



H O L I D A Y
FLAVORS

The Perfect Host

We all want to be known as a great host. We take pride in our decorations, presentations and the overall experience we can create for our guests. But doing so is no easy task.

It takes careful planning and the ability to execute accordingly.

Maybe your idea of an elegant get-together is a cocktail party. Or maybe it's a simple sit-down dinner. Either way, you can pull it off without breaking the budget or sending yourself over the stress cliff.

The first step to a successful party is determining whether you want a formal dinner or something more casual. Once that decision has been made, you can determine the party details, such as who you're inviting, how you're inviting them and the date of the party.

MAKE IT EASY ON YOURSELF

Though your guests will surely be at the forefront of your attention, don't forget to spend some time thinking of

yourself. Plan a buffet dinner for easy serving and cleanup. Doing so will help you get dishes to the table quickly and warm with guests serving themselves.

Also, make as much of the food and drinks ahead of time as possible. Some things will obviously have to wait, but the more you do before your party, the less stress you will feel the day of and the more attention you can pay your guests.

DECORATIONS

When it comes to decorations, it's OK to think small. The less table space decorations take up, the more room for dishes and drinks. Simple doesn't have to mean bare, however: You can add numerous smaller flower arrangements instead of one large, bulky centerpiece to your dining room table, for example.

The vessels you serve your food in can help give you the pretty presentation you're going for, too. Instead of opting for metal or glass baking dishes, transfer your food into colorful serving-ware to stylishly keep your food warm and accessible.



Appetizing Appetizers

No party is complete without an assortment of appetizers spread throughout the kitchen and dining room. Convenient and bite-sized, appetizers are the perfect way to keep your guests happy – and full – while you put together your stunning final course.



So whether you're looking for party ideas weeks ahead of time or seeking some last-minute guidance, here are a few simple appetizers sure to please the palates of your guests.

QUICK AND EASY SHRIMP

Shrimp can be your best friend when trying to pull off a quick holiday appetizer, as long as it comes ready to be cooked. After steaming, sauteing or boiling your own fresh shrimp, add a squeeze of lemon zest for an extra punch.

Some dipping sauce options can include tartar, cocktail, honey mustard or even homemade hot sauce (cook, puree and then strain the juices from about 10 sliced jalapenos, two tablespoons of minced garlic, one tablespoon of olive oil and one cup of white vinegar).

RELISH TRAY

Spice up your traditional vegetable tray by going with a platter of roasted red peppers, green and/or black olives, cheese cubes, sliced pastrami, marinated artichoke hearts and pickled peppers. You can also add hard breadsticks or pretzel rods for some crunch.

HOMEMADE SALSA

If you're in a pinch, there is nothing wrong with serving store-bought salsa. But you can do better than that. Grab a few handfuls of fresh produce from your local grocer and get to chopping.

Toss a combination of chopped Roma tomatoes, green onions, cilantro, green pepper and avocado into a mixture of lime juice, salt and pepper for a zesty take on the traditional salsa.

BITE-SIZED TORTILLA ROLL-UPS

Start this sure-hit appetizer by spreading a thin layer of cream cheese on a large flour tortilla. Many cream cheese flavors are on the market, so get creative. Then top the cream cheese with layers of the following ingredients:

- Turkey.
- Ham.
- Chicken.
- Sliced tomato.
- Baby spinach leaves or lettuce.

Roll your tortilla tightly and chill them for up to an hour. Then cut your rolls into slices for easy eating.

The Main Course

Duck, ham or turkey? What is your idea of the traditional holiday main course? No matter your answer, we all know that simply throwing your meat into the oven is not the way to wow your guests. It takes the detail work to really make your meal pop.

From the perfect ham glaze to the rich homemade turkey stuffing, put in a little time this year on the extras and your main course will be the talk of the day.

DUCK A L'ORANGE

The key to serving the perfect duck is cooking it on low heat – and having the perfect glaze for afterward. Add a mixture of one stick of butter, ½ cup of orange juice and a tablespoon of vinegar into your cooking dish once your duck is browned.

Continue cooking until the meat is done and remove the duck fat sitting on top of the juices. Strain the remaining juices, whisk in a cup of your favorite jam and cook it on low heat on the stovetop. Once this mixture thickens, remove it from the heat and pour it over your duck.

GLAZING THE HAM

If you're throwing in a ham on Christmas morning, try a combination of two cups of marmalade, two cups of brown sugar and one cup of Dijon mustard for a mouth-watering glaze sure to please.

A unique salsa of pineapple, spring onion and the juice from two limes will serve



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as the perfect complement for this spectacularly glazed ham.

STUFFING THE TURKEY

Why not go unique with your turkey this year? Ditch

the store-bought stuffing for a homemade concoction like this:

- 1 stick of melted butter.
- 1 stalk of diced celery .
- ½ cup diced red onion.
- ¼ cup of chopped pistachios.

Saute the ingredients together and stir in four cups of breadcrumbs and ½ cup of the jelly of your choice for a delicious take on the traditional holiday stuffing.

When it comes to stuffing the turkey, press the mixture

into the cavity and secure it with a skewer. Then tie the legs together and tuck the wings underneath. This will keep your stuffing secure during the cooking and basting process.

Cooking Safety

Christmas is a time for gathering as a family around the tree or dinner table – not the fire extinguisher. But home fires involving cooking peak on major holidays such as Christmas Eve and Christmas.



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Additionally, unattended cooking equipment is the leading cause of home cooking fires, according to Electrical Safety Foundation International.

So be safe this holiday season by following common-sense cooking practices in the kitchen. Take these tips from the National Fire Protection Association, as well.

- Stay in the kitchen while cooking on the stovetop.
- Remain home when cooking your turkey, ham or duck and check on it frequently.
- Always keep children at least three feet away from the stove or oven; this distance will keep them safe from steam or splashing from vegetables or gravy.

- Keep the floor clear so you don't trip over pets, bags or toys.
- Be sure electric cords from an electric knife, coffee maker or mixer are not dangling to where a child could easily reach it.
- Keep matches and utility lighters high in a locked cabinet – out of the reach of children.
- Never leave children alone in room with a lit candle or warming device.
- Make sure your smoke alarms are working and contain fresh batteries; test them often to ensure their optimal working condition.

Consider Your Drinks

Don't fall into the trap of over-preparing your food list without giving proper attention to your drink selection. Having a great variety of alcoholic and non-alcoholic drink choices can be the finishing touch for a festive holiday party.

Depending on the crew coming to your home, it may be the focal point of the party.

Along with offering the traditional choices – wine, beer, soda and punch – keep everyone on their toes by serving some unique twists to the traditional holiday drinks. You can achieve this with a little creativity and research – and these recipes:

APPLE CIDER PUNCH

Looking for a fruity, tart drink for sipping? Stir up about two cups of orange juice and a half-cup of lemon juice with six cups of apple cider. Then slowly pour in a bottle of sparkling white grape juice for the final add-in.

For an alcoholic option, use chilled champagne instead of the sparkling grape juice. Taste test your drink to determine the need for extra ingredients as you see fit and serve it in a large punch bowl.

MARGARITAS

You may associate margaritas with the summertime, but they can be an absolute hit at your holiday party. By simply adding a cup of frozen cranberry-raspberry juice concentrate, you can give your traditional or iced margarita a hint of red holiday hue that will leave your guests feeling the spirit.

HOT CHOCOLATE FLOAT

The float is another summertime favorite that can be translated into a winter wonderland.

Heat up a half-cup of fudge sauce and another half-cup of your favorite stout beer or root beer. Add two scoops of vanilla ice cream to a glass and pour your warm fudge-beer mixture over the ice cream. Top it with whipped cream to blow this float out of the water.



Cook Together

The Christmas feast is a large feat for one person to take on – especially if your guest list seems to grow by the minute. There's the appetizers, the main course, desserts, drinks and decorations.



counting and food safety. It can also foster quality bonding time between parents and kids that is crucial to overall family happiness.

Teach your chefs-in-training the difference between a broil and a boil, and a teaspoon and a tablespoon. Then quiz them later in the cooking process to see if they are retaining your expert instruction.

But make it fun. Remember, the young ones are on break from school and not looking for any extra homework.

PLAN AHEAD

OK, so you are more of a kitchen dictator who doesn't like to give up any control. That's fine, too. Your biggest aid this year will be a planning checklist that helps keep you on task and budget.

Break down your checklist into segments to give yourself timelines starting about one month away from Christmas. Your first list should be focused on figuring out who to invite and what they will bring to your party. Progress through the processes of purchasing food, decorating and food preparation until you have a comprehensive checklist to keep you organized and unflustered this holiday season.

Oh, and don't forget the cleanup. Not even super-mom or super-dad can handle all of the above without a heavy helping of stress on what is meant to be an enjoyable, reflective holiday.

ASK FOR HELP

There is no shame in enlisting the help of your friends

and family members in the cooking process. In fact, it may make them feel more invested into the process and leave them more appreciative of the finished product.

Ask guests to bring something to take some of the menu-planning burden off your shoulders. If any of your

guests celebrate Hanukkah, ask them to bring some potato latkes or matzoh ball soup from an old family recipe to make it a multi-cultural meal.

Also, have your spouse or neighbor help with preparation on the morning of your big meal. It's amazing how having someone peel a few

carrots or dress the turkey can help reduce your stress level.

INVOLVING CHILDREN: MAKE IT A GAME

Cooking can be a great forum for teaching young children about measurements,

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Holiday Health

The holidays pose the biggest challenge for people trying to stick to their calorie count or exercise routine. Creamy pies and generous portions can cancel out all the hard diet and exercise work you've done throughout the year in the blink of an eye and the shovel of a fork.

Sports nuts know Christmas is a great day for NBA basketball, keeping you plunked down on the couch instead of enjoying some holiday exercise.

Take some simple steps this year to change all of that, and escape the holiday season with your waist line under control. Because after all, the holidays are about family togetherness, and your family wants you around and healthy this time next year.

NON-FOOD TRADITION

One of the easiest ways to beat the "holiday hungries" is to partake in an enjoyable, activity-based family tradition. This can mean a flag football game or a sledding trip to your favorite hill. It can also mean a simple walk around the neighborhood or a Frisbee game with your dog.

No matter what you decide to take up this Christmas, make it a tradition. Having something to look forward to that isn't food-related will keep you from grazing all day at the appetizer table.

Also, drink a large glass of water between your activity and meal. This will help you feel fuller and keep your portion sizes under control.

STRATEGIES FOR 'THE GUEST'

Sometimes being the guest at a large holiday party can challenge to your commitment to eating healthy. You're not in control of the menu, and you don't want to be rude by eating only a small amount of food.

Try to balance out any unhealthy temptations by bringing a lighter recipe. This will provide a healthy option for both you and anyone else looking to maintain their dietary discipline throughout the holidays.

JUMP-START YOUR NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTION

With diet and exercise the perennial No. 1 resolution for Americans, there should be no reason to wait until Jan. 1 to begin your new routine. That's a lot of pressure and expectation for one day, which may discourage you from enjoying your exercise and eating habits.

Give yourself a two-week head-start for an easy transition into 2015. Start by jogging or biking before Christmas even arrives, and you will be in great shape for your holiday get-together, not to mention the new year.

