

Ham à la King

½ pound mushrooms	Salt and pepper to taste
3 medium red peppers	4 egg yolks
13 tablespoons butter	1 pound chunk smoked ham
½ cup flour	⅓ cup dry sherry
3 cups milk	2 tablespoons minced parsley
1½ cups heavy cream	1 sheet frozen puff pastry, or
1 bay leaf	English muffins, or fresh toast

Slice the mushrooms and cook them in 2 tablespoons of butter until tender, but not browned. Salt and pepper to taste, and set them aside.

Cut the peppers into short slivers. Cook them in 2 tablespoons of butter until tender, but not browned. Salt and pepper to taste, and set them aside.

Cut the smoked ham into small dice.

Heat the milk and the cream together with a bit of salt until just scalding

In a large heavy kettle, melt the remaining 9 tablespoons of butter. Whisk in the flour and cook for several minutes, stirring constantly without allowing the flour to brown.

Pour in the scalding milk and cream, whisking until the mixture has thickened. Add the bay leaf, and simmer the mixture gently for about 15 minutes, stirring occasionally to prevent a skin from forming on this béchamel.

Beat the egg yolks in a small bowl. Slowly beat into the yolks about ½ cup of the béchamel to temper them. Then add the yolk mixture into the pot of simmering béchamel, beating until well combined. Do not allow the sauce to boil, or the eggs will scramble. Remove the bay leaf. Add the diced ham, the sliced mushrooms, and peppers. Finish with the sherry, and taste for seasoning. If you've made the ham à la king ahead of time, reheat it gently over hot water so that it does not curdle.

Serve over toasted English muffins, fresh toast, or, for a more elaborate presentation, in vol-au-vent pastry shells. Sprinkle with the minced parsley.

To Make Vol-au Vent Pastry Shells

Defrost a sheet of all-butter puff pastry. Lightly flour a cutting board, place the cold sheet of puff pastry on top, then lightly flour the top of the pastry. Gently roll the pastry until it increases in dimensions by about 1 inch on each side.

Cut out circles of the pastry with a 3½-4-inch cutter or bowl. Using another cutter or bowl that is about ⅜-inch smaller in diameter than the initial cutter, center it in the middle of

half of the initially cut out rings. Cut out the center of the circles and remove them and set them aside, leaving a 3/8-inch ring.

Line a baking sheet with parchment paper. Beat 1 egg with a teaspoon of cold water. Take one half of the initially cut circles and turn them upside down on the parchment paper. Lightly brush the circles with the egg wash, making certain that no egg drips on the sides, which prevents the pastry from rising.

Take the 3/8-inch rings and turn them upside down onto the full circles, pressing gently to ensure they adhere. Brush the rings with the egg wash, again making sure that no egg drips on the sides.

With a fork, lightly scratch the center wells of the pastry to help prevent the centers from rising too much. Place the formed pastry shells in the refrigerator for one half hour.

Adjust the oven rack to the center level, and preheat the oven to 400°. Remove the pastry shells from the refrigerator and place them in the oven. Bake them for about 25-30 minutes until they have risen fully and are nicely browned and dried.

If the centers have risen, I like to cut them out, then use the cut-out disks as a top to the filled vol-au-vents. You may also bake the set-aside smaller cut-out centers, brushing them with egg wash, and using them for tops to the vol-au-vents.

If you've made the vol-au-vents in advance, you can reheat them in a 350° oven for about 5 minutes before serving.

Spoon the ham à la king into each pastry shell. Sprinkle with a little minced parsley. Then top with the smaller cut-out sections.