

EASY PARTY FOOD PLANNING

Parties are fun events we all look forward to attending. If you're hosting the party, it's easy to become overwhelmed with all the preparations to be made. Invitations, table settings, decorations and rounding up extra glassware all take time. Then there's the party food planning, shopping and cooking. Unless you're hosting a pot luck, a party is a lot of work! However, with a little organization, you can make short work of your menu and party food planning. Here are some fail-safe tips to make your party a success.

If your guest list is large, a buffet style party is the way to go. All the dishes are laid out and your guests help themselves. If you're just having a few friends in, it's not much work to set the dining table for a sit-down dinner and it is a bit more elegant.

Easy party food planning begins with careful menu selections. One main entree and perhaps two hot side dishes should be the most you need to deal with on the day of the party. Remember, some dishes taste better when cooked the day before, allowing the flavors to marry.

As a main entree, consider casserole style dishes like lasagna or manicotti for casual gatherings. Fancier dishes, like Beef Bourguignon, definitely improve in taste when prepared a day or two before you plan to serve. The classic German Sauerbraten owes its fantastic taste to four days of marinating. You then pop the roast in the oven the day of your party with little effort. You just make the gravy when the meat's done. So think do-ahead when planning party food for your menu.

For your hot side dishes, a rice pilaf would go well with the Bourguignon and can be done on the morning of your party and warmed just before serving. For the Sauerbraten, roast potato wedges in the same pan. Gingered carrots in orange sauce is an easy dish, as are creamed baby onions with nutmeg. These elegant vegetable dishes are also good do-aheads as the flavor improves when allowed to sit overnight in the frig.

A big green salad is always welcome. Wash the greens in the morning. Keeping leaves separated from one another, layer them on paper towels in a large rectangular plastic container. In another bowl, put your tomato wedges, onions and fresh or dried salad seasonings. Keep other salad veggies, like mushrooms, olives and cucumbers in separate containers. When you're ready to assemble the salad, your greens will be nice and crisp. The salad goes together in five minutes.

Make your menu work for you! You can see that careful party food planning is the

key to assuring a sumptuous meal for your guests without frantic last-minute preparations.