

## Our Holiday Planning Guide

### Decorating the Holiday Table

Once you've confirmed the number of guests and finalized the menu, take the time to plan the table setting. Several days before the meal, arrange the plates, bowls and platters on the buffet or dining table to make sure everything will fit. (Remember to allow space for wine bottles, carafes or an ice bucket.) This will give you a good idea of the space you'll have for decorating without crowding the table. Keeping in mind all the other last-minute preparations, be sure to have the tablecloth and napkins laundered and pressed well in advance. If you plan to use place mats with trivets and a runner, give the tabletop a good polishing.

**Dressing the Table:** Peri Wolfman, coauthor of *Great Settings*, favors a table embellished with natural elements. "Think of dressing your table, instead of just using a centerpiece. Start with a base of lemon leaf branches spread down the entire center of a long table or filling the center of a round table. The branches can be placed on top of a simple tablecloth or on a bare wood table. A good way to start is to browse around the seasonal fruit and greens in your neighborhood market or, better yet, a local farmers' market. Between Thanksgiving and Christmas, you'll find fruits, branches of greens and berries that are unique to the season. Pomegranates and shiny red apples make a great start for your centerpiece; they're long lasting and can be arranged ahead of time. Softer fruits, such as red, green and purple grapes, can be added the day of the party."

**Place Settings:** Feel free to assign seats, giving thought to which arrangements will spark the most enjoyable conversation. Seating can be designated with a place card on each plate or in a special holder. As an alternative to a centerpiece, decorate each setting with an individual arrangement or a beautiful favor—a small keepsake and sprigs of evergreen tied together with ribbon, for example.

**Candles:** If the meal is served in the evening, candles are essential. They always cast the most flattering light on faces, food and glassware. Wolfman suggests using pillar candles instead of tall tapers. The slow-burning pillars can be placed in saucers safely nestled in greenery as a centerpiece or aligned down the center of the table.

**Christmas Crackers:** Masters of tradition, the British have made the holiday dinner table a center of warm and jovial celebration. One old holiday custom had diners lifting their spoons to toast the good health of absent friends. Nowadays, the table is invariably set with a Christmas cracker (of the party-favor variety) alongside each plate. At the end of the meal, when all are feeling merry, arms are crossed and linked around the table, each hand holding one end of a cracker. On the count of three, everyone gives a tug, and the crackers loudly burst open. Inside each cracker is a cache of tiny toys, a paper hat and a printed riddle. The festivities continue at the table, with everyone wearing a silly hat and reading their riddle aloud. It's a grand way to end the meal with spirits high.

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### Planning Checklist

Planning ahead will help you stay organized and relaxed during the holidays.

- Decide on the type of get-together (brunch, formal dinner, cocktail party, etc.).
- Determine the number of guests.
- Set a time and a location in your house.
- Send out invitations (one month prior).
- Choose an entertaining style (formal, casual).
- Plan a doable menu that fits the style.
- Pick a color palette.
- Select your decorations.
- Shop for nonperishable items well ahead of the date.
- Decorate your space and set the table at least one day in advance.

## Chestnut Panettone Bread Pudding

*A spongy golden Italian egg bread studded with dried fruits and glacéed chestnuts, panettone is traditionally served during the Christmas holidays. Here we transform this sweet bread into a delicious version of bread pudding. You can assemble the pudding before your guests arrive and then bake it while everyone is enjoying the holiday meal. The aromas of cinnamon, nutmeg and vanilla will fill your house, tempting diners to enjoy this comforting bread pudding, which tastes best when served warm from the oven.*

Preheat an oven to 350°F. Butter a 9-by-13-inch baking dish.

Put the panettone cubes in a large bowl. In another bowl, whisk the eggs, sugar, butter, cinnamon, vanilla and nutmeg. Slowly whisk in the warm cream, whisking until the sugar is dissolved. Pour the egg mixture over the panettone cubes, then stir in the raisins. Let stand for 20 minutes.

Transfer the panettone mixture to the prepared baking dish and cover with aluminum foil. Bake for 30 minutes. Uncover the dish and continue to bake until a toothpick inserted into the center of the pudding comes out clean but is still slightly wet, 10 to 15 minutes more. Serves 6 to 8.

Recipe Courtesy of Williams-Sonoma Culinary Expert

## Perfect Potato Latkes

*A traditional Hanukkah dish, potato latkes are perfect appetizers when topped with sour cream, chives and a sprinkling of caviar.*

In a food processor fitted with the shredding disk, chop the onion using on-off pulses. Add the potatoes and process until finely chopped, with some texture remaining; do not overprocess. Transfer the mixture to a large bowl. Add the eggs, olive oil, flour and baking powder, season with salt and pepper, and stir until well combined.

Line a baking sheet with paper towels. In a large nonstick fry pan over medium-high heat, pour in oil to a depth of ½ inch and heat until a small piece of bread dropped into the oil sizzles and begins to fry. Working in batches, use a large spoon to drop the batter (about 2 Tbs. per latke) into the hot oil, flattening with the back of the spoon. Fry, turning once, until golden brown, 3 to 5 minutes per side. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the latkes to the prepared baking sheet to drain, then serve immediately. Makes 6 to 8 latkes.

**Note:** To make mini-latkes, spoon the potato mixture into a pastry bag fitted with a 1-inch round tip. Let the excess liquid drain into the sink. In a large nonstick fry pan, heat the oil as described above. Working in batches, pipe the potato mixture into the hot oil to form small latkes and fry until golden brown. Makes 12 to 16 mini-latkes.

Judy Zeidler, Author, *The Gourmet Jewish Cookbook* (William Morrow and Co., Inc., 1988).

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### Ingredients for Chestnut Panettone Bread Pudding

½ round panettone, cut into cubes and lightly toasted

6 eggs

⅔ cup sugar

8 Tbs. (1 stick) unsalted butter, melted

1½ tsp. ground cinnamon

1 Tbs. vanilla extract

¼ tsp. freshly grated nutmeg

2 cups heavy cream, heated

½ cup raisins, dried cranberries or roughly chopped dried apricots

### December's Popular Holidays Celebrated in the United States

- Hanukkah (Festival of Lights), begins Wednesday, Dec. 1
- Muharram, Tuesday, Dec. 7
- Christmas (Feast of the Nativity), Saturday, Dec. 25
- Kwanzaa, begins Sunday, Dec. 26
- New Year's Eve, Friday, Dec. 31

### Ingredients for Eggnog with Nutmeg and Cinnamon

1 or 2 whole nutmegs

1 cinnamon stick

12 egg yolks

4 cups milk

1¼ cups sugar

2 cups heavy cream

½ tsp. vanilla extract

1½ cups brandy, Cognac, rum or bourbon

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## WILLIAMS-SONOMA

# Technique Class: The Holiday Dinner

## Welcoming the Holidays

*Think about your happiest holiday memories. Chances are, they are filled with family and friends and food. After all, the real magic of the holiday season is that it brings people together to enjoy one another's company and the pleasures of the table. There is no better holiday gift that you can give the people you love than providing an occasion for that kind of connection—whether it's a traditional Christmas dinner, a warm and welcoming open house, or a sparkling New Year's Eve cocktail party.*

*"The planning, the cooking and the joy you put into your party will be a gift your friends can cherish all year long."*

— Chuck Williams

## Eggnog with Nutmeg and Cinnamon

*A traditional Christmas beverage, eggnog will be a wonderful complement to the panettone bread pudding for dessert. Here, the eggnog is topped with sweetened whipped cream and freshly ground spices.*

Using a nutmeg grater or the smallest rasps on a handheld grater-shredder, grate the nutmeg until you have about 1 tsp. In a spice grinder or a coffee grinder reserved for spices, grind the cinnamon stick. Set aside.

In a large saucepan, whisk the egg yolks, 2 cups of the milk and 1 cup of the sugar. Place over low heat and simmer, stirring often, until slightly thickened, 8 to 10 minutes. Remove from the heat, stir in the remaining 2 cups milk and let cool.

In a bowl, using a handheld mixer or whisk, whip the cream with the remaining ¼ cup sugar and the vanilla until soft peaks form. Set aside.

Strain the cooled mixture through a fine-mesh sieve and pour into a serving pitcher or a small punch bowl. Stir in the brandy. Serve the eggnog in cups or glasses, topped with a dollop of the whipped cream and a sprinkle each of nutmeg and cinnamon. Serves 8 to 10.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma *Christmas Entertaining*, by Georgeanne Brennan (Simon & Schuster, 2005).

#### Ingredients for Standing Rib Roast with Yorkshire Pudding

1 standing beef rib roast, 6 to 6½ lb.

Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

For the Yorkshire pudding:

3 eggs

1 cup milk

1 cup all-purpose flour

½ tsp. salt

2 Tbs. fat from roasting pan

¾ cup dry red wine

**About the Rib Roast:** A standing beef rib roast is sometimes called “prime rib.” Prime, however, refers to the grading of the meat and not the specific cut. The USDA grades beef as prime, choice or select depending on its tenderness, flavor and juiciness. Prime beef is generally reserved for restaurants and is available to consumers only in premium butcher shops. You can prepare this recipe using any good-quality standing rib roast.

**Shopping for a Rib Roast:** Look for a roast with a thick layer of white fat and marbling throughout the meat. Ask the butcher for the “first cut,” which comes from the loin end and has the biggest eye, and to tie the roast to keep the fat from pulling away from the meat. If you’re daunted by the prospect of carving a bone-in roast, ask for a butcher’s cut, with the bones separated but tied back on; they will add flavor during roasting, and carving will be easier.

## Standing Rib Roast with Yorkshire Pudding

*Here, we serve a standing rib roast with savory Yorkshire pudding. It is made from the same batter as popovers, but instead of being poured into individual cups, it is prepared as one large soufflé-like bread. The key to a good Yorkshire pudding is to have both the pan and the fat very hot when you pour in the batter. This immediately cooks the batter as it comes into contact with the pan and puffs up the pudding nicely. Serve Yorkshire pudding immediately after removing it from the oven, as it will quickly deflate.*

Position a rack in the lower third of an oven and preheat to 450°F. Oil a flameproof heavy roasting pan just large enough to hold the roast comfortably.

Generously season all sides of the roast with salt and pepper. Place the roast, fat side up, in the prepared pan. Roast for 20 minutes, then reduce the oven temperature to 350°F. Continue roasting until an instant-read thermometer inserted into the center of the roast, away from the bone, registers 125° to 130°F for very rare to medium-rare, about 1 hour and 10 minutes more (for a total roasting time of 1½ hours).

Meanwhile, make the Yorkshire pudding batter: In a bowl, whisk the eggs and milk. Whisk in the flour and salt. Pour into a small pitcher, cover and refrigerate.

Transfer the roast to a carving board and cover loosely with aluminum foil. Let rest while baking the pudding.

To make the pudding, increase the oven temperature to 450°F. Skim the surface fat from the drippings, reserving both the fat and the pan with the drippings. Spoon 2 Tbs. of the fat into a metal pie pan or baking pan and put the pan in the oven until it is very hot, about 4 minutes. Pour the batter into the hot pan. Bake on the lower rack until the pudding is golden and puffed, about 20 minutes, rotating once if puffing unevenly.

Meanwhile, place the roasting pan with the drippings over medium heat. Pour in the wine and deglaze the pan, stirring to scrape up the browned bits. Cook until the liquid is reduced by half, about 5 minutes. Season with salt and pepper. Pour into a sauceboat. Just before the pudding is ready, slice the beef and arrange on a warmed platter. Serve with the pudding and sauce. Serves 6 to 8.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma Collection Series, *Roasting*, by Barbara Grunes (Simon & Schuster, 2002).

## Tip: Tying a Boneless Rib Roast

This simple preparation will ensure that the roast cooks evenly, retains its shape and is easy to carve. You will need the following equipment:

- Large cutting board or clean work surface
- Kitchen twine
- Kitchen shears or paring knife

Cut about eight pieces of twine that are each four times the width of the roast, plus one piece that is three times its length.

Set the roast, fat side up, on the cutting board. Using a short piece of twine, hold one end with each hand and slide it under the roast about 2 inches from one end. Then pull the twine snug, knot the ends securely and trim the excess. Repeat with the remaining short pieces of twine at 2-inch intervals along the length of the roast.

Tie the long piece of twine to the center of the twine loop at one end of the roast. Then weave the loose end under and around the center of each loop along the length of the roast. Turn the roast over and repeat. Turn the roast, fat side up, and knot the loose end to the original loop. Trim the excess twine. Completely secured, the roast is now ready to be put into the oven.

Williams-Sonoma Kitchen

## Creamy Gratin of Winter Root Vegetables

*Parsnips, rutabagas and turnips are combined with potatoes, then coarsely mashed, topped with cheese and gratinéed. The root vegetables add texture while enhancing the background flavor of the potatoes.*

Preheat an oven to 350°F. Lightly butter a 12-inch flameproof gratin dish.

Peel the parsnips, rutabagas, turnip and potatoes and cut into 1-inch cubes. Put the vegetables in a stockpot, add water to cover by 4 to 5 inches, and add the coarse sea salt. Bring to a boil over high heat, reduce the heat to medium and cook, uncovered, until the vegetables are easily pierced with a fork, about 25 minutes.

Drain the vegetables well and transfer to a large bowl. Sprinkle with the fine sea salt and pepper and turn several times.

In a saucepan over medium heat, combine the half-and-half, milk and the 2 Tbs. butter and heat, stirring occasionally, just until tiny bubbles form along the edge of the pan.

Pour half of the milk mixture over the vegetables and mash coarsely with a potato masher. When the milk mixture has been absorbed, add the remaining milk mixture and 3 Tbs. of the parsley. Mash coarsely again until well blended. Spoon the mashed mixture into the prepared gratin dish, smoothing the surface. Sprinkle the Parmigiano-Reggiano and Gruyère cheeses on top. Cut the remaining 1 tsp. butter into bits and dot the top.

Bake until bubbles begin to form along the edges and the top begins to turn golden, 15 to 20 minutes. Preheat the broiler and broil until the top is golden, 3 to 4 minutes. Remove from the broiler and sprinkle with the remaining 1 Tbs. parsley. Serve hot. Serves 8 to 10.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma *Christmas Entertaining*, by Georgeanne Brennan (Simon & Schuster, 2005).

## Meat Portions for Parties

Whether it is casual or elegant, a buffet simplifies entertaining a houseful of guests. The culinary centerpiece is usually the meat you will serve—and most often a selection of several. To assist you in estimating the amounts needed, we turned to two nationally known caterers, Paula LeDuc and Mary Micucci.

Micucci offers this advice for a full-course buffet: “Here’s my good rule of thumb. If you are serving one kind of meat, order 8 to 10 oz. of raw meat per person, or 6 to 8 oz. of fish or chicken. If you are serving two kinds, figure on 5 oz. of each per person.”

For the buffet table at a cocktail party, LeDuc says, “We allow 2 oz. of smoked salmon per person if other proteins are offered on the table, or 4 oz. per person if salmon is the main course. When we serve hot slices of roast beef or turkey, 3 to 4 oz. per person is appropriate. And for any hors d’oeuvres that will be passed, I calculate the quantities needed in terms of bites, with 5 to 7 bites per person per hour.”

#### Ingredients for Creamy Gratin of Winter Root Vegetables

3 large parsnips

2 small rutabagas

1 medium turnip

3 Yukon Gold potatoes

1 Tbs. coarse sea salt or kosher salt

2 tsp. fine sea salt

1 tsp. freshly ground pepper

½ cup half-and-half

½ cup milk

2 Tbs. plus 1 tsp. unsalted butter

4 Tbs. minced fresh flat-leaf parsley

3 Tbs. grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese

3 Tbs. finely shredded Gruyère cheese

## Choosing Wines for the Holiday Feast

Selecting the wines for holiday celebrations should merit the same care and attention that go into preparing the meal itself. Chefs and enologists agree that taking the time to match a wine to the menu results in a gastronomic experience far greater than the sum of its parts.

It’s generally more satisfying to progress from lighter to more substantial foods and wines. Plan your meal course by course, then discuss your selections with a knowledgeable wine merchant, who can suggest wines to complement the flavors of the foods.

A good rule of thumb is to plan on half a bottle per person for a sit-down dinner (4 to 5 oz. per glass) and more for a cocktail party. Of course, your knowledge of the guests will dictate the number of bottles you order, but most hosts would rather have wine left over than run out. And many wine merchants will let you return unopened bottles.

If a variety of foods will be served, choose wines that emphasize full flavors without being too heavy. For white wines, avoid anything too oaky, as oak tannins tend to dry out the mouth. For the same reason, select softer reds with low tannins. If you serve Champagne or sparkling wine, try to strike a balance between dry and sweet. Your goal should be a balanced wine that is easy to drink.

## Decorating the Holiday Buffet Table

We asked four experts on buffet entertaining how they’ll decorate their holiday buffet tables. Mary Micucci, Paula LeDuc and Jean-Christophe Le Picart are preeminent caterers acclaimed for their stylish presentations of food, and Peri Wolfman is the coauthor of *Table Settings*, a very fine book on the subject.

**Mary Micucci of Along Came Mary, Los Angeles:** “I’ll decorate the buffet table with fragrant evergreens, berries, nuts, pinecones, pomegranates and other seasonal flora. And as always, I’ll use lots of candles. When setting up the table, I place the platters at different levels. This means the table will be more attractive to the eye and gives an impression of abundance. Serving both food and beverages in different rooms creates a flow; guests circulate and that reduces crowding. This is also a great way to show off your home. I like to be creative with the beverages, offering one special drink that reflects the season and serving it in a pretty glass. And on a practical note: Depending on the size of the party and your budget, employing or designating helpers ensures that the buffet will be replenished and kept neat and tidy.”

**Paula LeDuc of Paula LeDuc Fine Catering, San Francisco:** “Decorating with seasonal fresh fruit is easy, colorful and interesting. Start with holiday greens as the base for red and green apples of all varieties and sizes. The apples can be mounded or arranged in interesting containers. I occasionally add lemons as accents to pop the color. Of course, candlelight is essential, and I’ve even hollowed out the apples and inserted tea lights. One of our favorite candle ideas is to take a glass cylinder partly filled with rock salt and recess a smaller glass cylinder with a votive down into the salt. The result is a glowing, sparkling candle.”

**Jean-Christophe Le Picart of Feast & Fêtes, New York City:** “I’ll use an arrangement of blown sugar ornaments as a centerpiece of the buffet table, with a single ornament at the place setting of each guest. Another good option would be an individual floral arrangement at each setting. The simplicity of a monochromatic table decor can be very appealing—shiny white porcelain dinnerware contrasting with textured white cloths. I also like to use oversize, triple-hemstitched linen napkins. This year I’ll prepare two appetizers or two desserts and alternate them at every other guest’s setting. The variety of this arrangement makes the table a bit more interesting.”

**Peri Wolfman, coauthor of *Table Settings*, New York City:** “Scattering lots of simple votive candles in clear glass holders around the buffet adds the sparkle that is so much a part of the holidays. Gaylax leaves, which you can buy in little bundles at the florist, make a beautiful base under fruits, cakes and candles. I like to use a stacked set of glass cake stands filled with fruits, cookies and cakes to create a dramatic focal point and add height, while allowing more space for other foods on the table. To ensure that the stack of cake stands is sturdy and won’t easily topple over, I put a little ball of modeling clay in three spots on the bottom of each upper cake stand and gently press it onto the one below.”

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