made brioche, you should—it's a cross between bread and cake, a yeast bread loaded with eggs and butter. It's delicious and has many uses in both savory and sweet courses. We cut it up and crisp it for croutons and use it as the toast for grilled cheese.

The dough must rest overnight in the refrigerator, so start at least a day before you need it. Brioche freezes well, so that's an option when making it in advance.

Combine the water and yeast in a small bowl. Let stand for 10 minutes, then stir until the yeast is completely dissolved. Set aside.

Sift together the flours, sugar, and salt into the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with the dough hook. Add the eggs and beat for 1 minute at low speed, scraping down the sides with a rubber spatula as needed. Slowly add the dissolved yeast and continue beating at low speed for 5 minutes. Stop the machine, scrape any dough off the dough hook, and beat for another 5 minutes.

Add the butter cubes, about one-quarter of them at a time, beating for about 1 minute after each addition. Once all the butter has been added, beat for 10 minutes more, until the dough is smooth and silky.

Transfer the dough to a large floured bowl and cover with plastic wrap. Let stand in a warm place until doubled in size, about 3 hours.

Turn the dough out onto a generously floured work surface and gently work out the air bubbles by folding the dough over several times while lightly pressing down on it. Return the dough to the bowl, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate overnight.

Generously butter two 8½-by-4½-by-3-inch loaf pans or one 15¾-by-4½-by-3¾-inch Pullman loaf pan (see Sources, page 346). Turn the dough out onto a floured work surface. With floured hands, divide the dough in half, shape it into 2 rectangles that fit into the loaf pans, and put the dough in the pans. Or shape it into 1 loaf and put it in the Pullman pan (if using a Pullman pan, cover with the lid once the dough reaches ½ inch from the top). Let the dough rise, uncovered, in a warm place until it is about ½ inch above the top of the pans, about 3 hours.

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

Bake the brioche until it is well browned on top and sounds hollow when tapped on the bottom, 35 to 40 minutes for 2 loaves, 45 to 50 minutes for a Pullman loaf. Remove from the oven and immediately turn the brioche out onto a cooling rack.

If serving immediately, let the bread cool for 10 minutes, then slice. If serving within a few hours or up to 2 days, promptly wrap the hot bread in aluminum foil and set aside at room temperature until ready to use. To freeze, wrap the hot bread in foil and promptly freeze. The bread can be frozen for up to 2 months; when ready to use, reheat (without thawing, and still wrapped in the foil) in a 250°F oven until heated through, 20 to 25 minutes.

If using the brioche for croutons or bread pudding, let sit at room temperature, uncovered, to dry for a day.

MAKES 2 STANDARD LOAVES OR 1 PULLMAN LOAF