

For just the two of you

Couples can indulge selves in real holiday treat this season

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With the holidays almost upon us, our thoughts turn more and more toward festive meals. Many of us will be cooking the iconic Turkey with all the trimmings for Thanksgiving, followed by a standing rib roast for Christmas, then stepping out for a night on the town on New Year's Eve.

But what if there are only two of you, and you simply don't feel like cooking for days and ending up with enormous amounts of leftovers? Or perhaps you're tired of restaurants that are packed to the gills with drunken revelers on the last night of the year. Is it possible to have a magnificent meal for two at home with minimal effort? You betcha!

Thanks to the wonders of the Internet and overnight shipping, it's possible to obtain luxuries here in the Midwest that would have required a lengthy and expensive plane ride not so long ago. Here are three of my all-time favorite indulgences.

Crab from Seattle

One of the tastiest creatures to be hauled from the sea is the mighty Dungeness crab. There

are east coasters who claim to favor the Atlantic blue crab, but I suspect they haven't encountered a properly cooked Dungeness. The friendly people at Wild Salmon Seafood Market in Seattle will cook and clean two of the finest for you and ship them overnight.

These approximately-two-pound beauties will arrive in pristine condition, even on the hottest summer's day. Cover your table with several layers of newspaper, arm yourself with a couple of shell crackers and meat picks, melt some butter, and you're good to go. I used to serve rolls and raw veggies with the crab but gave up attempting to serve a balanced meal. A two-pound crab requires your full attention. Including shipping, the crab will set you back about \$80.

Maine lobster

From the tiny village of Cundy's Harbor, Maine, comes my next treat. In addition to selling live lobsters, the Hancock Lobster Pound creates insanely delicious Lobster Pot Pies. For \$85, you'll receive 4 individual ramekins packed with large pieces of succulent lobster bathed in a rich sauce and topped with a layer of puff pastry. Served with a couple of tasty side dishes, one of these pies is sufficient per diner, so you can tuck the other two away in the freezer for a future celebration.

Steak from NYC

I have not forgotten those readers who have the misfortune to suffer from a shellfish allergy. My final offering is for lovers of red meat, those passionate carnivores who would never consider ordering anything except steak when dining out. Let me introduce you to the best steak you've ever eaten.

Only 2 percent of all the cattle slaughtered in the United States is graded USDA prime, and only 2 percent of that 2 percent meets the exacting standards of Lobel's of New York City. Arguably the best butcher shop in the States, Lobel's dry ages their beef for six weeks, resulting in meltingly tender steaks. Lobel's sells many cuts of meat, but I prefer the 28-ounce bone-in rib-eye for its incomparable flavor.

The steak is the only one of the above suggestions that you can mess up, and since the price tag is roughly \$94, you don't want to do that. Follow the recipe I've included to the letter, and success (and a transcendent food experience) awaits you. Serve this exceptional steak with a simple salad and a baked potato. Leave the steak sauce in the fridge!

So, don't feel sad if your nest is empty and there's just the two of you alone for the holidays. There are a few positives to being a two-some, and the ability to pamper yourself and your significant other with one of these meals is one of them.

Cooking a 28-ounce Rib-Eye Steak

Now that you have a gorgeous piece of beef, you want to treat it very carefully - no throwing it on the grill and crossing your fingers. Follow this method precisely, and you will have a perfectly cooked, medium-rare steak.

One hour and forty-five minutes before you plan to sit down for dinner, remove the steak from the refrigerator, and let it sit at room temperature.

Fifty minutes before dinnertime, place a cast iron skillet over medium heat and let it heat up for five minutes. Pat the meat dry with paper towels. Do NOT season at this time. Using tongs to hold the meat in place, cook the steak along its fatty outer edge for 10 minutes, changing the position of the steak every few minutes, so that the fat renders and the edge of the steak is nicely browned. (If fat is spattering out of the pan, your heat is too high. Turn it down.)

Place the meat on a plate and pour out about half of the fat. Add 2 tablespoons of butter to the pan. Season one side of meat with salt and pepper. Place meat, seasoned side down, back in the pan. Cook for 10 minutes. Remove the meat to a plate, and pour out all of the fat. Wipe clean with a paper towel. Return the skillet to the heat and add 2 tablespoons of butter. Season the uncooked side of the steak with salt and pepper and place in the pan. Cook for 10 minutes, basting with some of the butter a couple of times.

Place the steak on a clean, warm plate, cover loosely with foil, and let rest in a warm place for 15 minutes. Cut the meat off the bone, then across the grain into thin slices.

Classic Vinaigrette

As in most simple recipes, the quality of a vinaigrette depends entirely on the quality of the ingredients that go into it. Use supermarket oil and vinegar, and you'll end up with a meh dressing. Use top-notch varieties, and you'll have a salad dressing worthy of a great steak dinner. Goods for Cooks has a great selection of high-end olive oils and vinegars. I particularly like the Laudemio olive oil and Forum Chardonnay vinegar.

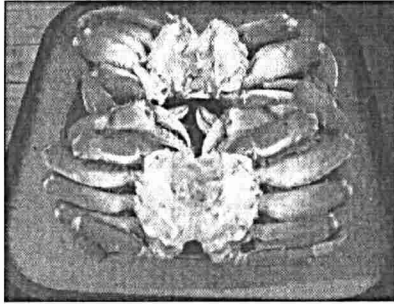
When making a small amount of vinaigrette, I like to shake it up in a small screw-top jar.

Pinch kosher salt
Several grinds of black pepper

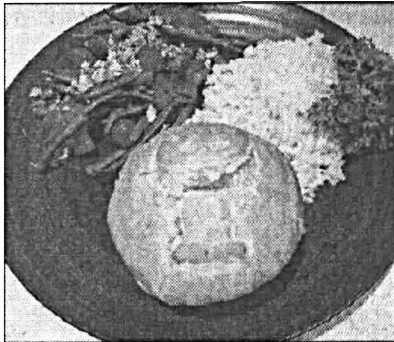
2 teaspoons vinegar
1/2 teaspoon Dijon mustard
2 tablespoons olive oil.

Combine the salt, pepper and vinegar, and let sit until the salt is dissolved. Add remaining ingredients and shake well. This makes enough vinaigrette to dress 5-6 cups of salad greens.

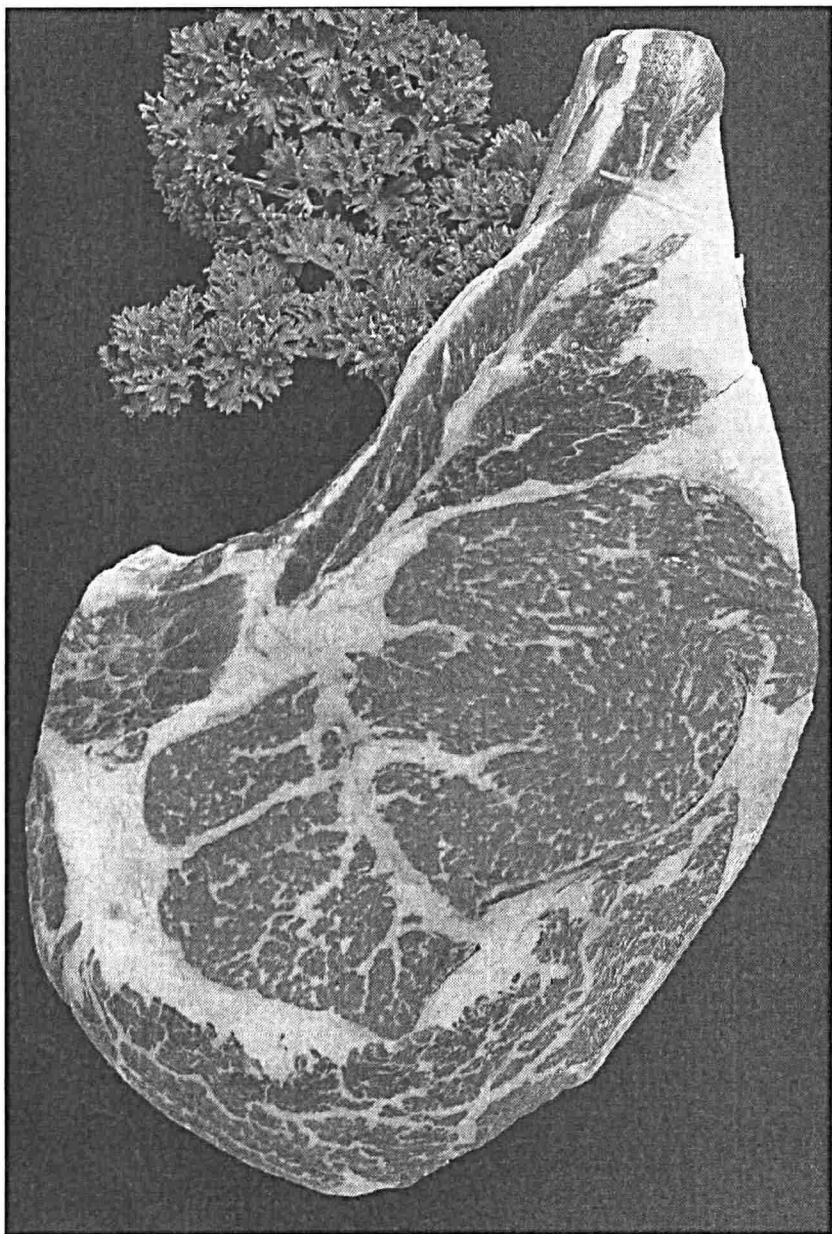
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A 28-ounce dry aged ribeye steak from Lobel's in New York City.