

Plan the perfect menu so you can be the perfect host

Another question from a faithful reader today.

Q. What can I serve when company is coming over so that I don't have to be in the kitchen the entire time they are there?

A. I LOVE this question because I truly believe that this is one of the biggest reasons that people don't entertain as often as they'd like. It's just too much work. So, what's the answer? Planning. It's all in the planning. When you are having guests over, you need to spend some time working through the menu. You can't just quickly decide—oh, I think I'll have a crepe party and make several different types including dessert crepes. Yummy menu and highly original, but holy cow—you are NEVER leaving the kitchen if you pick that one.

You have to choose a menu consisting of foods that can be prepared in advance—if some of them can be started days in advance that's even better. The menu must also not have very many foods requiring last minute attention or assembly.

Here's an example—as I sit here writing, it is early Sunday morning. In a few hours, I am having 14 people over for lunch. How come I have time to sit and write? Well, when I planned the menu, there were some requirements. First of all it had to be reasonable in cost—this is a casual lunch, not Christmas dinner. Second, I am darn busy these days and I was not willing to give up my whole weekend to prepare, set up and clean up from a giant party. Third, all of my friends and family are food lovers and the expectations are pretty high when they come over, so it had to be really nice food. So what am I serving? Cilantro pesto marinated chicken thighs, goat cheese tart, rosemary new potatoes, corn on the cob, green salad, a selection of cheeses, bread and for a

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dessert a fresh fruit platter and ice cream. Sounds yummy and sounds like a lot of work, but in reality, it took about two hours of preparation yesterday afternoon and it will take me about two hours today to finish it all off (and remember I am cooking for 14—if you are only having six or eight people it should be much shorter). Once the guests arrive, everything will be made except I will have to cook the corn on the cob just before eating.

When planning, look for foods that can be served at room temperature or cold instead of everything being piping hot off the stove or out of the oven. Look for foods that can be completely made in advance (like casseroles, stews, soups, ribs, etc). With side dishes, salads, etc, look for ones that have some component of advance preparation—a dressing that can be made in advance or perhaps all the individual ingredients can be made in advance, it just has to be assembled on the day of the party.

I am really a fan of Ziploc bags. They make my life much easier. I often do all the chopping for a meal the day before and put everything in Ziploc bags and then when it is time to cook, I just have to zip open and dump into the salad bowl or pan or whatever—so chop your onions, peppers, carrots, etc in advance. The only things you don't want to chop in advance are fresh herbs, garlic and tomatoes.

Choose a menu that has no more than one

complicated menu item. Make some of the menu really simple—buy the dessert or have corn on the cob or simple boiled new potatoes or something else that gives you at least one dish with no work involved.

Unless you are a really confident cook, don't make recipes you haven't tried before. You will find it much less work and less stress to stick with dishes that you are familiar with.

Choose menu items that cook in different manners. In other words, don't pick a menu that all has to go into the oven right before eating. Try to balance your kitchen by choosing something that is cooking in the crock pot for example and something else that goes on the barbecue and something else that was cooked

earlier and now sits out resting. Don't overdo it (this is my worst fault).

Choose a simple menu that will leave you relaxed when your guests arrive. There is nothing wrong with serving spaghetti and meatballs or soup and salad or hamburgers or pot roast with salad. The guests are there to spend time with you—not to analyze your Martha Stewart abilities.

So, pick an easy menu—think about it LOTS in advance to ensure it won't be too much work and then relax, have a drink and enjoy your day! Thank you for the great question. Have fun and keep cooking!

(Lori and Gerry can be reached at whatscookin@independentfreepress.com)

Romaine Soup

Makes 2-8 servings
Ingredients

- 3 tbsp unsalted butter
- 8 oz side bacon, chopped
- 1 small red onion, chopped
- 12 cloves garlic, minced
- 1/3 cup all purpose flour
- 8 cups chicken stock
- 2 heads romaine lettuce, chopped
- salt and pepper

Method

In a heavy pot, melt butter over medium high heat. Sauté the onion and bacon in the butter, until bacon has been rendered of most of its fat (about five minutes). Add garlic and continue to sauté another two minutes or until garlic has softened but not browned.

Stir in flour and cook, stirring until flour no longer smells raw, but has not coloured (about 1-2 minutes).



Gradually stir in stock, whisking constantly. Increase heat to medium and bring to a boil, stirring often.

Once soup is boiling, reduce heat until soup is simmering and continue to simmer for 15 minutes.

Add lettuce and simmer over low heat until very tender, about 10 minutes.

Using a blender or food processor, puree mixture.

Season with salt and pepper. Serve.

Cook's Note: yes, the recipe really does call for 12 cloves of garlic!

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