

SERVING UP THE HOLIDAYS

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Beautiful food is delicious food. It is as simple as that, well almost. It's really all about presentation. Even if you make just a few dishes and buy some prepared foods, how it is put on the table is the key. Sometimes the simplest ingredients can come together to be the most elegant. Hopefully these following tips, tricks and recipes can help you impress your holiday guests and make your life a little bit less stressful and most important of all, enjoyable for you.

The latest trend is an hors d'Oeuvre party. Hors d'Oeuvre means small, bite size, also called canapé. These little dishes are like mini meals. So if there is a recipe you make all the time and is everyone's favorite, try scaling it down to bite size. We all have that favorite foolproof recipe for a tart or quiche. These can be made in mini size muffin tins and frittatas can be made in larger sheet pans and cut into shapes with cookie cutters. Use frozen puff pastry instead of making your own to save time.

Another big trend is puréed soups that can be served at room temperature in demitasse cups or cups from the punch bowl set. Garnish with an herb of complementary color or a swirl of sour cream.

Here are some other quick recipes that use some store-bought ingredients to make life easier.

Pumpkin Bisque

2 tbs butter

2 garlic cloves, chopped

1 celery stalk, diced

1 small onion diced

1 leek, white part only, diced

1 lb. pumpkin flesh, diced (canned can be used but not the one for a pie)

2 quarts chicken broth

2 tbl white wine

½ tea. Fresh ginger grated

salt to taste

½ teas. ground nutmeg

Heat butter in soup pot, sauté celery, onion, leek and garlic. Add pumpkin and broth, simmer for 30 minutes. Meanwhile heat wine and steep ginger in it for 10 minutes then drain out ginger. Strain solids from soup remembering to reserve liquid; purée solids a blender, gradually adding liquid to achieve a slightly thick soup consistency, then add wine and season to taste. Serve warm with a sprinkle of nutmeg on top.

Grape Tomato Blossoms

1/3 cup of Boursin cheese (softened)

¼ cup finely chopped fresh basil
18 very thin slices of Genoa salami (3 ½ inches in diameter)
18 grape tomatoes
18 long fresh chives

Stir together cheese and basil; place ½ teaspoon in center of salami slice, top with tomato, gently fold up sides and tie with chive, place on basil leaves.

Smoked Salmon Cannolis

Make a batch of potato pancakes according to box directions but a little thinner and about 3 inches in diameter.

Mix 2/3 cup of mayonnaise
1/3 cup of sour cream
2 teaspoons of lemon
chopped fresh dill
dash of hot sauce

together in a small bowl, season to taste with salt

Spread a thin layer of mayonnaise mixture on pancake; place a slice of smoked salmon on the pancake and gently roll and secure with toothpick and green olive. Place on a round plate lined with dill; line them up in a circle formation starting in the center; sprinkle with finely chopped red onions and capers.

60 Second Chocolate Mousse

1 cup chocolate chips
1 c. heavy cream
1 egg
1 tsp. vanilla or liqueur to
flavor
Whipped cream

Place chocolate, egg and flavoring in blender or food processor and chop. Heat cream until small bubbles appear at edge. Do not boil. With machine running, pour in hot cream. Blend until chocolate is melted and mixture is smooth. Pour into martini glasses, demitasse cups, dessert dishes or plastic 3 oz clear glasses used in bars, cover with plastic and chill. Serve with whipped cream on top and a sprig of mint. Could even use mint chocolate chips, raspberry chocolate chips, Andes candies bits, etc. etc. etc.

Holiday Cocktails.

Cocktails infused with green tea and herbs are very popular. Steep some green tea and add it to a pint container of vodka. The ratio is 3 parts vodka to 1 part tea, but it is always a good idea to taste. Mint leaves steeped in hot water then strained also make a nice infusion. A peppermint stick makes a great stir in a drink made with 1 ½ oz. Vodka, 1 oz. Peppermint schnapps, and 1 oz. Triple sec. Another idea is to crush a peppermint stick, moisten rim of cocktail glass with lemon and roll in crushed peppermint

and serve with above recipe. Spear a rosemary leaf with cranberries for a unique cocktail stir made with cranberry juice and champagne.

Set up a bar area away from the food to encourage mingling and avoid heavy traffic at the buffet area. Make a decision to have a full bar or just beer and wine. Don't forget the non-alcoholic beverages too. Make up cocktail pitchers of seasonal fruit drinks with club soda or ginger ale. Garnish with cranberries and sliced fruit. Make this bar self-service, but put someone in charge of monitoring the bar with alcoholic beverages.

Crudités is also referred to as a simple selection of one particular type of food, such as vegetables. Take the time to hand cut veggies such as carrots, peppers celery, zucchini etc. into uniform lengths. Lay out in alternating colors. Down the center of the platter spread grape tomatoes (yellow pear shaped ones are usually available at large farm stands) or radishes also work this way. Make an antipasto tray of just olives (4 different kinds) marinated artichokes, mushrooms and large capers. These can be put in dishes or separated by lemon and lime wedges to add a nice contrasting color .

Garnishing Tips:

Take an ingredient that you used in the quiche or tart and place it in its whole form on the platter. For instance whole mushrooms, scallions, or cherry peppers look wonderful in clusters or laid out in rows to separate different food items. A great tray decoration is a lemon cut into points with sprigs of rosemary coming out the center like a palm tree. To spike or point a fruit, with a paring knife cut both ends off the fruit so it can stand freely. Just below center cut and angled slit into the fruit, then repeat with another angle cut going the opposite way to form a triangle. Work your way around the fruit, careful to go through to the center. Then gently twist in half and you will have two spiked or pointed pieces of fruit. This works great with kiwi fruit also. You can carefully dip the tips in parsley and paprika to make it more festive. The lemons make great toothpick holders too. Cabbages, red or green, cut in half and hollowed out make great dip dishes. Peppers also serve dips well. You just have to find a large, fat pepper that will stand up when the bottom is trimmed a bit. Sweet dips for fruits can be placed in hollowed out grapefruits or oranges. Be careful to wash your fruit before cutting and stay away from cantaloupes because their outer porous rind can spread foodborne illnesses. Frisée, also know as chicory, is a great garnish for hors d'Oeuvre trays. Also, fresh herbs or a simple and elegant long stem flower placed along the edge of the platter in a complimentary color to your food item.

Baskets make great holders for bread and crackers. If you have one too deep, just fill it with tissue to raise the bottom up, cover with foil and line with napkins that compliment your theme.

Choose a signature decorative element. This can be holiday greens, candles, sugared fruits etc. Sugared fruit is easy to do, just lightly brush a beaten egg white over the fruit (should not be wet) and cover with sugar and let dry. Remember that these fruits are pretty but not edible. Try miniature white lights woven through holiday greens and placed around your serving trays of food. Place sturdy boxes strategically on your buffet table, cover with a large table cloth and cover each box again with a complimentary colored napkin, then place trays of food on top of these boxes for a great three-

dimensional look. Fill tall vases with cranberries and herbs like parsley, tarragon and sage coming out the top or surround these elements around a ivory candle.

Hosting Secrets: Don't put out all your perishable food at once. Popular items like shrimp cocktail or roast beef will always go first. Hold a tray of each back and replenish as needed during the evening in case some of your guests are late and to make sure all of your guest get a taste. And remember, the most important thing, is to have a great time at your party!

Bon Appétit!