

Holiday

Flavors



# Center of Attention

Set holiday celebrations aglow with a vibrant, showy centerpiece on your table. Chances are, you probably already have most of what you need to turn on the shine this season.

## CANDLES GALORE

Set candles of varying heights and widths in a pleasing arrangement on a charger or platter to protect your table linens. Go monochromatic, play with different textures or stick with just a few complimentary colors. Try to get scent-free candles; too many smells might overwhelm guests. Worried about little fingers or clumsy uncles? There are a wide variety of LED candles on the market nowadays that light up with just the flick of a switch.

## GO GREEN

Set an elegant table using fresh greenery from your local florist. Holly, set off with bright red berries; fir wreaths or garlands; even weepy cacti with pale pink or white blooms are all easy to find this time of year. If you're looking for something taller, go for poinsettias or rosemary trees. Greenery also brings in some of the smells of the season and can be a good way to get that



fresh Christmas tree smell without dealing with an entire tree. Bear in mind that some plants, such as poinsettias and some ivies, are harmful to pets. Ask your florist for other plants to substitute if that's a concern. You also can hit your local craft store for some very pretty silk greenery that will last year after year.

## ORNAMENTS AND LIGHTS AREN'T JUST FOR THE TREE

Fill a pretty bowl with glass ornaments — silver reflects colored glass well — and place it on your table. If you're worried about sentimental or heirloom pieces on the tree, this is a great place to show them off where everyone can see them.

Look in the holiday decor section for battery-powered LED mini-lights to wind around larger ornaments set on a pretty holiday runner for a little extra sparkle. Tape the battery pack and switch under the table to hide it and keep it easy to reach.

Bowls not your thing or need a variety of heights? Reach for

the lowly glass jar. Save up empty jars from your pantry or hit the grocery store for canning jars in a variety of shapes, colors and sizes. Fill them with miniature ornaments, twinkling LEDs, pine cones or anything festive that will fit. Bonus: Use them after the season as drinking glasses, food storage or candle holders.

# Pass Around the Cheer

**D**on't forget the nibbles while planning your holiday party. Look for hors d'oeuvres that are easy to hold, eat and, oh yeah, make.

These ideas come together in a cinch and will be sure to please even your picky guests.

## CHEESE, PLEASE

Nothing could be easier than cubes of your favorite cheeses on festive platters. Visit your local grocer for a wide selection and ask the cheesemonger to recommend some new ones to try. Pair them up with pre-sliced cold meats, veggies and party crackers for a quick and easy holiday feast. Jazz it up with stone-ground mustard, pesto and other fancy condiments. Again, talk to the person behind the cheese counter for some recommendations.

In the mood for something warmer? Cut a baguette into diagonal slices and toast them into crostini. Top each crostini with a prepared pimento cheese spread — most fine grocers either make their own or carry a packaged variety of this traditional Southern spread — and crumbled bacon. Pop them back into the oven to brown the tops.

## GET POPPIN'

Popcorn is so much more

than a movie snack. Pop up a fresh batch of plain popcorn on the stove, then empty out your spice cabinet for smaller batches with zesty flavors. Try a drizzle of olive oil and cayenne pepper, or rosemary with finely shredded Parmesan. Thick flakes of fresh cracked black pepper and a hint of sage bring in some great flavors of the season. Serve in cones of wax or parchment paper for an impressive (and easy to carry) treat.

## THINK SMALL

Miniature is a big hit at parties. Tiny sausages, meatballs, baby vegetables, it all works well as a hors d'oeuvres. You can take your favorite recipes (try baked mac 'n' cheese or your favorite cheese ball recipe) and make them smaller. If you're in a big hurry, look for pre-packaged helpers such as frozen meatballs and throw together a homemade barbecue sauce like this South Carolina-style mustard-based sauce.

## MUSTARD BARBECUE SAUCE

3/4 cup yellow mustard  
3/4 cup apple cider vinegar  
1 Tbsp light brown sugar  
1 1/2 Tbsp unsalted butter, softened  
2 tsp salt, or to taste  
2 Tbsp Worcestershire sauce  
1 tsp black pepper, or to taste  
2 tsp hot sauce, or to taste

1. Whisk together all ingredients in a small saucepan over medium heat. Simmer for 20-30 minutes. Store in a sealed glass container in the fridge.



# Seasonal Salads

Just because it's the dark days of winter doesn't mean there aren't ample greens to go on your holiday table.

Romaine, arugula, baby spinach and other great bases for salads are available at your local grocers year-round.

Some greens, such as kale and Brussels sprouts, are in season during the winter and are likely to be cheaper and fresher than year-round greens. Here's what to look for in a great winter salad.

## KALE

This trendy superfood is great sauteed, roasted or toasted, but it's also good in a salad. When choosing fresh kale for a salad, pick a bunch with smaller leaves; it tends to be more tender and mild in taste. Look for leaves that are crisp and moist without being wilted. They should be free of the tiny holes that are usually indicative of insect damage. Kale has a more robust flavor than iceberg, so go with big flavors in your salad. Balsamic, and lots of it, goes well, as do dried cranberries and fresh, seasonal citrus.

## BRUSSELS SPROUTS

Once a pariah of the plate, Brussels sprouts are having a moment in the sun and the salad bowl. Pick firm, compact sprouts with few loose leaves. They should be bright green, not yellow. Trim the stem ends, then shave with a Mandolin slicer or food processor, then treat like a

cabbage slaw. For convenience, use a bottled coleslaw dressing, then throw in raisins or dried cranberries and walnuts for a crunchy treat.

## CHARD

Put a pop of color in your salads with the rainbow-hued stalks of chard. Pick a bunch with bright green leaves that are on the smaller side, then chop them finely and top with balsamic vinaigrette, dried cranberries, feta and pepitas for a delightful dish. Chard with white stalks is commonly called Swiss chard, but red and yellow chard also are available at your local fine grocer. Chard, like kale, is a big flavor in its raw form, so both lend themselves well to the warm salad, like this one.

## WARM CHARD SALAD

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 bunch chard, chopped finely
- 1/4 cup chopped onion
- 10 mushrooms, sliced
- 3 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- 12 grape tomatoes, quartered
- 2 tablespoons crumbled blue cheese or feta
- Salt and pepper, to taste

1. Heat olive oil in skillet and add garlic, cooking until fragrant. Add chard and cook about 5 minutes, or until wilted. Remove chard and garlic and set aside.

2. Cook onion and mushrooms in the skillet with any liquid from the chard for about 3 minutes, then add balsamic vinegar and cook for 3 more minutes. Remove from heat and add mushroom mixture to chard along with tomatoes, cheese and seasonings. Serve warm.



# Give Some Jars of Love

Canning might seem to be outdated and hard work, but homemade jams and jellies are easy to make without extra equipment.

If you're a beginner, jams are right up your alley. Jams contain bits of the fruit while jellies are made from the strained juice of the fruit (read: more work).

Strawberries are a great place to start, as those bright red jars make great holiday gifts.

## HARDWARE

You'll need a supply of canning jars. Thanks to a resurgence in the craft, most grocery stores now carry a selection of jars and lids, as well as other tools such as jar lifters, funnels and a magnet for fishing out lids. Look for a kit of basic canning tools to get you started. If you use small, wide-mouth jars, you won't need a special canner; a large Dutch oven or stock pot will work fine. Fruit jams and jellies don't need to be canned under pressure.

## SOFTWARE

While you're in the canning section, look for a liquid or powder pectin. You'll also need sugar, lemon juice and a fruit. Strawberries, which have plenty of natural pectin, are a great fruit for the beginning jam maker. You can use frozen berries as they will be cooked.

## SCIENCE

The first step to safe and delicious canning is to sterilize your jars, lids and gear. Put a large stockpot of water on to boil, then drop all your hardware inside. Allow to come to a simmer — not a full boil, which can damage delicate jars — for about 10 minutes. Sterilize your jar and lid lifters and funnel first, then your jars and lids. Put the jars right-side up and make sure the water covers them by about 1 inch.

Place them on towels to cool and try not to handle them until you fill your jars with jam.

## STRAWBERRY JAM

- 5 cups or 3 pounds crushed strawberries
  - 1/4 cup lemon juice
  - 6 tablespoons powdered pectin or the liquid equivalent
  - 7 cups of sugar
  - 8 8-oz canning jars with lids (If you don't have a very tall pot, use the short, wide-mouth ones.)
1. Combine strawberries and lemon

juice in a large pot. Stir in pectin. Bring mixture to a full, rolling boil that cannot be stirred down.

2. Add sugar and stir until dissolved. Bring back to a full boil for one minute, stirring constantly. Remove from heat and skim off the foam.

3. Ladle the hot jam into jars, leaving 1/4-inch headspace inside the jar. Wipe the rim, then place a lid and ring on the jar. Don't screw the ring on too tightly. Place the jars back into the boiling water, making sure there's at least 1 inch of water above the top of the jar. You'll notice bubbles coming out of

the jars; that's fine, as it's the water forcing air out of the jar for a good seal.

4. Process the jars for 10 minutes. Remove the hot jars to a towel. You might hear popping as the jars cool and seal. After 24 hours, check for a good seal by lightly pressing on the center of each lid. If you can pop it in and out, reprocess the jar. If a jar won't seal, refrigerate and use immediately. Dress up your cooled jars with a sticker or a bit of festive cloth and a bow. Be sure to label your jam with the month and year it was made.



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# Holiday Magic with Breads

Nothing says home like the smell of fresh-baked bread. If you thought the magic of bread-making is beyond you, think again. Baking the perfect loaf is science with a dash of art thrown in. Go slow and take it step by step, and a delicious and impressive smorgasbord of bread is well within your reach.

## QUICK VS. NOT SO QUICK

Quick breads are exactly as advertised: ready in a hot minute. These loaves are usually leavened with a quick-acting baking powder or soda. Biscuits, scones and most fruit bread recipes are quick breads. The key to a tender loaf or a fluffy biscuit is how much you touch the dough. Generally for quick breads, assemble your wet and dry ingredients separately, then combine them at the end of the recipe. Stir just enough to mix them up or you risk a tough bread.

Other breads are leavened with yeast or a sourdough starter and require more time and ideal conditions for those agents to work. Always proof your yeast before you assemble your bread dough by adding the yeast to the warm water or other liquid and sugar. Let sit for 10 minutes and, if your yeast is good, it will foam and smell bready. That way, you don't waste a good bit of flour and other ingredients with bad yeast.

Sourdough breads rise with the help of an active sourdough starter that requires regular care and maintenance. Sourdough breads, waffles, biscuits and other items have a distinctive tang to them that you need to keep in mind. If you're looking for a milder flavor, go for a yeast or quick bread. You can buy a ready-made sourdough starter at many specialty stores.

Here's a great recipe for a quick bread and a yeast bread that's sure to please your holiday guests.

## OATMEAL BANANA BREAD

½ cup butter-flavored shortening  
½ cup white sugar



¼ cup brown sugar  
2 eggs  
2-3 overripe bananas  
1 teaspoon vanilla extract  
1 teaspoon cinnamon  
Dash nutmeg  
1 ½ cups flour  
½ teaspoon baking soda  
½ teaspoon salt  
½ cup quick-cooking oats

1. In a stand mixer, whip the shortening until fluffy and light, then add the sugars, egg and bananas. Pour in the vanilla and spices. Remove from mixer and set aside.
2. Sift together the flour, baking soda and salt, then add to the shortening mix. Stir by hand

until just combined, then fold in the oats.  
3. Pour into a lightly greased loaf pan and bake at 350 degrees for 55 minutes.

## HONEY WHEAT BREAD

3 cups warm water (100 degrees)  
2 (.25 ounce) packages dry active yeast  
2/3 cup honey, divided  
5 cups flour  
3 tablespoons butter, melted  
1 tablespoon salt  
3 1/2 to 6 cups whole-wheat flour

1. In the bowl of a large stand mixer, mix together the water, yeast and 1/3 cup honey. Set aside for 10 minutes until the yeast is fragrant and foamy.

2. Stir in 5 cups of flour and let sit 20 minutes, or until bubbly.

3. Attach a dough hook, then add the other 1/3 cup of honey, 3 tablespoons melted butter and salt. Add about 3 cups of whole wheat flour and mix, adding flour as you go to make a smooth dough that pulls away from the sides of the bowl. Place dough in a greased bowl, turning once to coat, and leave in a warm place covered with a towel until the dough doubles in size.

4. Punch the dough down and divide into loaves or rolls. Allow to rise again until the dough tops a loaf pan by 1 inch or until the rolls grow by about a third. Bake loaves for about 30 minutes or rolls for about 15 minutes until they are golden brown and sound a bit hollow when thumped.

# Turkey Three Ways

**G**obbling down a delicious turkey baked in the oven is a holiday tradition around many tables, but you can break the mold with these three flavorful alternatives.

## FRYING

A Southern tradition that's taking hold, deep frying produces a juicy bird with a crisp outer skin. Frying something as big as a holiday turkey requires a specialized set-up, however, and needs to be done outside. Peanut oil is the usual frying medium here, as its high smoke point and mild flavor lend itself well to this application. There is a measure of danger involved; a turkey that's even the least bit frozen could produce a dangerous fire. Make sure your bird is completely thawed and patted dry before you fry. Many stores also sell infrared fryers that can accommodate a turkey and cook it without oil. Visit the small appliances section around holiday time.

## SMOKING

Low and slow gets you a bird with an intense smoky flavor. It's also slightly more involved than popping a turkey into the oven, but it does free up that oven for other uses, such as pies, sides and



bread. You can use a grill with an offset smoker or fashion your regular grill into a smoker using a disposable metal pan. The type of wood chips you use will depend on what flavor you get. Finer grocery stores usually carry at least a few

varieties near the charcoal; outdoor stores may offer more of a selection.

## GRILLED

If you don't have or don't want to make a smoker, there's always the option of putting

the bird on the grill. To be precise, in a roasting pan covered with foil on the grill. Keep an eye on the coals for even heat distribution. Keep the turkey from getting too dry by using beer or wine as a basting liquid, and don't forget herbs to

compliment. Try to keep the lid of the grill closed as much as possible, using a thermometer with a probe to keep an eye on the temperature. As you close in on that magic 170-degree temp, remove the foil and allow the turkey to brown.

# Leftover Solutions

When that holiday table groaning with food becomes a pile of leftovers, when you can't stand the thought of another bite of sweet potatoes or another turkey sandwich, pull these recipes out and transform your seasonal meals into a whole new dish.

## TURKEY POT PIE

1 can cream of mushroom soup  
1 can cream of chicken soup  
12 ounces cooked leftover vegetables, such as peas, corn, carrots or green beans

Black pepper and cayenne pepper, to taste

Dried parsley  
2 cups chopped cooked turkey  
9 frozen biscuits

1. In a saucepan, mix the soups, vegetables, seasonings, herbs and turkey. Stir and cook until warmed through.

2. Pour into a 9-inch-by-9-inch casserole dish and top with frozen biscuits.

3. Bake at 350 degrees for 40 minutes or until biscuits are golden brown and cooked through.

## SWEET POTATO BISCUITS

1 cup flour  
3 tablespoons baking powder

1 teaspoon salt  
2 tablespoons cold butter  
¾ cup leftover candied sweet potatoes, mashed  
¼ cup milk

1. Sift together the flour, baking powder and salt. Using your fingers or the tines of a fork, cut in the cold butter until you have coarse, pea-sized pieces. Mix in the sweet potatoes and milk to make a soft dough.

2. Pinch off pieces of dough and shape into flattened balls about 3 inches across and half an inch thick. Place biscuits 1 inch apart on a greased baking sheet. Lightly press your thumb in the middle, then bake

at 400 degrees for 15 minutes.

## HAM AND POTATO SOUP

2/3 cup butter  
2/3 cup flour  
7 cups milk  
2 cups cubed ham  
4-6 cups mashed potatoes  
1 cup shredded cheddar cheese, plus more for topping  
1 cup sour cream  
Salt and pepper, to taste  
Chopped green onions

1. In a large soup pot, melt the butter, then stir in the flour until smooth. Let cook for 2 minutes, then add the milk while stirring to make a

roux. Add the ham and potatoes and bring to a boil.

2. Stir, then reduce heat and simmer for 10 minutes. Add the cheese, sour cream, salt and pepper, stirring until cheese is melted. Serve immediately with cheese and chopped green onions for topping.

## ORANGE CRANBERRY MUFFINS

2 cups flour  
½ cup brown sugar  
¼ cup white sugar  
1 tablespoon Baking powder  
1/2 teaspoon salt  
1 teaspoon cinnamon  
Dash of nutmeg

Zest of one orange  
1 cup cranberry sauce  
3/4 cup milk  
1/4 cup vegetable oil  
1 egg  
1 teaspoon vanilla

1. Stir together flour, sugars, baking powder, salt, spices and orange zest in a bowl.

2. In a separate bowl, mix cranberry sauce, milk, oil, egg and vanilla. Stir the flour mixture into the wet ingredients until just moist.

3. Pour into a greased or lined muffin tin. Bake in a 400-degree oven for 15-20 minutes, or until golden brown.



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