



Holiday Flavors



Stress-Free Hosting

Does the thought of hosting a big holiday party give you sweats? The planning, the people, the cooking — how will you get it all done?

The key to pulling off a great holiday party is having confidence in yourself. Even if you haven't planned a party of this magnitude before, believing you can is half the battle.

Don't forget that people are focused on each other and their time together during the holidays. No one is going to notice if you make a few mistakes in a recipe or forget to grab a certain decoration. Keep that in mind to help you avoid stressing over every single party detail.

PLAN AHEAD

If you wait until the morning of your holiday party to start every recipe, stress is inevitable. A smart strategy is to get started a day early on the desserts and side items that can comfortably rest in the refrigerator without losing their flavor or freshness.

There are plenty of make-ahead recipes or even store-bought extras that can help keep your stress level to a minimum. You can incorporate a lot of small, finger-food items that not only make for easy preparation and overnight storage but easy cleanup as well.

CONSIDER A POTLUCK

The traditional holiday meal



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may be comprised of grandma whipping up the appetizers, main course, desserts and drinks, but it doesn't have to be that way.

Let guests know ahead of time that you're going with a potluck party format. Have everyone bring a main dish

and dessert — and make sure everyone knows what others are bringing. Or decide to cook the main turkey or ham dish and all of the desserts, leaving the side items up to your guests.

Before you know it, your list of items to cook will be whit-

tled down, right along with your stress level.

DECORATIONS

When it comes to decorations, it's OK to think simple. Take a walk around your property to find sticks, pinecones or

evergreen branches and combine them into a large vase for a natural centerpiece.

Add bowls of bright, vibrant fruit to your table. Items such as lemons and oranges will add some color to your spread, as well as fresh scents to complement the holiday spirit.

Think Small with Dessert

Once the appetizers have been served and the main course finished off, your guests will be looking for dessert. Don't let them down.

Convenient and cute, appetizer-sized desserts are the perfect way to keep your guests happy. It's even better if you can translate holiday favorites into mini versions, like the two ideas below.

GINGERBREAD CUPCAKES

For the cookies:

1 stick butter
8 ounces sour cream
2 cups all-purpose flour
3/4 teaspoon baking soda
1 1/2 teaspoons ground ginger
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1/4 teaspoon ground cloves

For the frosting:

8 ounces softened cream cheese
1 stick softened butter
1/2 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
1/2 cup sugar

Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. Line a muffin pan with paper liners. Combine butter with sour cream in mixer. Meanwhile, sift flour, baking soda, ginger, cinnamon and cloves into a small bowl. With the mixer on low speed, slowly add flour mixture to butter and sour cream mixture until smooth.

Divide batter into muffin pan liners. Bake on middle rack of oven for 25 to 30 minutes. For the frosting, mix cream cheese, butter and vanilla in a bowl. Add sugar and mix until smooth.

MINI CHEESECAKES

3 tablespoons butter
6 whole graham crackers
1/2 cup sugar
1 large egg
One 10 1/2-ounce log fresh goat cheese, softened
1/2 cup plus 2 tablespoons crème fraîche (5 ounces)

Preheat oven to 325 degrees F. Line a muffin pan with paper liners.

In a food processor, grind the crackers with the melted butter and 1 tablespoon of sugar. Pack the crumbs into the paper liners, pressing to compact. Bake for 10 minutes for crispiness and let cool.

Beat the egg, salt and remaining 1/2 cup sugar at medium speed for 2 minutes. Add goat cheese and beat until smooth. Fold in crème fraîche. Spoon mixture into molds and smooth tops.

Bake for about 30 minutes. Let cheesecakes cool, then refrigerate them until chilled, at least 1 hour.



Meat Secrets

On dining room tables across America, the star of the holiday meal is the meat. Turkey, duck, ham or steaks — you can't go wrong in wowing your guests with a perfectly executed meat dish.

Fittingly, a lot of pressure is on the cook to prepare, cook and carve the meat in just the right way. Follow the tips below to make sure you pull off the meat dish your guests are anticipating.

ROASTING TIPS

There are all sorts of fancy cooking methods for meat, but one of the most tried and true is the simple roast. Especially good for large cuts of meat, the basic roast will leave your meat juicy and tender.

Be sure that your meat is at least 2 inches thick. The meat depends on its own juices to provide some of the flavor and extra juiciness, so roasting too thin a piece can be counterproductive.

The steps to a perfect roast:

- Place the meat fat side up on a rack in an open roaster;
- Do not add water, as the meat will use its own juices;
- Insert a meat thermometer into thickest part of roast when the cooking time is nearing the end; and
- Allow the meat to stand for 15 minutes before carving.

CARVING TIPS

Different meats pose different challenges when it comes time for carving. A succulent



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pot roast is best carved against the grain of the meat for the ultimate cut. The turkey, on the other hand, is best cut into different segments to appease your white

meat and dark meat fans.

Roasts, turkeys and whole chickens benefit from 15 minutes of standing time to allow them to finish cooking.

Meat is also easier to carve

after it stands, and will not lose its juices like it would if cut immediately out of the oven.

You can either carve at the table or on a large cutting

board with a well at one end to hold the juice. Use a long, sharpened carving knife to slice the meat and a long-handled fork to keep your cuts straight and steady.

Take a Cooking Class

For holiday hosts of all skill levels, a cooking class can be the perfect way to sharpen your skills and prepare for your best feast yet.

From foolproof recipes to innovative decorating tips, there is likely a class near you divulging time-tested advice on planning and throwing the perfect holiday bash.

LEARN FROM THE PROS

Many professional chefs and cooking personalities host annual holiday cooking classes. They travel across the country delivering expert tips on what got them to positions of cooking mastery and how you can use some of their lessons learned.

Learning from a professional can be an inspiring experience that motivates you to try new things in the kitchen. It also can help you gain in-depth knowledge into different cooking methodologies and techniques to make you an overall better kitchen expert.

EXPAND YOUR HORIZONS

Maybe you're a meat and potatoes cooker, sticking firmly to basic recipes that have been passed down through your family for generations. That's OK. But there's no harm in learning about new foods and recipes, is



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there?

Cooking classes help you understand food science and how to mix the right ingredients together.

They also can open your mind to new herbs, spices or garnishes that you may not have heard of before.

The most important aspect

of taking a cooking class is keeping an open mind — and then applying what you've learned in your own kitchen.

GO ONLINE

If you're short on time, you may not have the luxury of blocking a large portion of

your day for cooking classes. Fortunately, the Internet provides us with an expansive resource full of cooking tips, tricks and recipes — all at the click of a button.

Sure you miss out on the one-on-one mentoring that a live cooking class would give you, but online courses let

you rewind and analyze any particular parts of the lesson or recipe that you may be unclear on.

Conduct a little research to see if your favorite cooking professional offers instructional online videos, especially ones that are focused on the holidays.

Coffee & Hot Chocolate Bar

The holidays mean cold weather for most of the country, which means warm, comforting drinks, and what's more holiday-inspired than coffee and hot chocolate?

Having a great variety of both in alcoholic and non-alcoholic choices can be the finishing touch for a festive holiday party.

You can achieve this in the form of a fancy coffee and hot chocolate bar set up on your kitchen island or a side table. Here's what you'll need:

MUGS AND GLASSES

No bar is complete without the mugs and glasses that will be used to serve your delicious concoctions. You can break out the humorous, tacky holiday mugs or opt for classier, more elegant drinkware.

Stack up your cups and mugs on a tray, and let guests serve themselves. Also, don't forget the to-go cups and lids for the non-alcoholic beverages if there are guests who aren't able to stay long at your party.

THE DRINKS

Coffee is the perfect option for a cold day, so invest in some store-quality thermoses that guests can pump themselves. These can hold much more coffee than a traditional 12-cup pot, which will help you spend less time making coffee and more time enjoy-



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ing your company.

Considering that not everybody is a coffee fan, be sure to have plenty of hot chocolate on tap for your guests, as well. Your guests can mix individual packets with warm milk for

the perfect holiday treat.

THE EXTRAS

Once the main aspects of the coffee and hot chocolate bar are planned out, it's time

to work on the extras. These can include candies and cookies to complement your drinks, or holiday decorations to dress up your table.

Don't forget the drink additions. Creamers, sugar and

marshmallows as companions for your guests' drinks. Many creamers come in peppermint, butter toffee or even rum cake — delectable flavors with the perfect holiday twist for your drink bar.

Cookies with the Kids

Cooking is a holiday tradition that should be enjoyed by people of all ages — even the kids. And depending on the age of your children, there are plenty of cooking activities to which they can lend a hand this year.

All it takes to get them involved is some clean hands and plenty of patience on your part.

You can assign different tasks to your children depending on their age. This will help keep them organized and focused on their own specific roles.

It also will ensure that the appropriate jobs are being handled by the appropriately aged children. Mixing and beating, for example is probably not a job for your 2-year-old toddler, while adding sprinkles to cookies may very well be.

Here are some ideas of how you can involve your children in the cooking process, depending on if they're younger (ages 2 to 5) or older (ages 6 and above).

YOUNGER CHILDREN

Youngsters love cracking eggs. And as long as you're there to supervise to make sure they're not ingesting them, this can be a fun, educational experience for your toddler.

You also can enlist your youngest children to pour ingredients into a mixing bowl after you have measured them out.

The most fun step for chil-



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dren of any age may be frosting the desserts, so step back and let them have a little fun.

Other roles can include:

- Rolling cookie dough into balls;
- Flattening the cookie dough balls with their fingers;
- Rolling balls of cookie dough in sugar; and
- Transferring cookie balls

onto a baking sheet.

OLDER CHILDREN

If you trust your older children to use hand-held electric mixers, they can help you take care of this step while you combine other ingredients.

You may want to step in

when the time comes to add messy items such as flour, sugar or softened cream cheese.

Here are some other roles that are perfect for the grade-schooler:

- Stir in chocolate chips, raisins or other ingredients;
- Cut out cookie shapes from the rolled dough;

- Unwrap and press chocolate kisses into the tops of cookies;

- Frost and decorate cookies by themselves;

- Dip cookies in melted chocolate or drizzle the chocolate over the cookies; and

- Pipe frosting features on gingerbread men and other desserts.

Health & Safety

In our haste to prepare and present the perfect holiday meals, let us not forget one of the most important aspects of our get-togethers — our health.

Every holiday season, we should feel grateful to put another healthy year behind us and look forward to another one ahead.

And we should try to carry on that healthful spirit into our holiday parties. But home fires involving cooking peak on major holidays such as Christmas Eve and Christmas. 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 3 feet away from the stove or oven to keep them safe from steam or splashing from vegetables or gravy; and
- Keep the floor clear so you don't trip over pets, bags or toys.

WORK OFF SOME CALORIES

Another aspect of the holidays that can compromise our



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health is the amount of food and lack of exercise that can come with them. Creamy pies and generous portions can cancel out all of the hard work you've done throughout the year trying to lose weight and

maintain a healthy waistline.

Take some simple steps — literally — to change this pattern. Put together a game of football in the yard before your meal. Recommend a family walk around the neigh-

borhood after dessert. These types of activities can help keep you on track with your weight and cholesterol levels during this holiday season.

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 being plunked down into grandma's couch all day watching football and basketball.