In the Kitchen – Romance at First Bite – by Marcy Lytle

Valentine's Day doesn't have to be an expensive dinner out, unless you want it to be – then go for it! However, it can also be fun to create a meal of bites, international food, picnics on the floor, appetizers and more – together! I love going out to eat, but more than once lately it's been too cold, someone was sick, or the thought of forking out a lot of money wasn't appetizing. If you make these fun ideas at home, you can have a Valentine's celebration several nights this month, instead of one big one on the 14th! (Or both!)

Pretzel Bites

These were interesting to make (I poured in the soda too quickly and made a mess!). But they came out nicely and tasted good with the onions and mustard – such a fun treat for two!

- 1/3 c baking soda
- 8 oz thawed pizza dough set at room temp 30 min
- 1 egg beaten
- Coarse sea salt
- Sliced scallions
- Coarse grain mustard

Heat oven to 450 degrees and line a sheet with parchment paper. Bring 5 cups water to a boil. Add the baking soda (slowly, or it will spill over!). Roll cherry sized dough balls and drop into boiling water in batches. Cook till slightly puffed, about one minute. Using slotted spoon, remove balls and place on paper towels; transfer then to the sheet about ½ in apart.

Brush dough with egg and sprinkle with coarse salt. Bake till deep golden brown, about 14 minutes. Sprinkle with scallions and serve with mustard!

Carrot Hummus

This is so pretty and so tasty. We enjoy it with carrots, cucumbers and fresh pita bread or chips. A great snack while you watch a movie or play a game.

- ¼ c olive oil
- ¼ t ground cumin
- 1 large clove garlic crushed
- 1 lb carrots, cut into one inch pieces
- 1 ½ t kosher salt, divided
- 1/3 c well-stirred tahini
- ¼ c fresh lemon juice
- Fresh black pepper and paprika

Heat 1 T oil over medium heat in large deep skillet with tight fitting lid. Add cumin and cook, stirring, until fragrant, about one minute. Add garlic and cook, stirring, still sizzling, about 30

seconds. Add carrots and 1 tsp salt, stir to coat in oil. Add ¼ c water and cover with lid. Cook, shaking skillet occasionally, til carrots are tender, about 15 minutes. Let cool, uncovered, 5 minutes.

Transfer carrots to food processor. Add tahini, lemon juice, several grinds of pepper, and 3 T oil, and ½ t salt. Process about one minute til smooth. Transfer to serving bowl, and swirl around the top with a spoon, drizzle with oil, and sprinkle with paprika.

Zucchini Fries

These were so very delicious, and would be a fun treat to make together. We had them with Salsa Ranch and they were the best snack! The crunch and the flavor – romantically tasty!

- Cooking spray
- 1/3 c flour
- 3 large egg whites
- 1 T water
- 1 cup panko breadcrumbs
- ¼ c grated Parmesan cheese
- 2 t chopped fresh rosemary
- ½ t salt
- ½ t ground pepper
- 1 lb zucchini cut into ½ by 4 inch sticks

Preheat oven to 425, line a rimmed baking sheet with foil, and place a wire rack on top. Coat with cooking spray.

Place flour in a shallow dish. Whisk egg whites and water in another shallow dish til foamy. Combine breadcrumbs, Parm, rosemary S&P in a third shallow dish. Working in batches, toss zucchini in flour to coat, dip in egg white and shake off excess. Then toss in breadcrumb mixture, pressing to adhere. Transfer to wire rack close together but not touching. Coat fries with cooking spray.

Bake until gold and crispy, turning halfway – about 20-25 minutes. Serve immediately.

Tray of Goodies

Use a baking sheet, or a tray, and a bucket from the dollar store, and little bowls or containers you have - and set out all sorts of good and fun snacks - in a fun arrangement to enjoy.

- Grapes on toothpicks with cashews
- Tiny pickles with cheese and sausage on toothpicks
- Apples with peanut butter
- Chocolates
- Popcorn
- Guacamole and chips
- Cute paper napkins and plates

Cuban beans and rice

Did you know you can buy Cuban beans in a pouch at World Market? I didn't, and they taste great and are easy to heat up.

Add brown rice at the bottom of a bowl, and the beans in the center. Around the circle of the bowl, include sliced avocado, cilantro, and bacon.

Top the beans with a little cheese and salsa – and you've got yourself a winner dinner for two!

Jiffy pop and chocolate

Need a simple picnic by the fire? When's the last time you shook a pan of Jiffy Pop and watched it expand and listened to the pops? It's so fun.

Spread out a blanket by the fire.

Include cups with cashews and chunks of dark chocolate.

Find a new movie to watch and enjoy it together while you slit open that foil and watch the steam escape, as you reach in together for that first bite!