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Holiday 2024

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Throw a Party Like a Pro

(Family Features)

Whether you're celebrating a special occasion or simply catching up with loved ones, playing host can be as demanding as it is enjoyable. Before gathering your crew for your next event, make a plan to ensure you get to enjoy the day as fully as your guests.

Keep the Menu Simple

An ornate spread may be impressive, but your guests are just as likely to appreciate a less demanding menu with a few standout dishes. Offer a single main dish, a couple of tried-and-true sides, some finger foods for snacking and a seasonal dessert. Beverage staples like tea, lemonade and water are all you really need, but if that feels too basic, you can offer a flavor station with fresh fruit like berries and lemon wedges, flavored syrups and other sweeteners. If you'll be serving alcohol, don't try to cater to everyone's favorite. Select neutral white and red wines and one or two beer varieties. A signature cocktail you can pre-mix and serve is another way to add a special touch.

Set a Thoughtful Theme

One area many hosts go overboard is theming their events. While setting a theme can be a fun idea, it doesn't have to be fussy or complicated, and your decorations don't have to be over the top. Subtle color, centerpieces and serving pieces are all places you can inject some thematic vibes without investing too much time or money. You can also let your theme influence any games or activities you plan, as well as other entertainment like background music.

Anticipate Guests' Needs

Thinking ahead about your guests' comfort can prevent scrambling once the party is under-



way. Consider needs like seating, where you'll keep extra food for quick refills and essentials like more toilet paper in the guest bath. Also anticipate accidents like spills and have supplies ready to efficiently correct inevitable incidents. Remember to plan for extra trash bins and if guests will be congregating outdoors, provide extra sunscreen, bug spray and fans.

Organize Entertainment

Depending on the purpose of the party, your entertainment may be pretty clear, but if it's a casual gathering, you'll likely want to provide guests some ideas for passing the time. Board games and backyard games are almost always a hit. A playlist that fits your theme can add ambiance and provide background for conversation, but you can also inject some musical fun with karaoke. If you'll have kids in attendance, provide age-appropriate options for shorter attention spans, too.

Make Cleanup Easy

After the last guest leaves, you may be ready to call it a night, but taking care of a few quick chores can make cleanup easier in the morning. Load the dishwasher and set it to run overnight, leaving any tough dishes to soak in hot, soapy water. Check for any spills or stains that need immediate attention and get a jump start on the floors. For a convenient hands-off experience, try the Eufy S1 Pro Robot Vacuum and Mop, which achieves a 99.99% sterilization rate when mopping and, using automated sensors, elevates the mophead and converts to powerful suction for carpeted areas. After cleaning, the robot docks to automatically empty its dustbin, dispose of wastewater and clean its mopping pads, drying them with hot air to inhibit bacterial growth and odors.

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LAKE METROPARKS

Stay comfy this winter with hygge inspiration

BY ERIN THORBURN
TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

Second to the term “Brexit,” the Collins English Dictionary coined “hygge” the runner-up for the word of the year in the UK in 2016. Soon after, the Danish and Norwegian word describing a cozy and contented mood became something of a phenomenon across the pond as well. Americans quickly embraced the idea and practice of hygge — and why wouldn’t we? Who doesn’t love cozying up with friends, family, fuzzy blankets, pillows and similar creature comforts?

Almost eight years later, the concept of contented living has not lost its appeal. After the hustle and bustle of the holidays, combined with new goals in a new year, there’s no better time to integrate a hygge-inspired theme into your next party or event.

While a hygge-influenced gathering can include any number of guests, consider keeping the event smaller — five to seven people. This way, as host you can help keep the party flow calm, cool, collected and encased in ultimate comfort — reducing your chance of mitigating typical large-party problems — so you can get in on the cozy too.

Comfy corners

The art of hygge isn’t complicated, so creating comfortable areas for guests doesn’t have to be



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either. To help provide a cozy but simple atmosphere, hosts can declutter a sitting area — keeping spaces clean and open. Then, pull out fuzzy throws, handmade blankets and plush pillows, and drape them over chairs, couches and ottomans.

Ambiance

To help heighten a sense of peace, calm and serenity, think about implementing soft lighting. White- and cream-colored candles lit throughout the room, a glowing fireplace and low-lit lamps can help add warmth and relaxation to the area. Consider playing quiet, soothing music in the background — classical, meditation or even rain and nature sounds.

Danish delights

The Scandinavian originators of hygge include certain foods and drinks into the practice of happy, cozy living. Mulled wine with cardamom pods and star anise and aquavit, citrus spiced cocktails are examples of hygge-inspired beverages, whereas Danish Split Pea Soup with Dill, Norwegian Porridge and Swedish Meatballs are Scandinavian-inspired dishes that correlate to the practice of cozy living (visit purewow.com for full recipes).

If you don't go the Scandinavian route, your guests will likely appreciate any comfort-food offerings you're willing to provide. Hot teas, apple cider and/or wine with a charcuterie board, or even a three-cheese macaroni or winter salad will certainly do.

Indoor activities

Being content, calm and joyful can include exploration. Include interesting table books about travel, gardening and design along with crossword puzzles, Sudoku and word scrambles for guests to dive into should they be so inclined.

Outdoor activities

Hygge isn't relegated to indoor enjoyment. If prompted you and your guests can bundle up with scarves, beanies, fuzzy socks, boots and jackets and go out for a brisk nature walk or bike ride. Or, per-

haps gather on a porch or deck to stargaze, roast marshmallows or simply chat by a fire pit.

Extra accents

Carry cozy throughout your home, infusing areas with calming scents — lavender, vanilla, cedarwood. Set out a water station with both room temperature and chilled water infused with lemon, lime or berries. In the bathroom, provide unique bar soaps (made with goats milk), soft exfoliating scrubs and special, hydrating lotion.

For guest takeaways, fuzzy socks (also referred to as reading socks) are part of the hygge movement and much appreciated during the winter months. ✨

Carry cozy throughout your home, infusing areas with calming scents — lavender, vanilla, cedarwood.



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The ultimate playlist to give your home the right holiday season vibe

Staying home for the holidays can make the season a little more convenient, saving celebrants from having to contend with the millions of individuals who take to the roads, railways and friendly skies each December. But staying home comes with its fair share of obligations, especially for individuals who are planning holiday get-togethers with family and friends.

Mood and merrymaking go hand in hand come the holiday season, and music can be used to establish a celebratory vibe this time of year. Whether you're hosting a holiday party or simply aspring to create a festive atmosphere throughout the month of December, the following songs can help set the right tone this year.

- "Sleigh Ride," by Ella Fitzgerald
- "The Christmas Song," by Gregory Porter
- "Jingle Bell Rock," by Bobby Helms
- "Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!," by Frank Sinatra
- "Jingle Bells," by Kimberley Locke
- "Silver Bells," by Tony Bennett, featuring Count Basie and His Big Band
- "Here Comes Santa Claus," by Elvis Presley
- "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," by Diana Krall
- "White Christmas," by Bing Crosby
- "Winter Wonderland," by Louie Armstrong



- "The First Noel," by the cast of "Glee"
- "Happy Holiday," by Peggy Lee
- "O Tannenbaum," by the Vince Guaraldi Trio
- "Boogie Woogie Santa Claus," by the Brian Setzer Orchestra
- "All I Want for Christmas Is You," by Mariah Carey
- "Santa Baby," by Eartha Kitt
- "Mele Kalikimaka," by Bing Crosby and The Andrews Sisters
- "Blue Christmas," by Elvis Presley
- "Frosty the Snowman," by Gene Autry
- "Santa Claus Is Comin' to Town," by Bruce Springsteen & the E Street Band
- "Deck the Halls," by Nat King Cole
- "Fairytale of New York," by The Pogues featuring Kirsty MacColl
- "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," by Burl Ives
- "Baby, It's Cold Outside," by Dean Martin and Marilyn Maxwell
- "The Twelve Days of Christmas," by The Ray Coniff Singers

These are just some of the songs that can make up a merry and festive holiday season playlist.



Games add another layer of levity to holiday celebrations

The holidays bring together friends, neighbors and family members to celebrate some of the most festive days of the year. Although celebrants often incorporate traditions they hold dear this time of year, downtime provides an opportunity to embrace new games and entertainment ideas as well.

The following are some fun games to play this holiday season that can help to break the ice and keep everyone laughing.

Reindeer Games

Everyone knows that Rudolph wanted to have fun and participate in "reindeer games," but he was left on the sidelines. Inspired by the tune, everyone can participate in reindeer games at your home. These types of games can include tests of endurance and dexterity, like fruitcake-eating contests, running races or doing hurdle competitions in the yard.

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they can launch a marshmallow into the outfield by hitting it with a candy cane taking the place of the baseball bat. Each participant gets three swings. The person with the most home runs wins.

Guess the Gift

In this game, party hosts wrap up five oddly shaped gifts specifically for the game (the gifts may be oddly shaped or just the wrapping as a decoy). Players take turns trying to guess what is inside and mark down their answers on sheets. One by one the gifts are revealed. If anyone guesses the gift, it is given as a prize. If more than one person guesses a gift, come up with a fun way to break the tie, such as rock, paper, scissors or thumb wrestling.

Christmas Karaoke

Singing traditional carols and popular holiday tunes is not uncommon come December. In this competitive version of karaoke, singers have to keep on singing, even when the lyrics get turned off or covered to test their true knowledge of these songs.

Present Stackers

This requires keeping a collection of oddly shaped gifts at the ready. Game participants try to stack the presents as tall as they can without them toppling over.

Fishing for Fun

Hang strings on the straight ends of candy canes to fashion fishing poles, with the curved ends serving as the “hooks.” Participants try to “fish” smaller candy canes out of a bowl and see how many they can reel in.

The “No L” Game

The game referee has a list of a few categories (i.e., food, sports, colors, cars, etc.) and players are split into a few teams. When the category is called, the teams have to jot down as many words as they can pertaining to the category that do not have a letter “L” in them before a timer runs out.

These are just a few festive ways to have fun with friends or family members during holiday gatherings.

Classic holiday films the whole family can enjoy

Celebrants owe the joy of the holiday season to various components. Decor and gift-giving go a long way toward making December a joyous time of year. Holiday films also do their part to make the season so special.

Many people have their own favorite holiday films, and the following are some that can engage viewers who are young or simply young at heart.

“A Christmas Story”

Released in 1983, this warmly nostalgic, humorous film is a perennial favorite among families. It follows the story of Ralphie, who has his heart set on a very specific Christmas present: a Red Rider BB gun. Amidst wintry exploits and family drama, the true spirit of Christmas manages to shine through in this beloved film. Some of the subject matter can be off-color, and there are some bullying scenes. So this is a movie best watched with children who are mature enough to make it through without being scared.

“Little Women”

Based on the Louisa May Alcott novel of the same name, the 1994 telling of this classic follows the March sisters, who confront financial difficulties, romance and family tragedies in mid-nineteenth century Massachusetts. While it’s not a traditional Christmas movie, the importance of spending time with family around Christmastime is a core theme in this coming-of-age tale.

“Klaus”

Perhaps not as well-known as other animated holiday flicks, “Klaus,” released in 2019, has a personality all its own. Postman

Jesper, who is not making the grade at the postal academy, is sent to work in a frozen town in the North, where he discovers a reclusive toy maker named Klaus. The unlikely duo ultimately team up to make and deliver toys and bring smiles to children’s faces.

“Meet Me In St. Louis”

Starring the irreplaceable Judy Garland, this movie musical focuses on four sisters who are awaiting the 1904 World’s Fair in their hometown, but learn that their father has accepted a new job and the family must move to New York beforehand. A Christmas miracle occurs and all is right in the end. Garland sings a memorable version of “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” in the film, solidifying this as a holiday classic.

“The Santa Clause”

This Disney film came out in 1994 and remains a family favorite. When divorced dad Scott (Tim Allen) accidentally kills a man in a Santa suit, he magically becomes the next Santa. He must learn to cope with the ways the transformation to the man in red interrupts his normal life, eventually giving over to the magic of Christmas.

“Emmet Otter’s Jug-Band Christmas”

Though this 1977 Jim Henson production is a television special and not a full-length feature film, Generation X likely remembers the heartfelt tale of a poor otter family who sacrifice prized possessions to have what’s needed to enter a talent contest. The goal is to win the prize money to buy special Christmas presents. Audiences get to enjoy narration by Kermit the Frog.

Films are a popular component that help to make the holiday season so special.

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Maximize outdoor spaces this holiday season

The holiday season comes at a time when the weather can be anywhere from cool to frigid. But even if the weather outside is somewhat frightful, holiday entertaining in outdoor spaces can still be delightful. Making the most of outdoor spaces during the holidays and the rest of the winter can enable guests to spread out, which should make things more comfortable for them. With that goal in mind, the following are some tips for putting outdoor areas to good use when hosting loved ones this holiday season.

- **Decorate first.** An easy way to make outdoor entertaining spaces more welcoming is to coordinate the decor with the interior of the home. Greenery wrapped with lights around railings and fencing can create the perfect ambiance. Candles, wreaths and small, decorated Christmas trees can finish the effect.

- **Consider a fire or heating element.** Unless you live in a temperate climate, you'll need some way to keep guests warm. Center the outdoor entertaining space around a fire pit, outdoor fireplace or an outdoor heater. Make sure to illuminate the outdoor area so that guests can find their way around with ease.

- **Host an early gathering.** The sun sets early in fall and winter, so it may not only get colder, but also darker at a time when guests typically arrive. Think about moving up the start time of your holiday event if you'll be having an outdoor area, so guests can see one another and stay a



little warmer.

- **Use the grill.** Keep foods warm by using the grill or an outdoor griddle; otherwise, set up the food buffet-style inside so guests can make their plates and gravitate where they feel comfortable.

- **Provide blankets or fleeces.** In addition to warming elements around your entertaining space, stock a large basket with cozy throws, blankets or fleece jackets that guests can use to warm up. Hats and scarves also may be appreciated.

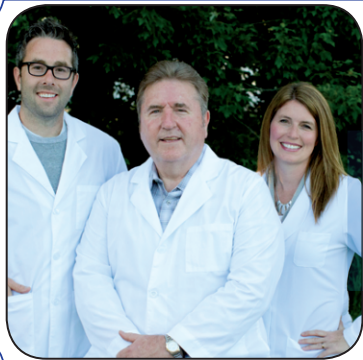
- **Invest in waterproof furniture.** Upgrade your exterior seating with plush outdoor couches and lounges that are decked out in weather-resistant fabrics. Make them more comfortable with throw pillows that coordinate with a holiday entertaining theme.

- **Set up two drink stations.** Set up beverages both inside and outside the home so guests can easily refill their drinks wherever they are

Using well-equipped outdoor areas for entertaining can expand the possibilities and guest list for holiday gatherings.

relaxing. Think about having some warm drinks outside, such as mulled cider or hot chocolate, so guests can be warmed from the inside as well.

- **Use a wireless speaker.** A Bluetooth-enabled wireless speaker placed outside allows guests to listen to holiday tunes while they are enjoying themselves.



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Read on for seven festive ideas that can set a holiday season party apart from the rest.

flowing, or a karaoke professional who will have guests up and singing holiday (or non-holiday) tunes?

4. Create a signature cocktail. An open bar can be expensive, especially if you want to stock it with top-shelf offerings. Wine and beer is more affordable, and hosts who want to offer something a little different can create a signature cocktail for the party. Tie in seasonal flavors, whether you go sweet with a chocolate cream liqueur and mint or something more tart like a cranberry-based drink.

5. Rearrange the furniture. If the music is playing and guests are fired up, you'll need a spot where they can dance. Move large furnishings out of the main gathering space to create room to cut a rug; otherwise, create an outdoor gathering area complete with strung lights so guests can take the fun outside, if necessary.

6. Plan for prizes. Guests always appreciate some sort of takeaway. Gifting is commonplace this time of year, but perhaps have guests work a little to reap the rewards? Simple trivia games or a scavenger hunt can increase the fun and make it possible for guests to walk away with some swag.

7. Have at least one unexpected item. This can be anything from a very clever and cute dessert to a special guest to an over-the-top decorative item that gets people talking and ensures the party is one no one will forget.

Throwing a festive holiday party is easier than one may think. With some creativity, hosts can plan a party to remember.

7 ideas for a festive holiday fête

The holiday season has arrived and with it comes many opportunities to socialize. With so many events on people's calendars, holiday party hosts may wonder what they can do to set their gatherings apart from others to make them memorable. Read on for seven festive ideas that can set a holiday season party apart from the rest.

1. Cook ahead. Being able to mingle with guests and guide conversation or activities is the key to being an excellent holiday host. By cooking foods that can feed crowds ahead of time, you won't be stuck in the kitchen when

you should be out and about. Casseroles, stews, soups, and quiches can be cooked in advance and then warmed (or set in a slow cooker) to bring to temperature

2. Choose a color scheme. Choose a color scheme that really pops and sets a festive tone. For a holiday cocktail party, consider bold reds and pinks and add a burst of gold for that contrast of color that adds impact.

3. Hire some entertainment. Conversation and reminiscing can fill some time, but allot some of the party budget to entertainment. Perhaps hire a DJ who can keep the music

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Gifts for holiday hosts

Millions of people open their homes to relatives and friends each holiday season. Taking on the task of holiday host can be a labor of love, as it involves not only a commitment of time, but also a financial investment. Lending Tree reported that 60 percent of Americans considering hosting holiday gatherings in 2023 expected to spend an average of \$556 on their celebrations. Six-figure earners planned to spend even more, indicating they expected to spend \$764 on holiday hosting.

Guests benefitting from holiday hosts' hospitality can offer tokens of their appreciation upon arrival. The following are some great gifts to offer hosts this holiday season.

- **Beverage of choice:** A bottle of wine or another spirit can be a great gift for holiday gatherings. Let hosts decide if they want to serve it with the meal or save it to enjoy at a later time.
 - **Curated food basket:** A guest can put together a basket of different foods, including crackers, cheeses, jams, bread sticks, and other items that can be enjoyed as snacks or appetizers.
 - **Holiday plant:** A poinsettia or Christmas cactus may be fitting this time of year, and a holiday host can enjoy seeing it grow during the season.
 - **Kitchen tools or serving items:** A beautiful olive wood serving platter or cutting board might be appreciated, particularly if guests arrive with it covered in a charcuterie spread.
 - **Scented candle:** Hosts can set the mood and add to the ambiance of an entertaining space with lit, scented candles, which make for a great gift. Guests can inquire as to the hosts' preferred aromas or stick with safe bets like vanilla or cinnamon.
 - **Holiday ornament or decorative piece:** Guests can offer ornaments for the tree or another decorative item for hosts who are repeat entertainers. Dating the decoration or having it engraved can transform it into a memento hosts can relish through the years.
 - **Comfort and care assortment:** Hosting takes effort, so a box of items to pamper holiday hosts can be a great gift. Fill the box with a loofah, bath bombs, shower gel, moisturizing cream, and massage oil.
- Holiday hosts invest time and money into making their homes welcoming spaces to spend the holidays. Guests can treat these hosts with gifts to show how much their efforts and hospitality are appreciated.

Guests can treat hosts with gifts to show how much their efforts and hospitality are appreciated.



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Lots Of Holiday Options

Classic Desserts That Combine Christmases Past and Present

(Family Features) If holiday gatherings have started to feel more overwhelming than celebratory, it's time to go back to the basics with seasonal desserts that are easy yet elegant.

Wow your crowd this year with a mouthwatering Hummingbird Cake or Coconut Cake that call to mind holidays past without requiring hours spent in the kitchen (like grandma used to do). Or for a classic take on an old favorite, these Christmas Cinnamon Cookies can even let the kiddos get involved - just make the dough then have your little helpers use their favorite cookie cutters to make festive shapes before the oven does the rest of the work.

Find these recipes and more from "Cookin' Savvy" at Culinary.net.

Christmas Cinnamon Cookies

- 1^a cups self-rising flour
- 2^s teaspoons cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon ginger
- ⅛ teaspoon cloves
- ½ cup sugar
- ½ cup brown sugar
- 1 egg
- 2 tablespoons water (optional)
- 1 cup powdered sugar (optional)

In mixing bowl, combine flour, cinnamon, ginger, cloves, sugar, brown sugar and egg to make dough. If dough is too dry to form into ball, add water. Form into log and wrap in parchment paper. Refrigerate 1 hour.

Heat oven to 350 F. Roll dough out and cut into shapes with cookie cutters. Place on cookie sheet covered in parchment paper and bake 8-10 minutes. Let cool on rack then dust with powdered sugar, if desired.

– Recipe courtesy of "Cookin' Savvy"



Coconut Cake

- 1 vanilla or white cake mix
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 cup coconut Greek yogurt
- 1 cup milk
- 2 tablespoons melted butter
- 3 eggs

Frosting:

- 1 stick butter, softened
- 1 package (8 ounces) cream cheese, softened
- ¼ cup heavy whipping cream
- 5 cups powdered sugar
- 2-4 cups shredded coconut

Heat oven to 350 F.

In mixing bowl, mix cake mix, flour and sugar. Blend in yogurt, milk, butter and eggs.

Grease two 8-inch cake pans with butter. Pour half the mixture into each pan and bake 45 minutes. Cool on rack before icing.

To make frosting: In mixing bowl, mix butter, cream cheese and heavy whipping cream. Slowly blend in powdered sugar.

Ice cake then pat shredded coconut gently into icing.

– Recipe courtesy of "Cookin' Savvy"



Hummingbird Cake

- 1 spice cake mix
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 cup banana cream Greek yogurt
- 3 eggs
- 1 cup crushed pineapple
- 1 cup crushed pecans
- 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 2 tablespoons melted butter

Frosting:

- 1 stick butter, softened
- 1 package (8 ounces) cream cheese, softened
- ¼ cup heavy whipping cream
- 5 cups powdered sugar
- 1 package pecans (optional)

Heat oven to 350 F. In mixing bowl, mix spice mix and sugar. Blend in yogurt, eggs and pineapple. In separate bowl, mix pecans, flour and butter then add to cake mixture.

Grease two 8-inch cake pans with butter. Pour half the mixture into each pan then bake 45 minutes. Cool on rack before icing.

To make frosting: In mixing bowl, mix butter, cream cheese and heavy whipping cream. Slowly blend in powdered sugar.

Ice cake then decorate with pecans, if desired.
– Recipe courtesy of "Cookin' Savvy"

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Up your setup and cocktail recipes for the holidays

BY **GRETCHEN MCKAY**
PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE

During the pandemic, Bill Semins was happy to have a lot more free time on his hands. However, because all his favorite restaurants and bars were forced to close during the lockdown, he had nowhere to go for a great adult beverage.

So the Pittsburgh lawyer took on a task he normally would have left to the professionals: creating and mixing signature drinks at home.

“I’ve always loved a good cocktail,” he explains, “and part of a great meal is the exper-

tise [of bartenders] I couldn’t do at home.”

Crafting a different one each day, Semins ended up mixing more than 270 custom cocktails before he stopped counting, earning him not just the admiration of family and friends, but also an invitation to join the “Cocktail of the Day” group on Facebook.

Many of his recipes, he says, are inspired by something he saw online. Others are the result of pure alchemy — measuring out a little of this to add to some of that to conjure up a drink both smooth and sophisticated. To add to the fun, many were given witty names that speak to the polarized times we live in, such as Smash the Peartriarchy (featuring bourbon, St-Ger-



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main, muddled pear and ginger syrup) and the Kentucky Kleptocrat, which stars Kentucky bourbon in an ode to Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell.

“There’s really no excuse not to make cocktails at home because there are so many recipes out here,” Semins says of his creations, which are bolstered by his wife Hattie Fletcher’s homemade syrups and infusions using garden ingredients. This time of year, for instance, plums and nasturtiums join forces in a sweet and slightly peppery simple syrup. “It’s just finding the right balance.”

Being able to serve his hand-crafted concoctions in the vintage glassware he inherited from his great uncle Meyer Paris and great aunts Rose and Violet Semins only adds to the experience.

With the holiday entertaining season fast approaching, maybe you’d like to try your hand at home cocktailing, too. You’re in good company, according to a study on emerging home design trends by Houzz, an online design source. It found that searches for home bars and wine cellars both were up nearly four times from 2020 to 2021.

Thankfully, expert mixologists such as Milk Street editorial director J.M. Hirsch, who spent much of the pandemic field-testing and writing the new cocktail book, “Pour Me Another: 250 Ways to Find Your Favorite Drink” (Voracious, \$27), say it’s not as hard as you might think.

Just as home cooking has gotten easier with better access to quality ingredients and great equipment online, so too has starting and growing a well-appointed bar setup. Another reason for the home bar’s growing popularity: As Semins demonstrated while whipping up an Aperol spritz in his dining room on a recent Wednesday, most cocktails can be made in 5 minutes or less.

Raising the bar

Sure, you can get obsessed and go down the



rabbit hole. But in terms of supplies, you need just a few core building blocks to set up a great home bar. Most cocktails draw on a limited array of liquors and liqueurs — Hirsch’s list includes white and aged rum, gin, blanco tequila, bourbon and rye, along with a bottle of orange and Angostura bitters. Since they’re being mixed with other ingredients, you don’t have to splurge on premium bottles. Solid middle shelf is absolutely fine, “so it’s not a huge investment,” he says.

The same goes for equipment. All that’s really required is a shaker of some sort, a stirring glass, a mesh strainer and — most important — a 1- or 2-ounce measuring device. Hour-glass-shaped Japanese-style jiggers can be a little clumsy for home use, so Hirsch recommends a single-bowl measure with easy-to-see graduated marks, like those offered by OXO.

Then, as you grow more confident, build on your bar with specialty items such as a stirring spoon, large-cube ice trays and a muddler to crush ingredients, and secondary spirits such as

Drambuie and vermouth.

As for glassware, Hirsch says it is both essential — and not important at all. A coupe glass is the practical go-to for many cocktails because its wide rim allows you to enjoy the drink’s aromatics, while long pours with a lot of ice, like a Tom Collins or bloody Mary, need the volume of a highball glass. But unless a certain cocktail would otherwise look silly, you don’t need every type of glassware to make terrific drinks.

“At the end of the day, drink a cocktail in what you like,” says Hirsch, which for him is often a repurposed Glade candle holder. “If all you have is a sippy cup, that’s OK.”

That said, know your audience. A boisterous crowd might require rocks glasses because they’re much harder to knock over than a coupe or cocktail glass.

You also need to take in account how much room you have for a home bar. Semins has plenty of room to house his bottles and glassware in separate corners of his dining room, but you might only have space for a single bar cart.



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Everyday ingredients

One of the best aspects of making cocktails at home is the ability to personalize them with your favorite flavors. And it doesn't have to be expensive. Most people, Hirsch notes, have "tons of ingredients" in their kitchens that can be used in amazing and transformative ways.

A bit of strawberry or raspberry jam, for instance, can add a sweet and fruity viscosity to a cocktail, while a few grains of kosher salt will make a drink taste fuller and brighter. Super-intense teas and coffees are also underrated cocktail mixers, and never underestimate the flavor-boosting power of muddled fresh fruit or the velvety goodness of fat-washing a glass with melted butter or a strip of bacon.

Many of those techniques and ingredients are included in "Pour Me Another," the pandemic follow-up to Hirsch's first cocktail book, "Shake Strain Done: Craft Cocktails at Home," which was nominated for a 2021 IACP Cookbook Award. Along with offering recipes for the five classic cocktails, it shows amateur mixologists how to use them as a flavor guide to finding new favorites.

From each of those iconic drinks — a tequila Margarita, Gin and Tonic, rum Daiquiri, vodka Martini and bourbon Old Fashioned — there are 50 iterations that share a combination of flavor characteristics (sweet, sour, bitter, spicy, etc.), from boldest to faintest.

Any liquor can present itself in diverse ways, depending on how and what it's mixed with. But the result is not always intuitive to the home bartender. Sweet vermouth is a perfect example, says Hirsch. Other than the word "sweet," many people have no idea what to expect when it's added to a cocktail.

Aperol sour

Serves 1

This colorful aperitif cocktail is traditionally crafted with gin and egg white. Here, St-Germain elderflower liqueur adds a sweet, fruity flavor.

- 1½ ounces Aperol
- ¾ ounce St-Germain elderflower liqueur
- ¼ ounce fresh lime juice
- Rosemary sprig, for garnish

Place all ingredients into a cocktail shaker filled with ice. Shake, then strain into a coupe. Add a rosemary sprig, and serve.

— *Bill Semins, Squirrel Hill*

Classic old fashioned

Serves 1

This is a very simple take on the classic cocktail that has roots stretching back to the 1800s.

- 3 ounces bourbon or rye
- ½ ounce (¾ teaspoon) agave or simple syrup
- Dash orange or Angostura bitters
- 1 small ice cube

In a rocks glass, stir the bourbon, syrup, bitters and ice cube.

— *"Pour Me Another: 250 Ways to Find Your Favorite Drink" by J.M. Hirsch (Voracious, October 2022)*



Hot toddy

Serves 1

Warm and boozy, the classic hot toddy is a favorite — and easy to make — winter drink. For honey syrup, mix 5 parts honey to 1 part warm filtered water.

- 2 lemon wedges
- 1½ ounces bourbon
- ¾ ounce honey syrup
- 1 dash Angostura bitters
- 4 ounces boiling water
- 2 lemon wedges and nutmeg, for garnish

Squeeze lemon wedges into a toddy mug, then add the remaining ingredients except water. Pour in boiling water and then grate some nutmeg over the top of the drink and garnish with lemon wedges.

— *"Cocktail Codex" by Alex Day, Nick Fauchald and David Kaplan (Ten Speed Press, \$40)*

Bijou

Serves 1

The Bijou is a gin drink that J.M. Hirsch says "will win whiskey drinkers over to the lighter side" with the addition of Angostura bitters and a pinch of salt.

- 2 ounces gin
- 1 ounce sweet vermouth
- ½ ounce Green Chartreuse
- Dash Angostura bitters
- Dash orange bitters
- 6-10 granules kosher salt
- Ice cubes

In a stirring glass, combine gin, vermouth, Green Chartreuse, both bitters and salt. Stir with ice cubes. Strain into a coupe,

— *"Pour Me Another: 250 Ways to Find Your Favorite Drink" by J.M. Hirsch (Voracious, \$27)* ✨

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These 3 pumpkin dishes might upstage the turkey on the table

BY **GRETCHEN MCKAY**
PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE

Of all the Thanksgiving classics, only one dish gives a roasted turkey a run for the money.

Silky smooth pumpkin pie is just as high on many people's list of favorite holiday dishes. Often made with Libby's canned pumpkin puree, a slice brings the meal to its sweet conclusion.

I've never been a big fan because of the dessert's jiggy texture. Even a giant dollop of homemade whipped cream spooned on top

won't sway me. I am, however, quite happy to bake one or two pies for the family and friends who love it.

Like a whole lot of Americans who love the flavor of pumpkin in everything from their morning coffee to their breads, soups and cookies, I also like to cook with it, so long as its final destination isn't inside a pie shell.

It's not just about the flavor: When it comes to canned foods, pure pumpkin is a winner nutrition-wise. Not only is the fruit low-fat and low-calorie (a half-cup serving has just 45 calories), it's naturally gluten-free. It's also packed with nutrients, fiber and vitamin A. In a pinch,

it can make a great substitute for oil or butter in baking.

The holidays are prime time for pumpkin lovers, because those instantly recognizable cans of pure pumpkin puree are not only happily on sale in the weeks leading up to Thanksgiving and Christmas, but also front and center on your grocery store's end caps and baking aisle — practically begging to be tossed into the shopping cart.

Want to expand your pumpkin repertoire? Or maybe you're just looking for ways to use up any leftover pumpkin after making the requisite pie. These three recipes all put the bright orange puree to good use, in ways both sweet and savory.

The first is a savory pumpkin hummus that takes less than 10 minutes to prepare, and will kick off your holiday gathering in a flavorful and nutritious fashion. It has all the ingredients of a traditional hummus — chickpeas, garlic, lemon and tahini — plus canned pumpkin puree and warm Mediterranean spices. The result is a festive and slightly spicy spin on a cold dip that's perfect for fall.

The second recipe is made to order for guests who prefer eating vegetarian, especially when said dish partners cheese and pasta. Cooked lasagna noodles are filled with a creamy mix of pumpkin puree and ricotta, Parmesan and mozzarella cheeses and rolled burrito-style into fat bundles. A rich sauce made with more pumpkin and heavy cream goes on top, along with thin ribbons of fresh sage. Not exactly low-cal, but fabulous! You'll never make sweet potato casserole again.

And finally, for dessert, may we suggest a moist and perfectly spiced pumpkin bundt cake. It's more showy than a round or square cake, and easier to make because you don't have to ice it. A thick but pourable glaze made of maple syrup, butter, vanilla and confectioners' sugar is drizzled on top and down the side for a sweet and seasonal finish.



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Spicy pumpkin hummus

Serves a crowd

This low-cal and very tasty appetizer made with pumpkin puree is super easy and super seasonal. Cayenne pepper and cumin give it a spicy little kick.

- 1 15-ounce canned pumpkin puree
- 1 15.5-ounce can garbanzo beans, drained and rinsed well
- 3 tablespoons tahini
- Juice 1 lemon
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 clove garlic
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
- Pita chips, apple slices and/or crackers for serving

Process pumpkin and chickpeas in a food processor until fairly smooth. Add tahini, lemon juice, oil, cayenne, cumin and garlic to the food processor and process until smooth.

Season to taste with salt and pepper; you also can add more lemon juice or spices, to taste.

Serve with pita chips or wedges, apple slices and/or crackers, with a sprinkle of cayenne on top.

—Adapted from *foodnetwork.com*



Pumpkin lasagna roll-ups

Serves 6-8

Have a few vegetarians at the table this holiday? Or simply tired of the same old sweet potato casserole? This decadent lasagna dish is sure to please. The filling combines pumpkin puree with ricotta and Parmesan cheeses as well as fresh sage. And the creamy pumpkin sauce shouts “fall!”

I used heavy cream in the sauce, but if you're looking for a lighter dish, use all milk instead. Any leftover filling can be tucked into ravioli or cannelloni.

- 2 teaspoons kosher salt, plus more for the noodles
- 12 lasagna noodles
- 1 tablespoon salted butter
- 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1 cup light or heavy cream
- 2 cups whole milk, plus more if needed
- Salt and black pepper
- 1½ cups grated Parmesan cheese
- Pinch of grated nutmeg
- Pinch of cayenne pepper
- 1½ cups pure pumpkin puree
- 1 16-ounce container whole-milk ricotta cheese
- 4 cups shredded mozzarella cheese
- 1 large egg, beaten
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh sage, plus more for topping

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add lasagna noodles and cook until al dente. Drain, rinse under cold water until cool and lay flat on a large sheet of foil. When cool, cut each in half.

Melt butter in a medium saucepan over medium heat. Sprinkle in flour and whisk constantly with a wooden spoon just long enough to eliminate the



raw taste of the flour, but not so long that the roux starts to brown, about 3 minutes.

Slowly pour in milk, whisking constantly. Season with 1 teaspoon salt and a few grinds of pepper. Bring to a gentle simmer, whisking occasionally, and cook until the sauce thickens a little, about 10 minutes. Whisk in 1/3 cup Parmesan, nutmeg and cayenne until melted.

Add 1 cup pumpkin puree to the sauce and whisk until smooth; taste and season with more salt, pepper, nutmeg or cayenne, if desired. If it seems too thick, add a little more milk. Set aside.

Prepare filling: Combine ricotta, 2 cups mozzarella, ¾ cup Parmesan, the remaining 1/2 cup pumpkin, egg, sage, 1 teaspoon salt and a few grinds of pepper in a large bowl and stir to combine.

Assemble roll-ups. Spread 1/2 cup of sauce in a 9- by- 13-inch baking dish. Spread a generous tablespoons of ricotta filling on each half noodle, then roll up to enclose the filling. Arrange seam-side down in the pan. (I divided the noodles between two pans.)

Top with the remaining sauce, mozzarella and Parmesan. Sprinkle with sage. Loosely cover with foil.

Bake for 15 minutes, then uncover and bake until bubbly, about 10 more minutes. Let it sit for 15 minutes before serving.

—Adapted from *thepioneerwoman.com*

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Pumpkin bundt cake

Makes 1 cake

Pumpkin pie is the most famous Thanksgiving dessert, but personally, I can't stand it. (It's a texture thing.) This super-moist pumpkin Bundt cake, which includes many of the same ingredients, including canned pumpkin, is a terrific substitute. A sweet maple glaze adds an autumnal flourish. Great for breakfast before Black Friday shopping.

For cake

- 3 cups all-purpose flour
- 2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
- 1½ teaspoons baking soda
- 1½ teaspoons ground nutmeg
- 1 teaspoon ground allspice
- ¾ teaspoon kosher salt
- ½ teaspoon baking powder
- 1 cup vegetable oil
- 2½ cups granulated sugar
- 3 large eggs, at room temperature
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 15-ounce can pumpkin puree (not pumpkin pie filling)

For maple glaze

- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- ½ cup pure maple syrup
- ¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 cup powdered sugar, sifted
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- Chopped walnuts or pecans, for garnish (optional)

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Generously grease a 10- to 12-cup Bundt pan with baking spray with flour.

Sift flour into a large bowl. Add cinnamon, baking soda, nutmeg, allspice, salt, and baking powder to the bowl and whisk to combine.



In a separate large bowl, beat vegetable oil and sugar together until fully combined. Beat in eggs, one at a time, making sure that each is fully incorporated before adding the next. Mix in vanilla.

Beginning and ending with the dry ingredients, alternate adding dry ingredients and pumpkin puree to the batter, mixing on low speed after each addition just until the ingredients are incorporated. Be careful not to overmix.

Pour batter into the prepared pan and smooth into an even layer. Firmly tap the pan on the countertop a few times to release any air bubbles.

Bake 55-60 minutes, until a cake tester or wooden skewer inserted in the cake comes out clean. Allow to cool for 10 minutes in the pan

before inverting onto a wire rack to cool completely.

Prepare maple glaze: Place butter, maple syrup, ground cinnamon and kosher salt in a medium saucepan set over medium-low heat, stirring occasionally until the butter is melted. Remove from the heat and whisk in the powdered sugar and vanilla. Allow to cool for 2-4 minutes, until slightly thickened.

Spoon the warm glaze over the cooled cake. If the glaze starts to set in the pan before drizzling over the cake, simply place it back on the heat for a few seconds and whisk until smooth). Garnish with chopped walnuts, if desired. ✨

— *southernliving.com*



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4 classic Thanksgiving vegetable dishes get tasty updates

BY **GRETCHEN MCKAY**
PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE

We all love our turkey and many of us would find it hard to turn down a piece of homemade pumpkin pie, especially if it's served with a dollop of homemade whipped cream. But we also know the truth about America's favorite food-focused holiday: Thanksgiving would be nothing more than a boring turkey dinner if not for the cornucopia of side dishes that complete the meal.

For some, the jury will always be out on whether cranberry sauce — especially the jiggly, log-shaped stuff plopped from a can — is the food of gods or a gelatinous abomination. Yet most will agree that some of the best eats on Thanksgiving will always be the baked, roasted and mashed vegetables that every year find their way onto the table. We're talking classics like green bean or sweet potato casserole, herbed stuffing and creamy (or maybe you prefer lumpy) mashed potatoes.

But to borrow a favorite line from the band Coldplay, if you never try, you'll never know how good something different can be when it comes to building out and updating your holiday menu with fresh takes on those traditional dishes.

With that in mind, and to cure you of

any possible Thanksgiving meal fatigue, we tweak a few favorites — gently! — with global flavors and unexpected ingredients.

In Pittsburgh, Fish & Ash chef Cory Hughes, for instance, gives roasted sweet potatoes an unanticipated warm and spicy kick with a compound butter garnish made with red curry paste, maple syrup, garlic and lime zest. In defiance of Mom's green bean casserole made with canned mushroom soup and those salty-but-irresistible crispy fried onions, Market District Chef Benjamin D'Amico channels the flavors of Greece with a fresh, mezze-style green bean salad that delights with sun-dried tomato, briny Kalamata olives and the salty punch of feta.

D'Amico also gives a simple platter of roasted asparagus the holiday treatment (and a tug at my heartstrings) with two of my father's favorite seasonal add-ons: juicy, crunchy pomegranate arils and chopped pistachios.

And for the inevitable pan of Brussels sprouts, which are often roasted to a crisp? In Sarah Grueneberg's new veggie-forward cookbook "Listen to Your Vegetables," the James Beard Award-winning chef gets fresh by going old school and gently boiling the sprouts and then tossing them in a nutty brown butter with dried cherries and pecans.

All are so tasty they're sure to make a repeat appearance on your Thanksgiving table for years to come, and then some.



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Mezze-style green bean salad

Serves 6

This modern take on green bean casserole is lighter than the traditional dish. To make crispy chickpeas from scratch, remove any loose skins from 1 cup rinsed and dried cooked chickpeas with 1 tablespoon oil, sea salt and whatever spices you like, and bake in a 400-degree oven for 30-40 minutes, or until golden brown and crispy.

For salad

- 2 pounds fresh green beans, trimmed (can be halved if preferred)
- ¼ cup sun-dried tomatoes, thinly sliced
- ½ cup Kalamata or black olives, halved lengthwise
- ¼ cup red onion, thinly sliced
- ½ cup feta cheese, crumbled
- ½ cup crispy chickpea

For vinaigrette

- ¼ cup canola or olive oil
- 1 teaspoon lemon zest
- ½ teaspoon dried oregano
- 2 tablespoons fresh parsley
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- ½ teaspoon black pepper

In a large pot of boiling water, steam or boil green beans for 3-4 minutes. Remove from heat and submerge beans in an ice bath for 2 minutes to chill. Drain beans and dry with a paper towel, and set aside while you prepare the vinaigrette.

In a small bowl, whisk together the oil, lemon zest, dried oregano, fresh parsley, salt and pepper until well combined.

When ready to serve, place the green beans, sun-dried tomatoes, olives, red onions in a bowl. Add vinaigrette and toss until well coated, then place onto a serving platter.

Garnish the salad with crumbled feta cheese and crispy chickpeas.

— Market District chef Benjamin D'Amico



Roasted asparagus with pomegranate, pistachios and balsamic glaze

Serves 4-6

The colors of this roasted asparagus dish might be more appropriate for Christmas, but the flavor is worth celebrating any day of the week. Pomegranate arils add a juicy, seasonal crunch.

- 2 pounds fresh asparagus
- 2 tablespoons canola or olive oil
- Kosher salt and black pepper
- 2 tablespoons pomegranate arils
- 2 tablespoons pistachios, chopped
- 1 teaspoon fresh lemon zest
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh parsley

- Market District Balsamic Glaze
- Preheat oven to 350 degrees.


Trim bottom ¼ inch off of the asparagus. (Asparagus can be left whole or cut into 1-inch pieces if preferred.) Place in a bowl and toss with oil, salt and pepper to taste.

Place the asparagus onto a parchment-lined baking tray and cook in hot oven for 20-25 minutes, or until roasted and tender.

Remove asparagus from oven and place onto a serving platter. Garnish with pomegranate arils, chopped pistachios, lemon zest, chopped parsley and a drizzle or two of balsamic glaze.



— Market District chef Benjamin D'Amico

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Brussels sprouts with dried cherries and pecans

Serves 4-6

Dried cherries add a tart-sweet touch to this buttery, nutty, easy-to-make pan of Brussels sprouts. I used pecans.

- Kosher salt
- 2 pounds Brussels sprouts, trimmed
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- ½ cup pecans or walnuts, chopped
- Leaves from 1 rosemary sprig
- ¼ cup dried tart cherries, chopped
- Fresh cracked black pepper

Bring a large pot of water to a boil and season generously with salt (about 1 tablespoon salt per quart of water). Add the Brussels sprouts and boil until tender, 5 to 7 minutes, depending on size. To check if they are tender, treat them like potatoes: Stick a paring knife in one sprout, and if the knife doesn't get stuck, the sprouts are done.

Drain sprouts in a large colander. Place pot back on stove over medium heat. Add butter and melt until foamy. Swirl the pan to check the darkening of the butter, about 1 minute.

As soon as the butter turns golden brown, add pecans and toast for 1 minute. Then add the rosemary and continue to cook, swirling the pan or stirring the nuts so they don't burn. As soon as the rosemary is fragrant, add the sprouts and cherries. (I cut the larger sprouts in half vertically to make them easier to eat.) Cook until evenly coated and the sprouts are warmed through.

Season with salt and pepper and serve.

— *"Listen to Your Vegetables"* by Sarah Grueneberg and Kate Heddings (*Harvest*, Oct. 2022, \$45)

Caramelized yams with red curry-maple compound butter

Serves 6

This globally inspired side dish is a modern take on candied sweet potatoes. Red curry and maple syrup add a subtle sweetness and spiciness.

For compound butter

- 2 sticks (16 tablespoons) butter, softened
- 1 teaspoon lime zest
- 1 tablespoon red curry paste, or more to taste
- 2 tablespoons minced basil
- 2 teaspoons minced garlic
- 1 teaspoon minced shallots
- 2 tablespoons maple syrup

For yams

- 4 medium yams, cut into quarters lengthwise
- 2 teaspoons minced garlic
- 2 teaspoons minced shallot
- 1 teaspoon smoked paprika
- 1 teaspoon sea salt
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- Maldon sea salt, for optional garnish
- Chopped basil, for garnish

Prepare compound butter: In a mixing bowl, combine butter, lime zest, curry paste, basil, garlic, shallots and maple syrup, and stir with a spatula. Take a 12- to 14-inch piece of plastic wrap and spoon the mixture in the middle lengthwise, into a burrito shape.

Wrap the mixture and roll into a burrito. Refrigerate for at least 4 hours, preferably overnight.



Prepare yams: Preheat oven to 450 degrees.

In a large mixing bowl, toss together quartered yams, garlic, shallot, paprika, salt and olive oil. Lay yams flat on 1 or 2 sheet trays, taking care not to overcrowd them.

Roast for 20 minutes, then turn the yams over and cook for an additional 5 minutes. Set the oven to broiler and cook for another 3 to 4 minutes until golden brown and delicious looking, to caramelize the yams. (If you don't have a broiler, skip this step and roast in a skillet.)

To plate, place the roasted yams in a shallow oval serving dish. Cut the compound butter into 1-inch slices, and place on top. Garnish with Maldon sea salt and basil, if desired. ✨

— Chef Cory Hughes, Fig & Ash, North Side

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3 squash recipes that make the most of the fall fruit

BY **BETH DOOLEY**
MINNESOTA STAR TRIBUNE

Winter squash — orange, green, striped, gray, red — represents the colors and flavor of fall.

Though actually a fruit, squash promises endless variations of soups, stews and curries as well as cakes, breads, scones and pies. Survey the whimsical sizes and shapes with alluring names — Aladdin’s Turban, pie pumpkin, delicata, honeynut. Try the winter kabocha, whose flaky texture makes a fine mash; the Koginut’s firm flesh is well-suited to stir-fries; and that sweet dumpling, with a lush, velvety texture, makes a lovely soup or pie. More old-timey varieties of squash are coming to market each year as growers discover heritage varieties that grow so well here.

Once the squash is harvested, it is “cured” — just set it aside in a cool, dry place so the skins harden. This ensures it will last through winter; the longer squash is in storage, the tougher the shell becomes, and it’s said they sweeten with age (just like us). Store cut-up squash unwrapped in the refrigerator. Avoid using plastic bags, as plastic traps moisture

and makes the squash slimy, shortening its life significantly. Better to refrigerate the cut pieces uncovered on the shelf. When you go to use it, slice and discard any discolored sections.

Use caution when wielding a knife to cut squash. Some, like the Hubbard, can be so tough, I’m often tempted to use an axe or toss it from the roof of my car to split it. Instead, put the squash on a cutting board and whack off a thin slice from the base so it stands firm and even. Then cut from the top downward to slice it in half; scoop out the seeds and fibers. After that, you might slice away the skin and then chunk the squash up for roasting in a hot oven or simmering in a soup or curry. Or, take the easier route and bake the halves on a sheet pan until they’re so tender they collapse on themselves.

The density and color of the flesh will determine the flavor and consistency of the dish you’re making. Pale, easy-to-cut squash makes a thin mash, best for working into a risotto or simmering into a soup. The denser, brightly colored flesh will make a wonderful, rich-tasting stew and is fabulous simply roasted and slathered with butter. Seems the harder the squash and the darker the meat, the richer the flavor and denser the texture will be.

While there are nuanced differences among all these many different varieties, much will depend on their growing conditions and when they were harvested. Be prepared to taste and season the different squash as you go because while they are relatively interchangeable, no one squash tastes exactly like another. (I skip spaghetti squash; it bakes up to produce stringy fibers that can be sauced like pasta, but why bother?)

Winter squash is a reliable and unfussy pantry staple. It will wait patiently until you’re ready to cook. As the temperatures plummet, I keep squash at the ready — it’s the backbone of my autumnal kitchen. Whether it’s going into a soup, stew or buttery golden mash, squash answers the question of what’s for dinner on a blustery, bone-chilling night.



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Squash soup with apple and ancho

Serves 4 to 6

Here, traditional squash soup gets a lick of smoke and heat from ancho chile pepper and a bit of tangy sweet from local apples. Here's where the sweet dumpling squash with its lush, creamy, sugary flesh is a great fit, but any local winter squash will work nicely (except spaghetti). Top this with toasted rough bread and crunchy pepitas.

- 2½ to 3 lb. winter squash
- 2 tablespoon unsalted butter
- 1 shallot, chopped
- 1 tart apple, peeled, cored and chopped
- ½ teaspoon ground ancho chile powder or chile powder, to taste
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- Generous pinch cumin
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 2 cups chicken or vegetable stock
- ½ cup apple cider
- Pepitas, for garnish



Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Line a baking sheet with parchment.

Cut the squash in half and remove the seeds and fibrous interior. Place the squash, cut side down, on the parchment. Roast the squash until very tender, about 45 minutes to 1 hour. Remove and allow to cool. Scoop the flesh from the squash (you should have a little more than 2 cups) and set aside.

In a large, heavy soup pot, melt the butter over medium heat, then sauté the shallot, apple, chile powder, cinnamon and cumin until the shallot and apple become tender, about 1 minute. Season with salt and pepper and stir in the stock, apple cider and squash. Increase the heat, bring to a boil, then reduce and simmer for about 10 minutes. Carefully transfer the mixture to a blender and purée. (When puréeing hot soup in a blender, never fill the blender more than halfway. Remove the plastic piece in the lid and cover with a dish towel to prevent steam from building.) Return the soup to the pot and serve garnished with pepitas.

— From Beth Dooley



Roasted squash with chickpeas, honey and za'atar

Serves 4 to 6

Roasted with warm spices and a lick of honey, this simple dish can easily be made ahead. It's a wonderful side to chicken or, when topped with a dollop of yogurt or crème fraîche, it makes a fine light dinner.

- 1½ to 2 lb. winter squash, peeled seeded, and cut into 1-in. thick chunks
- 1 cup cooked or canned garbanzo beans, drained and patted dry
- 2 tablespoon hazelnut oil or olive oil
- 1 tablespoon honey
- 1 tablespoon za'atar, or more to taste
- Coarse salt

- Freshly ground black pepper
- ¼ cup chopped toasted hazelnuts, for garnish
- ¼ cup chopped cilantro, for garnish
- Lemon wedges, for serving

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.

In a large bowl, toss the squash and the garbanzo beans with the oil, honey, za'atar and a pinch each of coarse salt and pepper. Arrange the squash and beans in a single layer and roast until golden and tender, about 30 minutes, shaking the pan and flipping the squash halfway through. Transfer the squash to a serving platter and garnish with the chopped nuts and cilantro. Serve with lemon wedges.

— From Beth Dooley

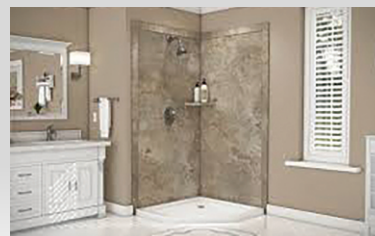


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Winter squash curry

Serves 4 to 6

This is Indian comfort food, spicy and warm — perfect on a cold night. The squash is cut into chunks and roasted first to give it crisp, sweet edges. Serve over rice, mashed potatoes or mashed squash. Leftovers, if you have them, are wonderful the next day. From Beth Dooley.

- 1 lb. winter squash, peeled, seeded and cut into ½-in. pieces
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- Coarse salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 3 tablespoon coconut oil or butter
- 1 small onion, diced
- 2 cloves garlic, smashed
- 1 cup diced carrots
- 1 large red bell pepper, seeded and diced
- 1 teaspoon curry powder, or more to taste
- ½ teaspoon ground coriander
- ½ teaspoon ground cumin
- ½ teaspoon ground turmeric
- 1 cup coconut milk
- 2 tablespoon lime juice, or to taste
- Chopped cilantro for garnish
- Lime wedges, for garnish

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper. In a medium bowl, toss the squash with the oil, salt and pepper and spread out on a baking sheet. Roast until the chunks are lightly browned and tender, about 30 minutes, tossing halfway through. Set aside.

In a large, heavy pot, heat the coconut oil over medium heat and sauté the onion, garlic, carrots, bell pepper, curry, coriander, cumin and turmeric until the vegetables are tender and the spices are fragrant, about 3 to 4 minutes. Stir in the roasted squash along with the coconut milk and the lime juice. Bring to a simmer and cook until all the vegetables are tender, about 10 minutes. Adjust the seasonings to taste. Serve garnished with the cilantro and lime wedges on the side. ✨

— From Beth Dooley



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Green chili with salsa verde chases away that fall chill

BY **GRETCHEN MCKAY**
PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE

Now that it's officially fall, and the weather is getting cooler, many of us are turning to foods that are a little heartier. A rich and warming pot of chili is a good dish to make the transition from summer to autumn in part because it's a perfect football food — it feeds a crowd and it's so easy to eat on the couch in front of the TV. Chili is also versatile, and can satisfy a vegetarian as well as a carnivore, depending on the mix of ingredients.

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It's also equal opportunity when it comes to spice. If you love a dish that makes your lips and taste buds burn, throw a few more chili peppers or tablespoons of chili powder into the pot. If you're more reserved, use less or choose a milder chili pepper, such as poblano.

This green chili combines chunks of pork tenderloin with white onion, garlic and salsa verde. Cannellini beans, a type of white kidney bean, add protein and fiber without overpowering the other flavors. I also add fresh jalapeño pepper for a gentle kick of heat. (To make it

even spicier, don't remove the ribs or seeds.)

The broth is a bit thinner than in some beef- or bean-based chilies, but it's incredibly flavorful. Plus, it all comes together in less than 45 minutes.

To make salsa verde from scratch, place 1 pound tomatillos (husked and rinsed), 2 or 3 stemmed and seeded jalapeños and half of a white onion in a large saucepan or Dutch oven and add enough water to completely cover.

Bring to a boil over medium-high heat, then reduce heat to low and simmer until vege-

tables are cooked through and soft, around 8-10 minutes. Transfer to a blender using a slotted spoon. Add cilantro, garlic, lime juice and a generous pinch of salt and blend until smooth. Taste and add more salt or lime juice if desired.

Chili verde

Serves 6

- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 small white onion, diced
- 1 jalapeño, seeded and minced, or more to taste
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 3 cups chicken stock
- 2 14-ounce cans cannellini beans, rinsed and drained
- 2 cups homemade or jarred salsa verde
- 1½ pounds pork tenderloin, cubed
- 1 teaspoon cumin, or more to taste
- 2 teaspoons chili powder, or more to taste
- 1 teaspoon sea salt
- 2 tablespoons lime juice

Sliced avocado and chopped fresh cilantro, for serving

Heat olive oil in a large stockpot over medium heat until glistening. Add onion and cook, stirring, until softened, 4-5 minutes.

Stir in jalapeño and garlic and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute.

Add chicken stock, white beans, salsa verde, pork, cumin, chili powder and salt, then stir to combine well. Increase heat to high and bring to a boil, then reduce to medium-low.

Simmer until the meat is cooked through, about 25-30 minutes.

Just before serving, stir in lime juice. Ladle into bowls and serve with avocado and cilantro. ✨



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Make the best brisket, every time

BY JULIE GIUFFRIDA
LOS ANGELES TIMES

Hanukkah, AKA major brisket season, is nearly upon us. A classic Jewish holiday food, brisket is a cinch to prepare and a great accompaniment to latkes, which require much more hands-on attention. One large brisket can feed many and last for several meals (it's better the next day and improves every day thereafter), easing the cooking pressure for the eight nights of candle lighting.

I must admit, as a child and well into adulthood, I hated brisket. Granted, my experience with it was limited to what my mother made (fortunately, very infrequently); it was always stringy, tough and not particularly flavorful. Because she was an otherwise excellent cook (and a caterer), I assumed that what she served was how it was supposed to be.

For years, I kept my disdain for brisket to myself for fear of committing Jewish culinary treason. Eventually, I needed to know what all the fuss was about — and to feed a crowd for the first Passover seder that I was hosting. So I pulled out some Jewish cookbooks and decided on Joan Nathan's recipe for Moroccan-style brisket from her book "Jewish Cooking in America." It called for ginger, saffron and olives, which appealed to me largely because it was so unlike what my mother served and also because I love olives. It was a hit and delicious in a way that I had no idea brisket could be. Having discovered "good" brisket, I began exploring other recipes.

There were the decidedly no-fuss recipes that dump one or more processed ingredients such as ketchup, onion soup mix and Coca-Cola (though not necessarily all together) on the meat before shoving it in the oven for 3 hours. And there were more complex ones that called for searing the meat and sautéing fresh, aromatic vegetables like onions, carrots and celery before adding tomatoes, balsamic, red wine or apple cider vinegar and honey or molasses to the pan before cooking it. Sweet or savory, simple or sophisticated, three hours was the magic cook time that almost every recipe specified.

Over the years, I have ditched the saffron and olives from my first brisket and taken a decidedly hamish approach to ingredients, sticking with the basics.



For years, I kept my disdain for brisket to myself for fear of committing Jewish culinary treason. Eventually, I needed to know what all the fuss was about — and to feed a crowd for the first Passover seder that I was hosting.

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The method, however, is sound and includes several best practices that I still adhere to today. I use it as a starting point. Sometimes I make it as is. Sometimes I embellish it depending on my mood, the occasion and the crowd. However I may modify the ingredients, I have found that investing a few minutes to sear the meat and saute the aromatics makes a huge difference in the final product. A few other best practices also make a significant difference such that even with only very basic ingredients, the brisket is always the best it can be — and intensely delicious.

Seven keys to the best brisket ever:

1. Know your meat. Brisket is the chest muscle of the cow. It is full of tough connective tissue and needs to be cooked for a long time at a low heat to tenderize it. A whole brisket has two parts, the front section, also called the point, which is thicker and more marbled, often with large chunks of fat; and, the back section, also called the flat, which is leaner and often more flavorful. In general, if you plan to slice your brisket, the flat will hold its shape better. If you plan to shred it, go with the point.

2. Know your flavorings. Season all of the surfaces generously — about a tablespoon of salt per 5 pounds of meat. If possible, salt it the day before you want to cook it and let it sit overnight in the refrigerator. The salt will fully penetrate the meat, making it more juicy and flavorful. Seasoning immediately before searing is OK too. Aromatics such as onions, celery and carrots will enhance the aroma surrounding the meat as well as infuse it with flavor. Sautéing them so that they will caramelize and release their aromas will add more flavor. Leave them in larger chunks so that they don't dissolve into the sauce. Acid in the sauce such as tomatoes, tomato sauce, wine, vinegar and citrus juice will help to tenderize the proteins and to brighten the overall flavor of the dish. Finally, keep it simple. Yes, you can add all sorts of ingredients-of-the-moment such as fish sauce, powdered mushrooms, miso or pomegranate



molasses, but you don't need them to make a fabulous brisket.

3. Use your oven. The best way to transform a hunk of tough muscle into something tender and succulent is to braise it — that is, cook it at low heat for a long time (in a covered pan) in enough liquid to cover only about of the roast. A few preliminary steps prior to sliding the pan into the oven will make your brisket the best it can be. First, sear the meat in a hot pan over medium-high heat for a few minutes on each side until it is beautifully browned. A tip on searing: Score the fat cap and sear that side first so that it will render nicely while searing. Next, saute the aromatics. Here too, the caramelization brings out more flavor. Then add your liquid and other flavorings to the pan and bring it all to a boil. Cover the pan and slide into a preheated oven. Cook it in the oven rather than on the stovetop. The oven provides a constant temperature around the pot, which allows the contents to cook evenly.

4. Give it time. Buy the brisket at least a day before you plan to cook it so that you can season it and let it rest overnight. Cook the brisket the day — or up to 4 days before — you plan to serve it. Chill it for a good 8 to 12 hours

in its juices, which will help the meat retain its moisture and give the flavors a chance to marry. Once cold, you can easily skim the fat from the surface.

5. Cut it properly. It is easier to cut even, 1/2-inch thick slices while the meat is cold and firm. Cut against the grain to prevent shredding. To identify the direction of the grain, turn the brisket upside down and look for the long muscle striations. Slice perpendicular to the direction of the striations.

6. Reheat gently. Once the meat is sliced, lay it out in an ovenproof serving dish along with the gravy. Cover and heat in a low to moderate oven — no more than 350 degrees — for 30 to 60 minutes. As with the cooking, reheating low and slow will keep the meat tender and moist.

7. Remember the gravy. If you have too much liquid left in the pan, boil it rapidly (separate from the meat) to reduce and thicken it. If you prefer a thicker gravy, puree the aromatics with the jus. If it needs more sauce, add some liquid such as water, broth or tomato sauce and a bit of acid — a few tablespoons of citrus or vinegar — to the pan when reheating.

I recently inherited my mother's long-retired recipe files, and, curious, I dug up her brisket



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recipe. It was immediately clear why her brisket was so awful. Aside from the meat, it called for salt, pepper, paprika, Accent and half a package of onion soup mix. Quantities are not specified. The method has you pile everything onto the brisket, wrap it in foil and roast for (the magical) 3 hours. I could go on but the horse is already way dead. How I wish she had known to use even a few of these best practices.

Best brisket ever

Serves 10 to 12

Time: 4 hours, largely unattended, plus overnight chilling

Delicious brisket does not require fancy ingredients, a lot of work or special equipment. If you focus on technique and keep the ingredient list simple, you will have delicious, tender results every time.

- 15- to 6-pound brisket
- 1 tablespoon Diamond Crystal kosher salt, plus more if needed
- ½ teaspoon ground black pepper, or to taste
- 6 cloves garlic, 1 halved, 3 crushed and 2 thinly sliced
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 large onions, chopped (about 4 cups)
- 4 medium carrots (about 12 ounces), scrubbed and roughly chopped (about 2 cups)
- 4 celery stalks, roughly chopped (about 2 cups)
- 1 15-oz can petite diced tomatoes in juice
- 2 cups low sodium beef broth, tomato sauce or water (or any combination thereof)
- 1 dried bay leaf
- 3 sprigs fresh thyme
- Juice of 1 lemon
- ½ cup water, if needed

1. The day before you want to cook the brisket, trim any excess fat, leaving the cap about ¼-inch thick. Sprinkle the salt and pepper on all sides of the meat and use your hands to rub in the seasoning. Wrap in plastic or place in a zip-top bag and refrigerate overnight. (If cooking the brisket the same day, pat it dry, sprinkle with 2 teaspoons kosher salt and ½ teaspoon ground black pepper, use your hands to rub in the seasonings and skip to step 3.)

2. When ready to cook, remove the brisket from the refrigerator, unwrap and pat dry with kitchen towels.

3. Heat oven to 325 degrees.

4. Rub the meat on all sides with the cut side of the halved garlic clove. Using a sharp knife, make several long, diagonal slashes about to ¾ of the way through the fat cap. Repeat, cutting in the opposite direction to create a cross-hatch pattern.

5. In a heavy-bottomed casserole, heat the oil over medium-high and when the oil is hot (shimmering), add the brisket, fat side down, and let it cook, undisturbed, until the bottom is well-browned, 2 to 3 minutes. Flip the meat and continue searing until well-browned on all sides, 4 to 6 minutes total. Remove the meat to a platter.

6. Add the onions, carrots and celery, and cover the pan for about 2 minutes, until the vegetables have released some of their juices. Uncover the pan, add the crushed garlic and continue cooking the vegetables, stirring occasionally, until softened, 5 to 6 minutes.

7. With a large spoon, remove ½ to of the vegetables from the pan. Add the tomatoes and broth, tomato sauce or water and bay leaf, stirring and scraping up any bits stuck to the bottom of the pan. Return the brisket to the pan, fat side up, along with any accumulated juices. Spoon the previously removed vegetables over the top of the meat, add the 2 garlic halves, sliced garlic and thyme, and bring to a boil. If needed, add more broth, tomato juice or

water so that the meat is about — but not fully — immersed in the liquid.

8. Cover and slide the pan into the oven and cook until it is fork tender, about 3 hours. (You know it is fork tender when you can easily slide a fork into the meat and remove it with little resistance.) Let cool in the pan, then refrigerate the brisket in its juices until the fat has solidified, preferably overnight.

9. Remove solidified fat from the chilled brisket and reserve for another use or discard. (If serving immediately, skim the fat with a spoon or pour the juices into a fat separator.) Separate the brisket from the juices and cut, against the grain, into ½-inch slices. Transfer about a third of the sauce to an ovenproof serving dish, lay the sliced meat on the sauce, top with the remaining sauce and add the lemon juice and, if necessary, ½ cup or so of water.

10. For serving, heat, covered, in a 350-degree oven until simmering and heated through, about 30 minutes. If the sauce is too thin, uncover and let cook for an additional 10 to 15 minutes, or until sauce reaches the desired consistency.

Variations:

Pressure cooker/Multicooker: Follow the same instructions but in step 5 use your stove-top pressure cooker or the sauté function of the Instant Pot set on high to sear the meat and sauté the vegetables. Complete through step 7. Set the pressure cooker to cook under high pressure for 1 hour. Allow the steam to release naturally. Continue with steps 9 and 10.

Slow Cooker: Follow the same instructions but in steps 5 and 6, use a large, heavy-bottom skillet on the stovetop to sear the meat and sauté the vegetables. In step 7, transfer ½ to of the vegetables to the slow cooker. Add the brisket, fat side up and top with the remaining vegetables. Add the liquid, sliced garlic, bay leaf and thyme. For step 8, cook for 5 hours on high or 9 hours on low and proceed with the instructions. Continue with steps 9 and 10. ✨

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A slow cooker is the help you need for this year's holiday dinner



BY **MEREDITH DEEDS**
MINNESOTA STAR TRIBUNE

Some of the best and most comforting dishes take a long time to cook. With time more precious than ever during the holiday season, meals can add an extra level of pressure. But smart hosts know that a make-ahead plan, with a slow-cooker assist, can be the key to a memorable, relaxing meal.

Slow cookers don't get the respect they deserve. You just put the food in, and the slow cooker does the heavy lifting while you go about your day. Well, almost. To get the best results from a slow cooker, you often need to add a step or two before you hit the power button.

In the case of a braise, like this Slow Cooker Spiced Pomegranate Beef Brisket, simply throwing everything into the pot can leave you with a piece of tender but flavorless meat swimming in a watery sauce. This happens because the cooking environment is sealed, and the liquid doesn't evaporate during the cooking process. So as the beef cooks, and exudes liquids of its own, the flavors can become more and more diluted. Luckily, it's an easy problem to avoid.

First, we make a dry rub with assertive spices that's massaged into the meat, which is then browned before being added to the slow cooker. Browning means flavor. Onions and garlic are sautéed in the same pan, which is then deglazed with red wine. More flavor.

We've chosen a liquid for our braise that brings a powerful, bright note of acidity — pomegranate juice. Loads of flavor.

After hours of cooking, when your brisket is meltingly tender and moist, there is one more thing we need to do to win the flavor game: pour the

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onions and cooking liquid into a saucepan and let it boil away on the stove until it reduces and thickens slightly and the — you guessed it — flavor is concentrated.

While none of these steps is difficult or time-consuming, they are critical if you want to wow diners at your holiday table.

One last tip: Make this dish a day or two before you need it. This allows all the flavors to mingle, but there are also a few other practical advantages. The meat is much easier to slice when the brisket is cold. The fat solidifies at the top, allowing you to easily scrape it off. And, of course, making it ahead leaves you free to tackle any other items on your holiday to-do list.

A generous shower of pomegranate seeds and fresh parsley just before serving not only makes the dish beautiful, but adds a hit of freshness, too.

Slow cooker spiced pomegranate beef brisket

Serves 8 to 10

A few extra steps, like browning the beef and reducing the cooking liquids, ensure an ultra-flavorful, fork-tender brisket. While this dish is delicious the day it's made, it's even better the day after (see make-ahead directions below). That makes it a smart choice for a stress-free dinner, perfect for a holiday or any other day. From Meredith Deeds.

- 1 tablespoon smoked paprika
- 1½ teaspoon ground coriander
- 1½ teaspoon ground cumin
- 1½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1 (4- to 5-lb.) brisket roast, fat trimmed to » in. thick and scored lightly
- 2 tablespoon olive oil
- 2 large onions, sliced

- 4 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- ½ cup dry red wine
- 1½ cup pomegranate juice
- 1 tablespoon honey
- ¼ cup chopped parsley
- ¼ cup pomegranate seeds

In a small bowl, combine the paprika, coriander, cumin, salt, cinnamon and pepper. Pat the beef dry with paper towels and rub the spice mixture all over the brisket, working it into the crevices.

Heat oil in a 12-inch skillet over medium heat. Add the brisket and brown, taking care not to burn the spices, about 5 minutes per side. Transfer to a 5- to 6-quart slow cooker.

Turn the heat under the skillet to medium-high. Add the onions and cook, stirring frequently, for 6 to 8 minutes, or until they begin to brown. Add garlic and cook for another 2 minutes. Add the red wine and cook, scraping up the brown bits on the bottom of the skillet, until liquid has almost evaporated. Transfer to the slow cooker with the beef.

Mix together the pomegranate juice and honey and pour over the beef, cover and cook until meat is very tender, 10 to 12 hours on low or 5 to 6 hours on high.

Transfer brisket to a cutting board, cover tightly with foil, and let rest 20 minutes. Pour onion mixture and accumulated juices into medium saucepan and skim fat from the top. Bring to a boil over medium heat and cook, stirring occasionally, until reduced by half. It will have a slightly thicker, more sauce-like consistency.

Slice brisket thinly across grain, and place on large serving platter. Ladle some of the sauce over the top. Garnish with the parsley and pomegranate seeds and serve with extra sauce on the side.

To make ahead: Refrigerate cooled, unsliced brisket, onions and juices for up to 2 days. To serve, slice thinly across grain while cold and transfer to baking dish with 1 cup of the juices. Cover tightly with foil and heat in 325-degree oven until brisket is heated through, about 1 hour. Transfer onions and remaining juices to a saucepan and continue with recipe, as directed.



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How to host 'The Great Holiday Swap'

BY ERIN THORBURN
TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

Friendsgiving, usually celebrated around Thanksgiving, and white elephant exchanges, typically held around the winter holidays, both involve the gathering of family, friends and/or coworkers. Perhaps not as commonly celebrated — at least by a proper name — but equally fun and easy to implement this time of year is “The Great Holiday Swap Meet.” This

event combines elements of Friendsgiving and a white elephant exchange but with its own special twist.

Begin with a theme. Everything from the gift exchange to the party’s entertainment, activities, decor and even food/beverage centers on the theme. The beauty of having a specific focus is that attendees don’t have to spend time thinking about what unique or sentimental gift to purchase for Friendsgiving or an eccentric, often never used — albeit often humorous — white elephant exchange offering.

Before we dive into individual theme ideas, here’s how the gift swap meet works: 1. Send an email to your proposed guest list with three choices for your holiday-swap-meet theme (ex: wine, books or movies) — the theme with the most votes wins. 2. Assign a dollar amount for gift exchange items. 3. Make sure to have each guest wrap the gift they’re bringing. 4. When guests arrive on the day of the event, each person is given a number and the host keeps that corresponding number in a bowl/hat/basket (raffle tickets work well for this!) 6. Place gifts in a central area. 5. Call out numbers randomly as the designated “selector” picks them from the raffle basket.

Host tip: If budget allows, purchase a couple of extra exchange gifts for those who may not have gift exchange funds in their budget, or for unexpected or last-minute-invited guests.

Now that you know how The Great Holiday Swap Meet works, here are a few themes to try:

Movies

This theme can be paired down to genre — sci-fi, drama, comedy or rom-com, or it can be left wide open to any type of movie, depending on the consensus of your guests. As far as gift ideas, provide attendees with gift inspiration in the form of cinematic posters, journals, mugs, T-shirts and other movie-focused merchandise. Select a movie for all to enjoy or to simply play in the background. Serve all the big-screen usuals — popcorn, soda, soft pretzels, candy assortments and other snacks.

Books

Much like a movie theme, a book gift swap can be narrowed down by genre or relegated to fiction or nonfiction. Or, you can leave it open and invite any type of literary theme. In addition to gifting favorite books, other book-lover gifts can include reading lamps and lights, bookmarks, book stands, book bags and booked-themed clothing. Create reading nooks with comfy pillows and blankets and serve





regular and decaf coffee, espresso drinks and teas with a variety of sweet and savory pastries.

Concert T-shirts

Invite all generations to unite in their love of music by making concert T-shirts the focal point of your gift-exchange extravaganza. See what happens when grandma unwraps a Britney Spears tee and her teen grandchild unveils a Beatles shirt. Arm your Bluetooth speaker with a variety of bands and bangers while you serve hot dogs and beer for the older crowd and Rockstar energy drinks and burgers for the 21 and unders. Encourage concert nostalgia to flow freely.

Wine

For a gathering of vino enthusiasts, provide a beverage cart full of reds, whites and pinks — with cheese pairings and palate cleansers. For the gift exchange, broaden the wine-themed packages to not only include varying Chardonnays and Cabernets but also include bottle openers, wine apparel and wine guide books or magazines.

Pets

Do you have a dog-walking group, kitty conclave or birds-of-a-feather flock you regularly meet with? If so, formulate your holiday gift swap around your furry, feathered or scaled friends. Provide doggie beds or obstacle courses for four-legged friends, perches and swings for avian guests and cat trees for felines. Include snacks and goodies for both humans and their companions. As for the gift exchange, encourage unique pet items from someplace like Etsy, where you can also support a diverse pool of artisans.

Use these five ideas to get started on your first holiday swap meet, and encourage trading of gifts so everyone gets something they love and remember for years to come. ✨



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Mexican chiles, peppers and cheese make meatloaf amazing



BY **GRETCHEN MCKAY**
PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE

You don't have to be fan of "Game of Thrones" to know winter is coming. A cozy sweater and heated car seats help to ward off the chill. But now is also the time to warm up both the body and soul with winter comfort foods like this spiced-up, cheesy meatloaf.

Assertively seasoned with ancho chile powder, cumin and charred Anaheim peppers, it's a spicy Mexican take on the favorite American diner food. Shredded cheese and a spicy-sweet chipotle glaze add even more personality.

If you serve the meatloaf with mashed potatoes and a green vegetable, a little goes a long way, which means there will be leftovers for sandwiches.

To roast the chile peppers on a gas stovetop, place them directly on the metal grates over the gas burner. Allow the peppers to cook and sizzle, turning often with a pair of tongs, until black spots appear on the cooked surfaces.

Remove the peppers from the stove and immediately transfer to a plastic zipper bag. Allow to steam for around 10 minutes (this will make the skin easy to peel) and place on a cutting board. When they're cool, use your fingers to remove the skins.

It's a spicy Mexican take on the favorite American diner food.

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Cheesy Mexican meatloaf

- Cooking spray or oil, for pan
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 medium onion, diced (about 1 cup)
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 tablespoon ancho chile powder
- 2 teaspoons cumin
- 1 teaspoon Mexican oregano or marjoram
- 2 generous splashes Worcestershire sauce
- 1 cup fresh bread crumbs
- 1 cup whole milk
- 2 pounds meatloaf mix
- 2 Anaheim chile peppers, roasted, seeded and chopped
- 1½ cups shredded Monterey Jack, Pepper Jack or Mexican blend cheese
- » cup chopped fresh cilantro
- 1 large egg, beaten
- 2 teaspoons kosher salt
- 1 teaspoon black pepper

For glaze

- » cup ketchup
- » cup brown sugar
- 2 canned chipotle chiles in adobo sauce, minced, with 2 teaspoons sauce
- Pinch of salt

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly coat a 9-by-5-inch meatloaf pan with nonstick cooking spray or oil.

In a small saucepan over medium heat, heat olive oil. When oil is hot, add onion and cook until just soft, 3-4 minutes. Add garlic and continue to cook until fragrant, about 1 minute.

Add chile powder, cumin and oregano and stir to combine. Continue cooking, stirring every so often, until mixture is very soft and slightly darkened, an additional 2 minutes.



Deglaze the pan by adding Worcestershire sauce and scraping up any brown bits from the bottom with a spatula. Transfer mixture to a large bowl and allow to cool slightly.

In a second bowl, combine bread crumbs and milk and let soak for around 5 minutes, or until milk is fully absorbed.

To the bowl with onion mixture, add ground meat, bread crumbs, roasted Anaheim peppers, cheese, cilantro, egg, salt and pepper. Mix thoroughly by hand until mixture sticks to your fingers.

Transfer meat mixture to prepared pan and smooth the top with an offset spatula or by tapping it on the counter a few times.

Bake meatloaf in oven, uncovered, until brown on the top and bubbly around the edges, 35-40 minutes.

While meatloaf is baking, make glaze by combining ketchup, sugar and chipotle in a small bowl. Season to taste with salt. You also can add more chipotle if it's not spicy enough.

Remove meatloaf from oven and brush the glaze on top. Return to the oven and bake until it registers 155 degrees on an instant-read thermometer, another 30-35 minutes.

When meatloaf is finished baking, allow it to cool slightly in pan on a wire rack. (Pan juices will accumulate at the edges of the pan. I pour them out, but you can also save them to drizzle on top of meatloaf slices.)

Cut meatloaf into thick slices and serve with boiled or mashed potatoes or sweet potato fries.

— Adapted from "Food Between Friends" by Jesse Tyler Ferguson and Julie Tanous (Clarkson Potter, \$32)

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Christmas cookies from the archives

BY MICHELLE STARK
TAMPA BAY TIMES

We have dipped back into our archives to republish some of our top cookie recipes. Happy baking!

Santa's whiskers

Makes about 6 dozen

- 1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter, room temperature
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 tablespoons milk
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 2½ cups all-purpose flour
- ¾ cup finely chopped red and/or green candied cherries
- ¾ cup finely chopped pecans
- ¾ cup flaked coconut

In a large bowl, beat butter with an electric mixer on medium to high speed for 30 seconds. Add sugar and beat until fluffy. Add milk and vanilla and beat well.

Add flour and beat until well mixed. Stir in cherries and pecans. Divide dough into thirds. Shape each portion into a 7-inch-long log. Roll each log in ¼ cup of the coconut to coat. Wrap and chill in the refrigerator for at least 2 hours or up to 24 hours.

Cut into ¼-inch-thick slices and place on an ungreased cookie sheet. Bake in preheated 375-degree oven for 10 to 12 minutes or until edges are lightly browned. Cool cookies on wire rack.

Freezeworthy: yes, but cool completely first.

—Originally published in 2005; submitted by Kathryn Rem, Springfield, Ill.



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Brickle

Makes at least 3 dozen pieces

- 60 or more saltine crackers
- 1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter
- 1 cup brown sugar
- 1 (12-ounce) package chocolate chips
- Chopped nuts

Preheat oven to 400 degrees.

Cover large jelly roll pan (about 13 by 15 inches) with foil. Coat lightly with nonstick spray. Place saltine crackers in single layer on foil.

In saucepan on stove, melt butter and brown sugar over low heat. Bring to full boil and cook 3 minutes, stirring constantly. Remove and pour over crackers. Bake for 5 minutes.

Remove from oven and sprinkle chocolate chips on top. Leave until melted. Spread out the chocolate and sprinkle with nuts.

Refrigerate at least 4 hours. Break into pieces.

Store in airtight container in refrigerator.

Freezeworthy: no.

—Originally published in 2002; submitted by Judith L. McVaugh, Beverly Hills, Calif., and Carol Latta Milner, Seminole, Fla.



Dipped gingersnaps

Makes 3 to 4 dozen

- 2 cups sugar
- 1½ cups vegetable oil
- 2 eggs
- ½ cup molasses
- 4 cups all-purpose flour
- 4 teaspoons baking soda
- 1 tablespoon ground ginger
- 2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon salt
- Additional sugar for rolling

For dipping:

- 2 (12-ounce) packages white chocolate chips
- ¼ cup shortening

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. In a large bowl, combine sugar and oil and mix well. Add eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Stir in molasses. Combine dry ingredients in a separate bowl. Gradually add to creamed mixture and mix well. Shape into ¾-inch balls and roll in sugar. Place 2 inches apart on ungreased baking sheet and bake for 10 to 12 minutes. Remove from cookie sheet to cool.

For dipping: Melt chips and shortening in microwaveable bowl. Dip cookies halfway and place on waxed paper to harden.

Freezeworthy: yes, but let melted chocolate harden first.

—Originally published in 2008; submitted by Janet Starr, St. Petersburg, Fla.



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Tuscan rosemary and pine nut bars

Makes 16 squares or 18 bars

- ¼ cup pine nuts
- ½ cup (1 stick) unsalted butter
- ½ cup powdered sugar
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh rosemary
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup all-purpose flour

Preheat oven to 325 degrees. Spread pine nuts on baking sheet and toast in oven, stirring once or twice to prevent burning, until they are a shade darker, about 5 minutes. Remove from baking sheet to prevent further browning and

set aside.

In medium saucepan over medium heat, melt butter. Remove pan from heat and stir in sugar, rosemary, salt and pine nuts. Combine until sugar is dissolved. Stir in flour to make a stiff dough.

Spread the dough evenly into an ungreased 8-inch square baking pan. Bake about 20 minutes until the dough is golden around the edges and firm in the center. Cool pan on a rack for a few minutes, then cut dough into bars or squares. Let cool in the pan for at least 15 minutes before removing.

Freezeworthy: yes, but cool completely first.

—Originally published in 2003; from *Short & Sweet: Sophisticated Desserts in No Time at All* by Melanie Barnard (Houghton Mifflin, 1999)



Peppermint wands

Makes about 7 dozen

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- ½ teaspoon baking powder
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter, room temperature
- 1 cup confectioners' sugar
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract

For coating:

- 4 ounces German sweet chocolate, melted
- 10 red and white peppermints (or candy canes), crushed, or finely chopped nuts

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line baking sheet with aluminum foil.

Combine flour, baking powder and salt in a bowl; set aside. Beat

butter and confectioners' sugar in a large bowl until light and fluffy. Beat in vanilla. On low speed, beat in flour mixture until combined. Refrigerate 30 minutes.

Roll 1 teaspoon of dough into a log, about 2½ inches long. Place on prepared baking sheet. Repeat with remaining dough, placing cookies 1½ inches apart.

Bake in preheated 350-degree oven for 10 to 12 minutes or until very pale golden at edges. Remove cookies to wire racks to cool.

For coating: When cookies are cool, dip one end of each cookie into melted chocolate. Return to wire rack. Sprinkle each dipped end with ¼ teaspoon crushed peppermints or finely chopped nuts. Cool on racks in refrigerator for 20 minutes to set. Store in airtight containers at room temperature.

Freezeworthy: yes, and they are even delicious frozen!

—Originally published in 2004; submitted by Marion Haupt, Zephyrhills, Fla.

Chocolate pistachio fingers

Makes about 4 dozen

- ¾ cup unsalted butter, room temperature
- ½ cup sugar
- 3 ounces (about ⅓ cup) almond paste
- 1 egg yolk
- 1½ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 cup (6 ounces) semisweet chocolate chips
- ½ cup finely chopped natural pistachios

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line cookie sheets with parchment paper or lightly grease.

Cream butter and sugar in large bowl until blended. Add almond paste and egg yolk; beat until light. Blend in flour to make a smooth dough. (If dough is too

soft to handle, cover and refrigerate until firm.) Turn out onto lightly floured board. Pull off 1- to 2-teaspoon pieces and roll into a finger shape. Place 2 inches apart on prepared cookie sheets.

Bake 10 to 12 minutes or until edges just begin to brown. Remove to wire racks to cool.

Melt chips in small bowl over hot water. Stir until smooth. Dip both ends of cookies about ½ inch into melted chocolate, then dip the chocolate ends into pistachios. Place on waxed paper and let stand until chocolate is set.

Freezeworthy: yes, but cool completely first.✱

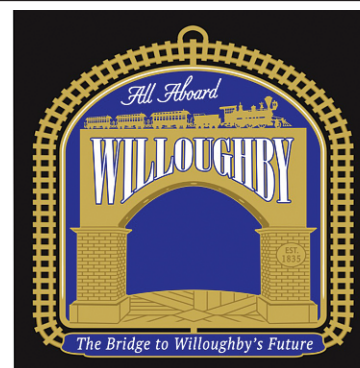
—Originally published in 2010; submitted by Gail Sloan, Tampa, Fla.



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Festive Foods for Your Dog This Holiday Season

(Family Features)

Bring on the list-making, gift-giving, party-going time of year. The holiday season would also feel incomplete without delicious dishes to keep everyone feeling merry and bright. By everyone, that includes canine companions, too.

Consider this list of pup- and pet-parent-approved festive foods, as well as those to avoid, from the experts at Petcurean, makers of premium quality, nutrient-rich food for pets:

Enjoy steamed vegetables: Holiday feasts are all about the side dishes. Dogs can savor their own sides with plain vegetables like steamed green beans or carrots, making for a flavorful, nutritious addition to their meals. Vegetables are packed with vitamins and minerals, and steaming them allows more of the nutrients to be retained while also supporting proper digestion. Be sure to chop veggies into small pieces and stay clear of seasoning or sauce.

Avoid chocolate: There's no way to sugarcoat it - chocolate is a no-go for dogs. The presence of both caffeine and a chemical called theobromine makes chocolate toxic to dogs because they aren't able to metabolize them the way humans can. If ingested, chocolate can lead to a spike in heart rate and blood pressure, as well as vomiting, diarrhea, agitation, seizures and more. If ingested, pet parents should monitor their pup closely and check with a veterinarian.

Enjoy fresh meats: When cooked, fresh meat such as chicken, turkey, pork or beef can satisfy cravings while also offering pups a nutritious meal that is easy to digest. Pet parents can also choose a kibble made with fresh meats as a

convenient option that supports dogs' overall wellness, such as Now Fresh Good Gravy, which is made with easily digested fresh meats and nutrient-dense fruits and veggies, and by adding water, a delicious bone broth gravy is created for your pup to enjoy.

Avoid table scraps: For many reasons, it's best to skip the table scraps. Not only could an allergen or toxin be present that pet parents may not be aware of, there are several other health risks associated with feeding dogs table scraps, such as digestive issues (vomiting, diarrhea, etc.) and even more serious problems like pancreatitis. Plus, giving dogs calorie-dense food can contribute to

obesity.

Enjoy pumpkin: A staple of holiday feasts, pumpkin is not off the table for pups to enjoy. In fact, pumpkin is a superfood full of nutrients. Feeding dogs cooked or plain canned pumpkin can also be beneficial for their digestion because pumpkin contains fiber - just be sure to serve it free of seasonings like sugar and spices.

Just like their pet parents, pups deserve to indulge a little over the holidays, but it's important to ensure what they eat leaves them feeling great. Remember to always check with a veterinarian about any concerns, especially when introducing new foods, and visit nowfresh.com to find personalized nutrition crafted for your pet.



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'Pawty' Tips for Celebrating Your Pup

(Family Features)

It's no secret - people love their pets. Last year alone, people spent \$147 billion on their pets, according to the American Pet Products Association, which included throwing what has turned into one of the hottest invites on social media these days: pet parties. There have been more than 1 million posts using #DogBirthday to show off these celebrations.

With dog birthday parties and adoptions being celebrated across the country, entertainment ideas can be borrowed from regular parties - but the special guests will need to be taken into account when planning a party designed for pooches.

Plan a pup party with these tips from Mindy Weiss, a best-selling author and event planner for notable celebrity clients.

Plan for a Place to Play

When hosting a dog party, make sure there is plenty of space for the pups to play, whether it's a fenced yard or a large indoor area. The more room they have to zoom around, the happier (and safer) everyone will be.

Keep the dogs entertained with activities like a ball pit, kiddie pool or basket of tennis balls. If you're feeling ambitious, hide treats around the yard for the dogs to find. It's a great way to keep their tails wagging and their minds engaged while they have a blast.

Personalize Party Details

Subtle accents can elevate any party. Pick a theme that can come to life through the decor and details, such as a "retro dog disco," where both the humans and dogs can dress up. Small touches like personalized dog tags or themed



water bowls and dog treats can make any pet party a memorable event.

Avoid Party Crashers

When guests and dogs are moving indoors and out, alongside (often messy) food, flying insects will likely try to sneak their way in. That's why no party is complete without this top pet party essential - the STEM Attracts and Traps Flying Insects Light Trap. It is people- and pet-friendly when used as directed, insecticide-free and uses a soft UV light to attract flying insects with a dual-sided, refillable cartridge to trap them. It can also be used throughout the home in kitchens, garages, around pet feeding stations and more.

Remember the Pup Parents

Don't forget about the humans. While the dogs are the guests of honor, the humans might also enjoy a nibble. Consider staying on theme with mini hot dogs, bone-shaped pretzels or "pup pop" cake pops.

Bring on the Besties

Just like humans have best friends, dogs do too. Before sending out invites, make sure the guest list includes dogs that are friendly with your pup and play well with others. A little pre-party check can help ensure everyone has a good time.

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Spicy steamed mussels with 'nduja

BY **GRETCHEN MCKAY**
PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE

Christmas cookie exchanges and cocoa with Santa notwithstanding, here's a culinary tradition worth trying during the month of December: the Feast of the Seven Fishes.

Traditionally celebrated by Italian American families and fans of Italian food on Dec. 24, the meatless Italian meal features seven courses (and sometimes many more), each with a different seafood.

Even though it's a relatively new tradition born in the U.S. (it's virtually unknown to Italians living in Italy), the fish-forward feast is thought to have roots that stretch back centuries to southern Italy. Abstaining from meat and dairy products on the eve of certain holidays, including on vigilia di Natale, is a precept of Roman Catholicism. So the best guess is that when Italian immigrants arrived in America during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, they wanted to bring a taste of home to their new country while also creating their own traditions.

That there are seven dishes is also something of a mystery. Its religious significance — the number seven appears throughout the Bible — could convey the week it took God to create the Earth, or the number of cardinal sins or sacraments in Roman Catholic theology. Another possibility: Ancient Rome was built on a group of seven hills.

However the tradition came about, all that really matters is that the Feast of Seven Fishes offers an occasion, and reason, for families and friends to come together for a good meal and celebrate their heritage.

This recipe, adapted from Serious Eats, puts a spicy spotlight on mussels. 'Nduja, a soft and spreadable pork



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sausage made with Calabrian chilies, goes into the pan along with crushed tomato and white wine, creating a rich, tomatoey sauce that pleasantly burns on the palate. (Hint: You'll want lots of bread to soak up every last drop.)

When buying mussels, look for shells that are tightly closed and smell fresh and briny, but not fishy. It's best to cook them the day you buy them, though you can refrigerate them, removed from the bag and covered loosely with a damp paper towel, for a day or so if that's what your schedule mandates.

They don't take long to cook; you'll know they're done when the shells open. Any mussels that fail to open during cooking should be discarded — that means they were dead and unsafe to eat.

Merry Christmas!

Spicy steamed mussels with 'nduja

Serves 2-4, depending on whether it's a main course or appetizer

You can find 'nduja next to refrigerated charcuterie at Italian markets. If you find a "beard" on the mussel (it looks like a thread), grab it with your fingers and pull firmly toward the hinge end of the shell until it snaps off.

- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 large shallots, thinly sliced
- 2 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
- Kosher salt
- 2 ounces 'nduja (spreadable pork sausage)
- 1 cup dry white wine
- 15-ounce can Italian plum tomatoes, preferably San Marzano, crushed by hand
- 2 pounds fresh mussels, scrubbed and debearded
- » cup chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley
- Juice and zest from ½ lemon, or more to taste

▪ 1 loaf rustic Italian bread, thickly sliced, drizzled with olive oil, and broiled until heavily toasted

In a large saucepan, heat oil over medium heat until shimmering. Add shallots and garlic, season lightly with salt, and cook, stirring frequently, until softened but not brown, 5 to 7 minutes.

Add 'nduja and, using a wooden spoon, break it into pieces and stir vigorously to combine with shallots and garlic. Continue to cook, stirring frequently, until fat from 'nduja separates and shallots and garlic are stained red and fully coated with 'nduja, 3 to 5 minutes longer. Add wine and crushed tomatoes, increase heat to high and bring to a boil.

Add mussels, stir, cover, and cook, shaking pan

constantly and peeking every 30 seconds to stir. Cook just until all the mussels are open, 2 to 4 minutes. Remove from heat, and using tongs or a slotted spoon, quickly transfer mussels to a warmed heatproof serving bowl. Cover mussels with saucepan lid to keep warm.

Add parsley, lemon juice and zest to saucepan and stir to combine. Taste the liquid, and adjust seasoning with salt or more lemon juice and/or zest, if needed. (I added about ½ teaspoon of salt.)

Remove lid from the serving bowl, and pour contents of saucepan over mussels. Serve immediately, passing toasted bread at the table along with a large empty bowl for collecting spent mussel shells. ✨

— Adapted from *seriouseats.com*



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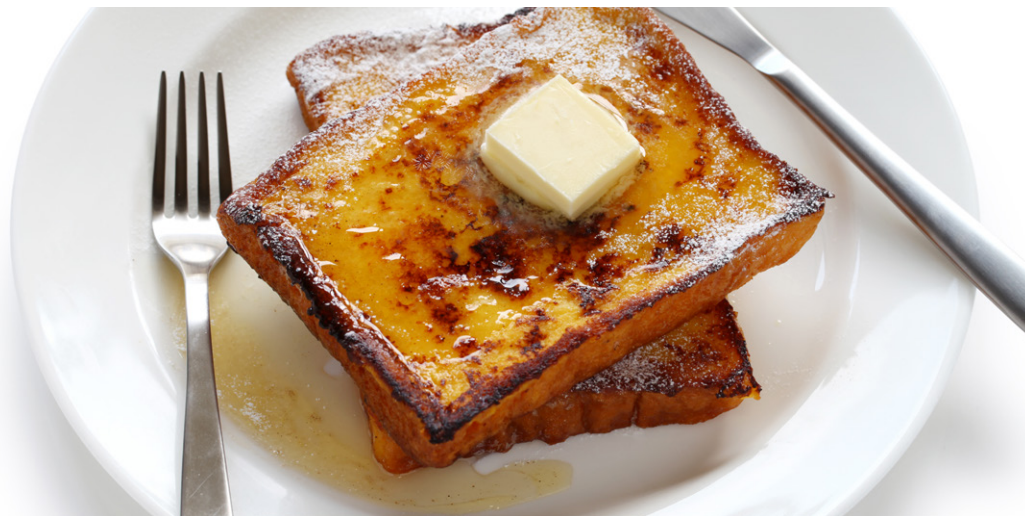


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Have some eggnog for breakfast



BY **BETH DOOLEY**
STAR TRIBUNE

At some point during the holidays, regardless of your religious or family traditions, a lovely breakfast will be added to the already busy schedule.

Because there's plenty to do in the kitchen this time of year, I have no delusions about setting a fancy table early in the morning. But I do believe it's worth giving this meal some thought a day or two before.

In our home, overnight French toast is the winning dish, especially when there's eggnog leftover from earlier festivities. Making this one-pan dish sure beats standing over the stove, cooking slice after slice of French toast or ladling pancake batter onto the griddle. It is easily scaled up to feed a crowd with very little effort, as all of

the servings bake simultaneously.

Everything can be assembled the night before, so all you need to do when you wake up is pop it in the oven. It will fill the house with a warm, toasty scent as it rises into an impressive golden puff. This is the sort of breakfast dish that will wait happily for late risers; it can be kept warm and stay in prime condition.

This recipe dispatches any sort of stale loaf — the panettone, challah, brioche, a few croissants, a day-old baguette, even dried cake — forgotten among all the holiday goodies. Eggnog, whether it's made from scratch or poured from a carton, makes easy work of this dish. Serve the slices topped with speedy cranberry-kumquat preserves that can also be made ahead.

After all the holiday hubbub, the simplicity of this timeless breakfast casserole is dependably luxurious and comforting.

Eggnog French toast loaf

Serves 4 to 6

Note: If using prepared eggnog, replace the sugar and cream with 1½ cups of eggnog.

- 2 eggs
- 1 cup granulated sugar (see Note)
- 1 cup heavy cream (see Note)
- 4 tablespoon melted unsalted butter
- 1 tablespoon vanilla extract
- » teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg
- Generous pinch coarse salt
- About 16 oz. (1 loaf bread, or mix of holiday breads), cut into 2-in.-thick slices
- Powdered sugar, for dusting
- Cranberry-Kumquat preserves (see recipe)

Line the bottom of a loaf pan with parchment paper. In a medium bowl, whisk together the eggs, sugar, cream, butter, vanilla, nutmeg and salt. Add the bread slices to the bowl and allow to soak for a few minutes. Arrange the soaked slices in the loaf pan and pour any of the egg mixture left in the bottom over the bread. Dust the top with a little nutmeg and cover with a slice of parchment paper. Refrigerate overnight.

When ready to bake, preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Remove the parchment paper covering the loaf and set loaf pan onto a baking sheet. Bake until the loaf is deeply golden brown on top and the custard has set, about 1 hour. Remove and serve from the pan in slices dusted with powdered sugar and Cranberry-Kumquat Preserves on the side.

Cranberry-kumquat preserves

Makes 1 cup

- 1 cup fresh cranberries
- ½ cup kumquat, sliced
- » cup honey

Put the cranberries, kumquats and honey into a small saucepan. Set over low heat, cover, and cook just until the cranberries have opened, about 3 to 5 minutes, stirring occasionally to be sure they are not sticking to the bottom. Remove, allow to cool to room temperature before transferring to covered container to store in the refrigerator. ✨



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This is why we eat black-eyed peas on New Year's Day

BY **STEPHANIE TOONE**
THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION

New Year's Eve may traditionally include a glass of Champagne and/or a kiss with a special someone, but come New Year's Day, the traditions all encompass what's on the menu.

Specifically in the South, eating a bowl of black-eyed peas and collard greens has become the standard on New Year's Day. Many celebrating the new year might just be going along with the offered dishes without the context.

A few culinary experts have some clues how this tradition came to be. According to celebrated Southern food researcher John Egerton in his book "Southern Food: At Home, On the Road, In History," black-eyed peas are associated with a "mystical and mythical power to bring good luck."

According to a report by Southern Living, the black-eyed peas have that lucky reputation reaching all the way back to 500 A.D. as a part of the Jewish holiday Rosh Hashanah, which is the Jewish New Year.

Linda Pelaccio, who hosts culinary radio show "A Taste of the Past," told USA Today

that peas and other lentils are associated with the holiday. Eating them along with collards, with their green color, represent a financially prosperous new year.

Black-eyed peas in the South

Though its roots do not stem from the South, eating black-eyed peas in particular dishes has become a Southern tradition, Pelaccio said. Black-eyed peas are served with rice in the traditional Southern U.S. dish called "Hoppin' John" for New Year's Eve. Or, the peas can be part of a soup. In Italy, lentils mix with pork for a lucky dish. That tradition of eating the peas with rice is of African origin, and it became popular in the South later, especially in the Carolinas.

Other black-eyed peas combos

Black-eyed peas with corn bread represents gold, according to Southern Living. Stew your black-eyed peas with tomatoes and they become a symbol of wealth and health.

One unusual but common New Year's Day black-eyed peas tradition involves putting actual money in the dish. Some add to their "luck" by cooking their pot of peas with a penny or dime inside. Whoever gets the bowl with the coin in it, according to legend, has the best luck for the new year. ✨



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When building a cheese board, take some advice from an expert: ‘Just have fun’

BY **GRETCHEN MCKAY**

PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE

Cheese boards are the ultimate party platter during the holidays, including on New Year’s Eve, because who among us doesn’t like to nibble a little of this and nosh a bit of that while sipping on a flute of Champagne?

Yet for the person in charge of assembling said board, especially one who can’t tell a sharp English cheddar from an aged Spanish manchego, they can prove quite the stressor.

So many tastes and textures! And why does this one cost so much more than that one? It’s enough to drive you mad, or at the very least shake your confidence in being the perfect party host.

Depending on your budget and time frame, companies such as Blanket & Board, Boards and Baskets and The Cheese Queen can do the heavy lifting for you with pre-made charcuterie boxes and cheese boards. Books such as America’s Test Kitchen’s “Boards: Stylish Spreads for Casual Gatherings” (2022, \$30) can also provide guidance and inspiration, if you have the time to page through them.

Anais Saint-Andre Loughran, who owns Chantal’s Cheese Shop in Pittsburgh, has these words of advice: Stop worrying so much about it!

A cheese board, she says, “is a blank canvas you fill with your heart,” adding, with a reassuring laugh, “There are no hard rules about it.”

In France, where Loughran grew up, cheese is routinely eaten after dinner, “and you cut as you go,” she says. In the U.S., it’s something of a mystery why the pre-cut cheese boards arranged in beautiful patterns are “so specific” when they really don’t have to be to work their magic.



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What you should consider, however, is buying artisan cheeses whose purchases will help support a farm and/or family. Then, she says, “just have fun.”

If you like all firm or semi-firm cheeses, such as gouda or cheddar, go for it. It’s equally OK to play around with different flavors and textures if you like variety.

So if Loughran had to compose the perfect, seasonal cheese board for New Year’s Eve, what three or four cheeses would be on it?

Because you’re most likely drinking bubbly, she’d start with a rich and bloomy triple cream cheese made with goat’s milk and cow’s cream, such as Nettle Meadow’s Kunik (which means “kiss” in Inuit) from upstate New York. It’s a little firmer than brie, “but melts on the palate.”

She’d also put a cheese that’s been washed or smeared with a brine, alcohol or beer on the plate. Rusk Creek Reserve from Uplands Cheese Co. in Wisconsin, which is aged in a special spruce bark, immediately comes to mind. The smell can be pungent, but the custardy cheese inside is sweet and sour dough-y.

Third on the board is something semi-firm and “drunken” — Ubriaco al Prosecco, a cow’s milk hard cheese from Veneto, Italy, that is soaked in the unfiltered dry sparkling wine for 30 days. It can be crumbled like Parmesan or shaved into long slices, and what a wonderful flavor: You can almost taste the fizzles, says Loughran.

Finally, a decent board should always have a wild card that’s a blue. A creamy, crumbly Stilton from English cheesemaker Colston Bassett goes well with a dessert wine or port. “And it’s British so it’s got earthier tones,” she says.

Other suggestions: You can’t miss with a nutty Alpine cheese from France, such as a 36 Month Comte or Adarre Reserve, made with a blend of sheep and goat milks. And don’t forget about the most famous of French cheeses, a soft and spreadable goat’s milk chevre. You’ll love its tangy kick.

When it comes to how much to buy, plan on 1 ounce per cheese per person, if it’s an appetizer,

or 3 ounces per cheese per person if the board is the main course. If you’ve got some meat eaters on the guest list, you can’t go wrong adding two meats for every four cheeses; popular charcuterie include salami, prosciutto and coppa.

Loughran suggests folding the meats into different shapes instead of simply laying them flat — think cigarettes, trumpets and roses. Then, fill the empty spaces with garnishes such as olives, pickles, dips, honey, jam, dried or fresh fruits, nuts and even butter. “Julienne whatever you’ve got and just put it out,” she says. “It’s free fall.”

Finally, don’t forget to finish it up with crackers, and maybe a few nice touches like flowers, cranberries or pine boughs that speak to the season.

“Having rules is the wrong way to let your heart speak,” says Loughran. ✨

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Turn over a new leaf: Salad recipes for the new year

BY **GRETCHEN MCKAY**
PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE

A new year is always celebrated — maybe even revered — for its boundless possibilities. Seeing those empty 365 days on the calendar as a blank slate, we can't help but feel optimistic when January rolls around. We resolve to improve our relationships, exercise more, stop smoking, curtail drinking and generally just live life to the fullest.

Many of us also pledge to be kinder to our bodies by making healthier choices at mealtime. Maybe you over-indulged over the holidays or (finally) came to the realization that, yes, you really are what you eat. Perhaps you just want to feel lighter, with more energy. To that end, experts advise filling our plates and bowls with a variety of fruits and vegetables each and every day.

A well-built salad can accomplish that goal. Leafy greens and raw veggies are full of dietary fiber, which not only helps lower cholesterol levels but also keeps your gut healthy. Fiber also helps regulate your blood sugar, keeping hunger and mindless snacking in check.

Naturally low in calories, salad greens and their accoutrements also pack a nutritional punch, with vitamins A, C, E, B6 and folic acid. Why not throw a handful of nuts on top, or

build the salad on a whole grain such as farro, bulgar or quinoa? You'll add some much-needed protein and healthy fats, too, while turning a snack or appetizer into a full-fledged, good-for-you meal.

One problem: Salads can be boring! Especially if it's just a wedge of iceberg lettuce or handful of pre-packaged, chopped greens topped with a high-fat, processed bottled dressing.

It doesn't have to be so.

The following salads aim to build excitement by offering bright colors, a range of textures and crunchy and/or tangy add-ons such as nuts, finely grated cheese and dried fruit that assure every bite is super satisfying.

Make-your-own dressings add to their appeal, with seasonal ingredients such as maple syrup and citrus as key components.

Happy New Year!

Spinach salad with warm maple dressing

Serves 4

Rich in antioxidants, baby spinach is the original super food. Here, it's paired with crunchy apple, fresh blueberries and crumbled feta for a low-cal and healthful salad. I added a cup of shredded roasted chicken tossed in 1 tablespoon of dressing for added protein, along with a handful of smoked or toasted almonds for crunch.

For dressing

- ½ cup avocado or good-quality olive oil
- 3 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- 1½ tablespoons pure maple syrup
- ¾ teaspoon Dijon mustard
- ½ teaspoon honey
- » teaspoon smoked paprika
- » teaspoon kosher salt
- » teaspoon black pepper



For salad

- 5-ounce bag of baby spinach (about 4 cups)
- ½ unpeeled Granny Smith apple, thinly sliced
- ½ cup fresh blueberries
- » cup crumbled feta cheese
- Kosher salt, to taste
- Black pepper, to taste
- ½ cup sliced or whole smoked almonds
- 1 cup shredded, roasted chicken, optional

Prepare maple dressing: Combine oil, vinegar, maple syrup, mustard, honey, paprika, salt and pepper in a lidded glass jar. Process with an immersion blender until well combined, about 30 seconds, or seal with lid and shake vigorously.

Prepare salad: Toss together spinach, apple, blueberries, feta and toasted almonds in a large heatproof bowl. Set aside.

Add dressing to skillet; heat over medium until it just begins to simmer, about 1 minute. Pour about 6 tablespoons warm dressing over salad and toss to coat. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Garnish with smoked almonds and roasted chicken, if using.

Serve salad with remaining warm dressing, if desired.

— Adapted from *foodandwine.com*

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Hearty sweet potato, arugula & bulgar salad with ginger dressing

Serves 4

Spicy arugula offers a nutritious, green base for this hearty grain-based salad. The sweetness of the caramelized, roasted sweet potatoes is balanced by a spicy ginger dressing.

Crumbled blue cheese, red onion and sweet dried cherries round out the flavors and add some heft to this meal-in-a-bowl. The original recipe calls for building the salad on wild rice but I used farro, an ancient whole-grain wheat with a nutty flavor and chewy texture. You also could substitute barley or couscous.

- 1 cup farro or barley, rinsed
- ½ teaspoon fine sea salt, divided
- 1½ pounds sweet potatoes (2 medium or 3 small), peeled and sliced into 1-inch cubes
- 1½ tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- ¾ cup chopped pecans, toasted
- 4 cups packed arugula
- ½ cup crumbled blue cheese
- ½ cup thinly sliced red onion
- » cup dried cherries

For ginger dressing

- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar, or to taste
- 2 tablespoons Dijon mustard
- 1 tablespoon maple syrup or honey
- 2 teaspoons finely grated fresh ginger
- ½ teaspoon fine sea salt
- Freshly ground black pepper

Prepare farro or barley as the label directs. Drain and rinse under cold water, then transfer

to a large bowl and toss with 2 tablespoons olive oil. Meanwhile, roast the sweet potatoes: Preheat the oven to 425 degrees. Line a large, rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper for easy cleanup. Place the cubed sweet potato on the pan, drizzle with the olive oil and sprinkle with ¼ teaspoon of the salt. Toss until the sweet potatoes are lightly and evenly coated in oil.

Arrange sweet potatoes in a single layer and roast for 25-30 minutes, tossing halfway, until they are caramelized on the edges and tender when pierced through with a fork. Leave the oven on and let the sweet potatoes cool for a few minutes.

Make the dressing by combining all ingredients in a small bowl and whisk until thoroughly combined. Set aside.

Combine arugula, cooked farro or barley, and roasted sweet potatoes in a large serving bowl or platter. Spread toasted pecans over the salad. Top with crumbled blue cheese, red onion and dried cranberries.

If you're serving the salad immediately, go ahead and drizzle most of the dressing on top (you probably won't use it all). Gently toss to combine, and let the salad rest for a few minutes so the grains have time to absorb some of the dressing. Serve.

If you're planning to have leftovers, divide the salad into portions and store the dressing separately. The salad and dressing will keep well, each covered in the refrigerator, for up to 5 days. Leftover dressing is great for future salads!

— Adapted from cookieandkate.com



Winter citrus salad with honey vinaigrette

Serves 4

Winter citrus is great for boosting your immune system — and it just makes a gloomy, overcast winter day feel cheery. Be sure to get as much of the pith as you can off the fruit or it will taste bitter. A sprinkle of flaky sea salt like Maldon adds a crunchy finish.

For salad

- 2 oranges
- 1 yellow grapefruit
- 1 pink grapefruit
- Large flaked sea salt such as Maldon
- 1 shallot, finely chopped

For dressing

- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon sherry vinegar
- 1 teaspoon honey
- Juice of 1 lime, or more to taste
- Sliced fresh parsley, tarragon or chives, for garnish

Peel oranges and grapefruit, removing as much pith as possible, then slice fruit horizontally into thin wheels. Remove any pits, then layer fruit on a serving dish. Sprinkle with salt and garnish with chopped shallot

Make dressing by whisking together olive oil, vinegar, honey and lime juice until well combined, or vigorously shaking ingredients in a mason jar with lid on. Taste, adjust seasoning as needed and drizzle over salad, then garnish with herbs. ✨

— Gretchen McKay, Post-Gazette

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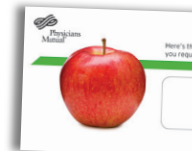
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