

Why Do Make-Ahead Recipes Work So Well To Reduce Your Dinner Party Stress?

One of the "tricks" I find most useful for hosting stress-free dinner parties is to make some of the recipes ahead. I find that too many last minute jobs can overwhelm me, so I plan ahead to eliminate as many as possible.

The more dishes you can prepare a day or some hours before guests ring your doorbell, the more you reduce your stress. Here are some reasons:

• You avoid a last minute crisis if preparation takes longer than you thought it would.

• If you like to cook, you'll have the leisure to enjoy what you're doing instead of feeling frantic about a deadline

• You have time to clean up after you cook.

• If there is a disaster, say you burn something, you have plenty of time to come up with an alternate plan.

• If you have prepared the dessert ahead, you don't need to leave the table for a long stretch just when the conversation is getting really interesting.

Put your imagination to work for you! Try to imagine your way through the last minute jobs you will have to get dinner on the table, and reduce them to a minimum you feel comfortable with. It helps to think about what all those last minute jobs are: setting out the ice water pitcher, lighting the candles, putting items in serving dishes and getting the guests to the table.

By the way, many of these are jobs that your guests can do.

What is your level of tolerance for last minute jobs?

Now ask yourself what your level of tolerance is for last minute jobs? If it is low, then you should think about finding some recipes that absolutely minimize any last minute work. This is especially true if you are an inexperienced cook.

Some of the recipes I rely on are make-ahead, and some are just items that I can bring home from the store and put out in nice serving dishes.

Some cooks even make everything ahead. If you love stews, lasagna and casseroles, then you could do that too.

But I often prefer serving a delicious roast of lamb or beef or chicken as the special item on the menu. Luckily these dishes are ones you can put in the oven and leave to themselves while you do other things.

If you can add potatoes and vegetables to the roast while it cooks you have almost all of the advantages of make-ahead. Once you pop them in the oven beside the roast you can pretty well ignore them until they are cooked.

So I tend to focus on finding appetizers, salads, side dishes and desserts that I can make ahead, or set out straight from the store, or vegetables I can cook alongside a roast. Then I can concentrate on the last minute items like slicing a roast, making gravy, and getting things on the table.

Probably the most important category for me is appetizers. I find it too stressful to be fussing at cooking something while the doorbell is ringing. If you are hosting by yourself you may find the same.

So I try to have a repertoire of make-ahead or buy-ahead appetizer recipes that work for me. Often I serve more than one, since some of my guests like to stick to very light appetizers, and others enjoy heartier ones.

You can build your repertoire of make ahead recipes for your home dinner parties. I suggest you start with appetizers. If you want to see some of my favorites, just go to my Make-Ahead Appetizers page on my website.

Enjoy minimizing your hosting stress and watching your guests' eyes light up at the sight of your tasty, well presented appetizers.

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