

There is a special joy associated with creating appetizers, perhaps because sharing food and drink with others is always one of life's pleasures.

— Author Betty Evans



## Hot and Sassy Spinach & Artichoke Dip

Although we had a mild winter, I welcome springtime. Our otherwise drab desert floor is transformed into a colorful display of budding cacti, wildflowers, and green brush. The sun shines brighter, the days grow longer, and the temperature climbs. I'm in the mood to don my silver and turquoise "jewels" and to step into the latest trendy shoes—strappy sandals.

Now that we've had a breather from holiday parties, it's time, once again, to celebrate and welcome the "season of growth." Whether you're planning a tea, a fundraiser, reception or shower, appetizers allow one to entertain with versatility. One "bite" I suggest is a spicy-hot thermally warm dip, a sassy-rich blend of spinach, artichoke hearts, cream, and three varieties of cheese. Splashes of hot sauce heat up this traditional springtime appetizer. Serve it with veggies, tortilla chips, crackers or all three. Consider using the dip as a spread for tea sandwiches.

### HOT AND SASSY SPINACH & ARTICHOKE DIP

- 2 (8 oz) packages cream cheese, softened
- $\frac{2}{3}$  cup heavy cream (half & half can be substituted)
- $\frac{1}{3}$  cup grated Parmesan cheese
- $\frac{1}{4}$  tsp garlic powder
- 4 generous dashes or splashes of habanero hot sauce
- 1 (16 oz) bag frozen spinach, thawed and well drained
- 1 (12  $\frac{2}{3}$  oz) can artichoke hearts, rinsed and well drained
- $\frac{2}{3}$  cup shredded Monterey Jack and Colby cheese
- 1 cup prepared salsa
- Crackers or tortilla chips for serving



By Sunny Conley

Photography by Russell Bamert

Preheat oven to 250° F. In a food processor, blend the cream cheese, cream, Parmesan cheese, garlic powder, and hot sauce until smooth and creamy. Add the spinach and process until thoroughly mixed. Add the artichokes and process until they are coarsely chopped. Add the mixture to a small ovenproof casserole dish; smooth the top. Cover and warm 1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> to 1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> hours until the center is hot. (Check every 20 minutes or so.) Sprinkle the top evenly with the Monterey Jack/Colby cheeses and spoon the salsa around the inside edges of the casserole dish. Cover and continue heating for 15 minutes longer or until the cheese is melted. Serve warm sprinkled, if desired, with dried red chile peppers. \*

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