

Dishing Out Joy



Paola Westbeek explains how buffets can be the answer to the stress of holiday meal hosting

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WE ALL KNOW how potentially daunting holiday entertaining can be. Combine high expectations with a desire for perfectionism, add a dollop of relatives who all seem to have different dietary restrictions, finish with a dash of stressing over which drinks to serve, and you've cooked yourself up a recipe that's everything but jolly. Fear not, however. When in doubt about how to gracefully host a gathering come the month of December, nothing will prove as truly satisfying and stress-free as inviting friends and family over for a casual (yet decidedly festive) buffet.

The great thing about buffets is that the dishes can be prepared well in advance, meaning you won't have to leave your guests to serve the next course, not to mention fret about making an impression with your plating skills. Once you've decided on which dishes to serve, it's all a matter of

arranging them into an attractive tablescape complete with plates, cutlery and napkins.

Let's begin with the canvas—your buffet table, which should be set up away from the wall so that guests can walk around it and have easy access to the food. It's important to remember that the focus should be on the dishes, so keep the decor simple yet elegant and inviting.



are, can pose a risk for guests as they reach over to help themselves. Tea lights in pretty votive holders can be strategically placed between dishes and will add just as much warmth to the set-up. And do not make the mistake of lighting scented candles! Steer away from special holiday varieties with seductive names like "gingerbread men" or "magical winter forest" and let the food's

FOR DESSERT, A HANDSOME, STORE-BOUGHT YULE LOG AND PERHAPS A BOWL OF PEARS POACHED IN SPICED WINE

Instead of a bulky tablecloth, place a few beautiful cream or white linen runners across the table to create the illusion of space and add lightness to your presentation. Once you've decided on the menu, start by setting the table in a logical order. Arrange a stack of plates on one corner, followed by the serving trays for cold appetisers and salads, chafing dishes for mains and sides that should be kept hot, stands for cakes and desserts, and ending with the cutlery and napkins on the opposite corner. With this all in place, you can move on to the decorative touches.



tempting aromas permeate the air instead. Another option is to skip the candles and fill mason jars or glass vases of various heights with delicate fairy lights.

When it comes to choosing accessories, at this time of year, nature will be your ultimate source of inspiration. Rather than baubles, fill your table with holly sprigs, pinecones painted in silver and gold, twigs tied with sparkling ribbon, and crystal bowls brimming with sugared cranberries and nuts.

The menu, of course, is the real star of the show and will require the most planning. For a group of ten, you should prepare three appetisers, three mains, two sides and two desserts. Rather than the

Candlelight will cast a subtle glow over your spread, but bear in mind that tall candles, graceful as they

usual olives and breadsticks to start, you'll want to include a sumptuous crudité platter filled with crisp vegetables and served with two cold dips (presented on a bed of ice) such as aioli, cocktail sauce, hummus, guacamole or tapenade. Alongside any traditional roasts serving as the *pièce de résistance*, make sure to include a vegetarian or vegan option in the form of a decadent mushroom lasagne, a hearty shepherd's pie with lentils in lieu of meat, or a pumpkin and sage quiche. Root vegetable gratins and traybakes made with seasonal vegetables are excellent hot sides, but remember to also include a mixed green salad with a jar of homemade vinaigrette. For dessert, a handsome, store-bought yule log

and perhaps a bowl of pears poached in spiced wine or baked under a golden crumb topping of pecans, cranberries, cinnamon, butter, brown sugar and oats will certainly please and impress.

Finally, designate a separate station for drinks (including a few non-alcoholic options). Offer a festive cocktail served in a bowl or pitcher, such as a sangria with sliced oranges, cranberries and cinnamon. Wines that pair well with myriad dishes include those made with riesling grapes (for white) and grenache or pinot noir (for red). When in doubt, however, remember that nothing captures the spirit of the season more than the always versatile bottle of champagne. ■



White Christmas

Despite snow featuring on Christmas cards, advent calendars and festive songs, it's more likely to fall in the UK between January and March than in December

"Technical" white Christmases simply require one snowflake to fall somewhere in the UK (something that has happened the last three years)

The last widespread white Christmas in the UK was in 2010. There was snow on the ground at 83 per cent of observation stations—the highest ever recorded

Other than 2010, there have only been three other years since 1960 with snow on the ground at more than 40 per cent of UK stations—2009, 1995 and 1981

SOURCE: METOFFICE.GOV.UK