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PREPARING FOR THE PARTY

Holiday time is party time! With Christmas and the big New Year's Eve event just around the corner, a little advanced planning can result in a happy time for the cook, too!

Your guests are all invited; you know how many will attend. Now, use this schedule to help make the rest of the planning easier and more efficient.

With the number of guests and their likes and dislikes in mind, plan your menu. Actually, write down your menu and post it in the kitchen. The goal is to serve menu items that keep you out of the kitchen during the party. Do this by having foods that can be prepared ahead, which need little attention on party day. Then look up your recipes and make your grocery list. Shop for ingredients early and then whenever you have a free moment you can mix a batter or prepare hors d'oeuvres.

A day or two before the party make some extra space in your refrigerator. Take out anything that can safely be stored elsewhere for a day or two. Condense the contents of any partly filled large containers into smaller units. You might use those convenient self-locking plastic storage bags wherever you can because they take up little space. Arrange to pick up any of the things you need to borrow.

Early on party day put the candles in the refrigerator (not the freezer) to cool. They will burn more slowly and drip less. Make any modifications in the arrangement of your furniture that will allow your guests to move around more easily, and put the flowers or other decorations you plan to use in place. Set up the table or buffet with linens, decorations, tableware and china. Check your menu to make sure you have everything you need to finish the food and drink preparation.

Sometimes it is difficult to decide how much you need to prepare. Here are some guidelines using 25 guests as the number served. For meats and cheeses, you need 13 pounds of roast beef; 8 pounds of boneless ham; a 16-pound turkey; 6 pounds of cheese or 8 pounds of sliced cold meats.

If you are making sandwiches based on using 2-3 loaves of bread you will need 1/2 pound margarine or butter, 1-2 cups of mayonnaise, 6 cups of mixed fillings and 2 heads of lettuce.

Salads to accompany your meats for 25 people include 4 quarts of potato or pasta salad; 3 quarts of green salad (tossed salad) and 4 quarts of fruit salad.

Large amounts of coffee can be a problem, even for those of us who make a pot or two each day. The rule of thumb is 1 tablespoon of coffee per cup. So just some simple kitchen math—remember there are 16 tablespoons per measuring cup.

Now do not overlook food safety and your party is safely underway. Each year, many cases of food poisoning are reported from holiday dishes such as cold meats, poultry stuffing, potato salad, meat salads, cream pies and eggnog -- all of these contain meat, poultry or eggs. These foods are handled more than other foods in preparation - especially for a fancy buffet - and it is easy for germs to spread from hands to the food. Keep your hands and utensils clean when preparing food.

If you prepare dishes ahead of time, refrigerate them immediately until serving. Remember the 2-Hour Food Safety Rule. No perishable food should be at room temperature for more than 2 hours. Particularly with a buffet, you need to keep timing in mind.

When preparing a hot dish place it in the refrigerator within 30 minutes after cooking. Reheat thoroughly just before serving. Never leave dishes containing meat, poultry or eggs at room temperature. Refrigerate immediately after preparation.

Buffets are festive and fun but they require extra care in preparing, storing and serving food. Keep buffet servings small, and replenish the serving dishes as needed, directly from the refrigerator or stove. Keep in mind when replenishing buffet dishes the best method would be to wash the dish before refilling!

When all your guests have finished eating, put the perishables - especially the meat and poultry - back into the refrigerator. Remember, when foods are left on the buffet table for more than 2 hours, the risk of food poisoning increases.

To add a festive, yet easy addition to your holiday buffet table, try the Shrimp Christmas Tree for hors d'oeuvres.

Shrimp Christmas Tree

Materials you will need:

- 1 Styrofoam cone, 30 inches high
- 1 Styrofoam square, 12"x12"x1"
- 1 box round toothpicks
- 3 lbs. shrimp, fresh or frozen
- 4 bunches curly endive
- 1/2 cup salt

Ribbon, holly or small ornament

To Cook Shrimp:

Thaw shrimp, if frozen. Drop into 2 quarts boiling water, salted. Seasonings such as peppercorns, bay leaf, and hot pepper sauce may be added for extra flavor. After water comes to a boil again, simmer only until shrimp is opaque. Drain immediately. For tastiest results, remember the first rule of good seafood cooking: Do not overcook. If you are using in-shell shrimp, peel and remove the dark vein with the tip of a small paring knife. Refrigerate shrimp.

To Assemble Tree:

Separate and wash endive. Dry and chill. Place cone in the center of the styrofoam square and draw a circle around the base of the cone. Cut out circle and insert cone. Start at the outside edge of the base and work up, covering base and cone with overlapping leaves of endive. Secure leaves to cone with toothpick halves. Fully cover with greens to resemble a Christmas tree. Attach shrimp with toothpicks, placing shrimp in even rows encircling the tree. Top with a velvet bow and sprig of holly or a small ornament. Provide cocktail sauce for dipping. Serves 12.

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