

'Tis the Season: Entertaining Made Easier

by Karen Giles-Smith, MS, RD

Although most people love the idea of entertaining at home, many experience party planning paralysis because they think entertaining is too time-consuming and stressful, especially when hosting health-conscious guests. But with a little planning, you can get the party started by serving delicious and nutritious appetizers -- without being confined to the kitchen all night or worrying about waistlines the next day. Just follow these simple steps for fancy party fare without the fuss.

1. Go easy on yourself

Ask for help, choose simple recipes and no-cook dishes, dim the lights (everything looks better by candlelight) and don't forget to have fun!

2. Divide and conquer

In 69 percent of households, family members pitch in to help with holiday meal preparation, which is a great way to bring the family together during the busy season and give yourself some relief. Other time savers include asking a friend or hiring a teen from your neighborhood to help you during the party, asking guests to bring a dozen cookies to share, choosing recipes you can make ahead, or creating a build-your-own entrée or dessert bar.

Denise Vivaldos, author of *Do it for Less Parties*, recommends a simple tart bar for your party: Make shortbread or pie crust cups the week before (or purchase from a local bakery) and freeze until the day of the party. Whip together a bar of cream cheese and a small jar of marshmallow cream. Set out the tart cups, cream cheese mixture, and bowls of fresh fruits like raspberries, blueberries, blackberries, and sliced strawberries. Ask your guests to create their own tarts and watch the creativity flow!

3. Prepare simply delicious recipes

Cooking from scratch isn't necessarily time-consuming and, in fact, it may be better for you and your guests. Researchers from the University of California, Los Angeles found that it takes about the same amount of time to prepare simple, healthful meals from scratch as it takes to make meals using prepackaged convenience foods. The key difference is the higher nutritional value of the scratch meal, which typically has less fat, sodium and preservatives and more vitamins and minerals. Try the Harvest Cheddar Fondue or Shrimp and Vegetable Kabobs recipes (see sidebar). The dairy foods in each of these recipes provide nine essential vitamins and minerals like calcium, protein and potassium. Research shows enjoying at least three servings of low-fat or fat-free milk, cheese or yogurt each day can help reduce the risk of high blood pressure, osteoporosis and certain cancers.

4. Consider cheese

A cheese board requires no cooking at all. It takes less than 10 minutes to prepare and is sure to be a party-pleaser. In a survey conducted by *Food and Wine Magazine*, cheese

was voted as one of the top two foods Americans can't live without. In addition, several kinds of cheese such as cheddar, Swiss and mozzarella may help protect teeth from decay. Follow these simple steps to create a beautiful cheese board:

- Plan to serve three to five different types of cheese to keep preparation to a minimum and give guests an array of choices. For example: Serve Camembert, Gorgonzola, Havarti, Colby and aged Cheddar together.
- Include cheeses that vary in taste, texture and appearance -- from mild to bold, soft to firm, and light to dark.
- For each cheese, estimate one to two ounces per person.
- Serve cheese at room temperature for optimal flavor. Take the cheese out of the refrigerator and let it sit, covered, for 30 minutes to an hour before serving (except for fresh cheeses like ricotta, mascarpone and queso blanco which should be left out for only brief periods of time).
- Display the cheese on a wooden tray or colorful ceramic platter large enough to keep the different types of cheese from touching. Provide a different knife for each cheese to avoid mixing flavors.
- Pair the cheese with apples, pears, peaches, nuts and crusty whole grain bread to further increase the nutritional value.

With just a little advance planning, you can enjoy the party as much as your guests. For more simple, delicious and nutritious recipes, visit www.3aday.org, and for tips on pairing cheese with beverages and other food, visit www.ilovecheese.com.

Karen Giles-Smith is a registered dietitian and manager of nutrition communications for United Dairy Industry of Michigan