

Good Food and Drink Ideas

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The Dinner Party on a Budget

Dinner parties are not just for the people who can afford veal and lobster most nights of the week. And, they are not just for those who have a large grocery budget. One of the easiest things to do if you are looking to entertain is to throw a dinner party on a budget.

When working on a budget, you will have a smaller list of ingredients to choose from. For example, you may be forced to choose from steak or chicken, instead of anything under the sun. Smaller parties are also easier to manage and to plan for.

The first thing to do is to make sure the guest list is complete. Do you have enough space for everyone? Are the people you invite likely to come? You don't want to invite ten people and only have three show up especially when you buy enough food for ten. When you make your guest list out, make sure you have enough room to accommodate them as well as the budget to feed them. It's true that the less people you have, the better food you can purchase. But at the same time, you need to consider what is more important to you for your party; a well rounded guest list or a gourmet meal.

After you have the guest list managed, search for a menu that you can work with. Buying frozen appetizers can look expensive, but they are usually cheaper than buying the ingredients to make them yourself. Try to keep the courses set to three as a maximum. An appetizer, main course and dessert are the only things you really need, and dessert can be as simple as a sweet cocktail. Look for a main dish that is liked by everyone but still a decent price. This way you keep everyone pleased as well on budget.

The next thing to consider is that you need to keep the setting as simple as possible. I've seen parties where everything is perfectly matched and the theme is right in your face, and while it usually looks good, it can cost more than the food if you are not careful. At the same time you can have a very simple theme where you use color or stuff you already have as a great jumpstart to the best party you've thrown. Just remember that no matter what you do the point is to have a good time and spend time with friends. If you start getting stressed out then maybe you should step back and take a break, then try again in a few minutes.

How To Be Ready For Drop-In Entertaining

Even the most gracious host can become frazzled and stressed out when things get hectic and fast paced, especially when she is on her own with the hors d'oeuvres, cocktails and the planning. Imagine how she'd be when there is last minute extra guests or out of town friends stop by because they were "in the neighborhood"!

Despite how much effort you think it takes to put together a planned party or how stressed out you think you'd be if you tried, it's always so much simpler if you keep a few items on hand and always remember that if you want to entertain then almost anything is fixable.

You can get a decent bottle of red wine almost anywhere and they keep well in the bottom of the pantry. And since red wine is best served room temperature then this would be your best option for those drop-ins. Another option when it comes to drinks is to have a bottle of cocktail mix ready in the fridge, and as long as it hasn't been opened then they keep a long time, and it will be ready and chilled, so even if your liquor is not, the temperature will still be nice and cold thanks to the mix. One other thing to keep in mind is if you think there will be kids. Older ones like teens may like a sparkling grape juice, or soda, and younger ones will be just as content with a juice box. These things are easy to keep on hand and are usually in your pantry anyway if you have kids yourself.

As for hors d'oeuvres they can be as simple or as complicated as you'd like, keeping in mind that guests who will be staying just a minute may need something quicker than those who are staying a few hours. Keeping some cream cheese and some crushed red peppers on hand is a real quick way to have a cheese ball along with some crackers, just use wax paper to roll the cream cheese into a ball then coat in the crushed pepper and serve on a plate with crackers and you have an instant dish in less than five minutes. For something a little more extravagant you could keep a box of frozen stuffed mushrooms or spinach pastries in the freezer and pop them in when you fix the drinks.

Keeping a few festive paper plates on hand can be a real life saver for after guests leave since you probably weren't ready for the mess in the first place so this keeps clean up to a minimum and prep very quick and simple.

How to Have a Successful Pot-Luck Dinner

One of the most common types of dinner parties now is the pot-luck dinner. Most of the time these are very easy to plan and usually go off without a hitch, but there is always room for error with guest serviced parties. One person might show up with a meat dish to a vegan pot luck or someone won't show up with anything, or even worse, the person who is supposed to bring a main dish shows up with a bag of fast food cheese burgers. Now a lot of people will just go with the flow and try to fix it their selves, but as we all know this will just make a stressed host and a party that seemed useless.

Most of these problems won't mean much or bother too many people if it was for a children's play date or something casual, but to a more sophisticated party, they can be disasters.

One of the easiest ways to head off any problems is to assign each guest a dish, you can do this in any extent you'd like really, just understand that some guests may balk at the idea of you telling them what to bring to a pot-luck so your best approach is to either ask and hope that they respect your wishes or call it something other than a pot-luck. One way to assign the guests a dish is to assign them a specific course, such as two people bring appetizers and three bring the main course and then two bring dessert. Another way to do it is to give each person a list of dishes on the invites and let them pick which one they would like to bring.

The next thing to remember with a pot-luck is to always have enough plates and silverware available. Weather they are paper plates and plastic forks or the best china available, you will always want to have extra so that you don't chance running out. Also make sure that each guest brings serving utensils for their dish unless you have enough yourself.

It's a good idea to have wide selections of drinks from water and sodas to juice and if it's an adult party then cocktails or an open bar. Another option with this is to have a self serve bar set up away from the food table so that no ones in anyone's way. This can be stocked with glasses and mixers or a carafe of a selected cocktail perfect for the theme of the party.

Whatever you do to keep things stress free understand that the guests are partly hosting as well with pot-luck parties, so don't stress too much if things go a little wrong, just do what you can to keep problems to a minimum and enjoy your party.

Christmas Baking With Kids

Christmas is a magical time for people of all ages, especially so for children. And what better way to get them to enjoy the holidays than by encouraging them to bake with you. You don't need to limit your baking to just cookies. You can make cakes as well as edible gifts for family, friends, and teachers.

Even very young children can help decorate cookies or cut out cookie shapes from the dough. Try making some spiced ginger star cookies which look great in a tissue lined box. Or you can cut out the ginger star shapes and make a hole near the top before baking. Once baked, tie a ribbon through the hole and hang the star cookies on the Christmas tree. Consider a cookie swap with parents of other children. Have everyone bring a different cookie, with everyone sharing and taking home cookies in containers. This is a great way to have a variety of cookies on hand at home without having to bake so many different kinds.

Come up with creative ways to package cookies if you're giving them away as a gift. Cover an old shoebox with wrapping paper and line it with tissue paper. Once the cookies are inside you can decorate the lid with some holly or other decorations.

Christmas cakes allow for endless ideas of creativity. Buy a Christmas tree shaped cake tin and follow a simple recipe for a sponge cake. Then let the kids go wild decorating the tree with icing, marzipan, chocolate sprinkles, or any other topping that creates a masterpiece of a tree. Cakes make a great gift for your children's teachers. Decorate a cake and place it inside a Christmas cake tin. Or wrap it up with clear cellophane and tie it up with a box. You might want to consider including the recipe with the cake along with a thank you note.

If you have older children you might want to try making candy for the holidays. Almond Roca is easy to make and requires only a few ingredients such as butter, sugar, corn syrup, almonds, and chocolate. One thing to keep in mind is that you'll need to use a candy thermometer to ensure the mixture reaches the candy stage. Once done, Almond Roca makes an impressive gift for your children to give.

Have fun baking and creating with your children. No matter what the ages are, children will be able to feel proud of what they make during the holidays.

How to Turn Any Dish Into a Diet Friendly Dish

A lot of people are concerned about eating healthier. And, a lot of people are put on stricter diets because of either a personal reason or as a medical reason such as high blood pressure or cholesterol. This is usually easy to follow if you've been doing it a while, but at the same time can get very boring and make you start wishing for your old favorite that's now off limits.

The easiest way to handle the situation is to adapt your favorite foods so they can fit into your diet. Sometimes this is easier than others, but at the same time it's almost always doable. It just depends on your diet and what you're trying to convert to a diet friendly food.

If you're in a diet where you need lower calorie foods then using skim milk and cheeses and "fat free" alternatives can be something to consider. At the same time you need to make sure that what you substitute in your recipe is not changing good calories and nutrients for worthless ones. Make sure that if you use skim cheese that it's not imitation, because then you shave off some calories, but you also lose all of the vitamin and calcium. If your favorite desert is smothered in hot fudge and strawberry glaze, try switching it out for fresh sliced strawberries and some shaved dark chocolate.

Other things to consider are diets for a healthy heart or high cholesterol. These can be a bit more restrictive because you really can't find a substitute for salt or a big steak. The real things you can do for a diet like this though are to make sure you stick to portion size. A serving size of steak is just one deck of cards. That's right, the size of a single deck of cards, and most people eat steaks two or three times that size. Using a variety of seasonings other than salt can work out well also. Try using lime marinades instead of salt and you still get a little kick from the lime and it usually is perceived the same way as salt, so you won't be missing it for long.

In the end you will eventually be able to adapt any recipe to fit your specific diet, so don't fret about the limited things you can eat and instead, use your head to figure out other ways to make those dishes.

What Makes A Great Gourmet Coffee?

Tasting coffee is as much a ritual for some as wine tasting is for others. When a coffee connoisseur tries a new gourmet coffee they are just as focused as the wine aficionado. So what makes a coffee a great gourmet cup of coffee? Several things go into determining what good coffee is all about.

It all starts before you start to brew the coffee, with the way the coffee beans smell after you've ground them. The first impression of the flavour comes to you as you inhale the aroma. As the coffee is brewed, the fragrance will come out. And finally there's the taste as your tongue comes into contact with the coffee, releasing the coffee aroma within your mouth.

It's your tongue that is going to decide between an okay cup of coffee and one that is sensational. There are three basic components that most coffee experts focus on: acidity, balance, and body.

Within the coffee beans are naturally occurring acids. These acids blend with natural sugars which then produce a slightly sugary taste. It's this sweetness that gives the coffee its spiciness or tang.

A balanced gourmet coffee will have all its flavour characteristics in perfect alignment for that type of variety of coffee. The expertise comes by knowing what characteristics a certain coffee is supposed to have.

The body of the coffee is determined by the aftertaste in your mouth. Residues of the coffee will remain in your mouth and on your tongue. And this aftertaste will vary on the type of characteristics the coffee is supposed to have. To simplify this, the body of a coffee is all about its consistency, thickness, and texture.

There are many varieties of coffee to choose from that it can become confusing to find one or two that you really like. Some of the best gourmet coffees come from Costa Rica, having the perfect balance of smoothness and flavour without being at all bitter. Second in line are gourmet coffees from Columbia and Brazil, though they can be slightly bitter. Many African coffees will have a hard taste to them, while Asian coffees are often on the sour side.

The key to finding gourmet coffee you like is by focusing on the characteristics that taste best to you. For instance, if you like a sharp, dry coffee you might want to try a Costa Rican or Kenyan coffee. Coffees with a great aftertaste are typical of Kenya or Guatemala. No matter what, gourmet coffee all comes down to personal taste.

Make Any Drink More Festive

Most all holiday parties will have either an open bar or a self serve bar, whether it's cocktails or just juices and soda. It's always more fun for the holidays to make things more festive when it comes to drinks. Even if you just down play the decorations around the house, playing it up with the drinks is a fun and unexpected way to bring the cheer.

You can use any theme from Christmas to the 4th of July as a backdrop for your drink ideas. Just remember that some things will add flavors to the drink so make sure they are palatable to at least some of your guests. But at the same time, some don't add any flavor at all so they would work for anyone.

Around Christmas time it's always fun to add some festive color here and there. This is really a fun time to spice up the drinks with a neat garnish. You can use peppermint sticks or candy canes for swizzle sticks, or maybe try a chocolate straw for hot cocoa. You could also use colored sugars such as red or green for sweet cocktails that generally have a sugar coated rim to begin with. These ideas work well with cocktails as well as sodas and juices.

Other holidays such as 4th of July or Halloween are great for festive drinks as well. You could use food dye to color the ice cubes red and blue and have some normal or if you wanted the illusion of them being white, just use hot water when you fill the trays and every now and then stick a toothpick into the ice cubes as they harden. The hot water adds more bubbles than cold and the agitation from the toothpick does the same. The more bubbles you have the whiter the ice will be. If you want to put a little more work into it you could start out with star or pumpkin shaped ice cubes then put those into regular ice cube trays to create an enclosed ice cube.

Things to consider when creating your bar are to make sure that the garnishes that add flavor are not going to sour the drinks or create an odd aftertaste, so it's a good idea to try those out before the party. Just keep in mind that if you have a self serve bar to make the uses for the garnishes obvious, you would never guess how many people would think it's just for a table display or something else that is off the wall.

Ideal Cocktails For Brunch

What better way to enjoy a weekend morning than by serving brunch to your family and friends. And keep in mind that brunches are perfect for any occasion, such as Mother's Day and Christmas, or no occasion at all. The varieties of foods you can serve for brunch are endless, including egg dishes, decadent French toast, potato casserole, and berries with cream. But what type of beverages are you going to serve your guests?

Of course no brunch would be complete without a great tasting coffee. Why not spice that coffee up a bit by turning it into Irish coffee? Just add a little whiskey, fresh whipped cream, and chocolate shavings on top and you have the perfect way to start off the morning.

Don't stop there. There are many types of cocktails you can serve depending on what type of brunch theme you want to create, each with their own light and fruity taste. After all, cocktails aren't just for dinner anymore.

If you're serving a light brunch, a Melon Patch cocktail is the perfect choice. Made with vodka, triple sec, melon liqueur, and club soda, this drink is a good accompaniment for brunches that feature fruit. Another cocktail for a light brunch is the Greyhound, a simple and refreshing drink made with vodka and grapefruit juice.

The Bloody Mary is a great choice for heavier brunches. The tomato flavour combines well with egg, pasta, and pancakes dishes. And what about putting a slightly different twist on the original Mimosa? The Dream Mimosa combines apricot juice with champagne, mint, and ginger root.

For those brunches served on hot mornings, why not try a Tequila Sunrise, which goes well with pastries and fruits. This cocktail is easy to make with tequila, orange juice, and grenadine. Similarly, the Screwdriver is delicious in its simplicity by mixing vodka with orange juice, ideal on a sunny morning.

A Peach Bellini is perfect for formal brunches when you want to impress someone. The Bellini goes well with brunches where eggs, fish, and white meats are served. For more casual brunches where you still want to impress, the Kiwi Mango Mint Cocktail is a refreshing cocktail. Made with kiwi vodka, mango nectar, and fresh mint leaves, this drink will make your guests want to linger all day.

No matter what types of cocktails you serve at your brunch, your main goal should be to match the drink with the food. With so many great cocktails to choose from the possibilities are endless.

Making a Kid Friendly Dinner Party

Dinner parties are common all year long, whether it's for a birthday or a congrats party, or any other reason even if you don't have one. They are even more common when the holiday season hits. From thanksgiving, Christmas, or Hanukkah, and all the way through New Year's, holiday parties seem to multiply out of thin air. One thing most will have in common is the adult theme, meaning usually no kids are allowed or at the very least they are advised against bringing them, mainly because even the older ones that are 12 and 13 will be bored and may cause interruptions.

There are many different reasons to throw a kid friendly dinner party, the first being that you may have kids yourself, and at the same time if your guests have children they may not be able to get a babysitter or feel like leaving them behind. If something happens and they need a last minute babysitter it can be hard to find one, not to mention that during the holidays finding a sitter may be hard.

The first thing to consider when making your party kid friendly is the atmosphere. Is the party a real formal sit down three course dinner? If so then try to have a separate room where the kids can have plenty of room to play but that's also okay for them to have dinner in. Make sure there are plenty of toys for all the ages involved, so obviously if they are all under five then a game system shouldn't be needed, but at the same time if they are all over five then baby toys will not be needed.

When it comes to the menu, I doubt that the kids will want lamb chops with garlic sautéed mushrooms, so try to plan accordingly, and if you don't want to cook an extra dish then have the parents pitch in for pizza. Most local delivery places are fairly well priced so you each toss in about two through five dollars and you should have enough depending on how many kids there are.

Keep in mind that while kids over eight or nine will be fairly well off without constant supervision, others under that age may need a babysitter. This is where one of the older kids comes into play. If you or one of the guests has a teen that is good at babysitting, try talking to them a few days before and see if they will “baby-sit” in the kid’s room while the party is in effect. Most teens would jump at the chance to make a quick fifty or so, depending on how many parents have the younger children you could all agree on a total to pay the sitter then divide it up by the number of smaller kids and each parent pays their share.

Quick and Simple Main Dishes Using Chicken

When most people complete their grocery shopping, they keep a list of items handy to purchase. One of the most commonly purchased protein items is chicken; chicken breasts, chicken thighs and sometimes whole chickens. Without cooking chicken in a variety of ways, it can become somewhat mundane over time. Consider the cooking ideas listed below to spice up your usage of the traditional staple, chicken.

Roast Chicken

The easiest thing to do with a whole chicken is to roast it. Some people shy away from roasting chicken as they perceive the process to be too challenging. But, with some simple tips, you can begin to roast a beautiful chicken for dinner.

Begin by placing your chicken into a roasting pan. Toss in about two cups of chopped vegetables, choosing whichever vegetables are your favorites. Some vegetable ideas include carrots, potatoes, squash, parsnips or celery. Spice to taste and set your oven to roast. You have just created a simple meal that is both filling and healthy.

Chicken Pieces

Chicken breasts are great for a variety of recipes. One of the best things to do with chicken breasts is to dice them up when they are still half frozen. This way you have a nice easy time cutting them up into bite size pieces, and then you can just toss them into a pan with some garlic and a little oil to sauté. Then, boil some noodles until al dente. Toss the chicken and the pasta together with a jar of Alfredo sauce, or any tomato based sauce and serve. This chicken recipe is as easy as spaghetti.

Barbeque Chicken Legs

When it comes to chicken legs, one of the easiest recipe ideas is to line a baking pan with foil for easy clean up. Lay the chicken thighs down in rows and then pour a bit of barbeque sauce over them. Choose whichever barbeque flavoring you prefer. This recipe is a really easy meal to create in any volume and it goes great with just about any side dish that you can imagine. For example, you could add potato salad, Mac n’ cheese or fruit salad to your chicken thighs to complete your meal.

Some of these are even as simple to do with other cutlets of chicken such as thighs or wings as well, but keep in mind that they would require more effort to have them come out right.

The Art Of A South Western Burrito

Southwest cooking has often been described as earthy and full of spirit, with a character that is complex yet achieved with only a few simple ingredients. Some of the more common ingredients that are considered to be south western include beans, corn, tomatoes, chillis, avocados, and squash. You can combine all of these ingredients together in a satisfying and great tasting meal that features the tortilla.

The simple concept of filling a tortilla with savoury ingredients and rolling it up is native to

Sonora, found in the north west of Mexico. Experiment with chicken, beef, and beans as fillings. Tortillas are a tasty on their own and make a great wrap. In Mexico the tortilla is usually used much like an eating utensil. You'll find tortillas easily enough in your local grocery store and find they come in different varieties for all palates such as whole grain, corn, or ones made without hydrogenated oils.

You'll want to serve salsa with your burrito to give it that added zing. In past years, salsa has replaced ketchup as the favourite condiment. There are countless commercial salsas available at the grocery store. However, nothing can compare to making your own fresh salsa in your own kitchen. Try mingling the flavours together in a unique salsa by combining avocado, jicama, celery, red peppers, lime juice, and garlic. This salsa makes a great accompaniment to any burrito.

Along with the salsa, serve a south western potato salad alongside the burrito. Use a waxy variety of potato that has a thin skin and won't fall apart once cooked. Slice up the potatoes and combine in a bowl with cooked fresh corn cut off the cob, onions, garlic, a bit of mayonnaise, lime juice, and cilantro.

South western cuisine doesn't have to be hot and spicy. You can use mild chillis to add a distinctive flavour to any dish without overpowering it with too much heat. Try roasting the chilli's to intensify the flavour even further. Or use chilli's found in the grocery store, such as whole canned green chilli's or whole fire roasted red and green chillies.

At the end of the meal serve a light dessert that won't take away from the warm sensation your stomach will be experiencing after the burrito, salsa, and potato salad. Fruit sprinkled with a bit of pineapple juice and sugar makes a nice ending.

Enjoy the many tastes of south western cooking by starting with the simplicity and great taste of the burrito.

Beef Bourguignon: the Old Favorite That is Making a Comeback!

There are few people that could not help but love the old French favorite of beef bourguignon. Originally, it was exceptionally popular in the sixties and seventies. Unfortunately, the recipe for this perfect dish was placed on the top shelves, out of reach for many decades, but now it is making a great big come back. So, your friends can just refrain from turning their noses up, if you choose to present this as your entrée, during a dinner party. It is official; beef bourguignon is now back in fashion.

So, let's get cracking on this perfect dish!

First of all, you should dice 2lb or 900g of braising beef into large chunks. Heat a small amount of olive oil in a frying pan and then add the beef, cooking for around 5 minutes or until the meat has been browned enough. Place the meat into the main pan that you are going to be cooking with.

Dice a medium onion and gently brown these in the oil. Add to the main pan and add 1 tablespoon of flour, which you should introduce slowly to the mixture to absorb all of the juices. Gradually pour in around 425ml or just short of a pint of red wine and ensure that you stir the mixture continually, when doing so. For seasoning, add 2 cloves of chopped garlic, some thyme, a bay leaf and, of course, some salt and cracked black pepper. You should then cook for around two hours on a low simmering heat, either on your hob, or in a casserole dish.

Next, take 12oz or 350g of peeled shallots and dice around 8oz or 225g of bacon into strips. Brown these in olive oil until they reach a light colour. Finally, you should chop 4oz or 110g of dark-gilled mushroom. Add all of these ingredients to your main pan and cook for a further one hour.

Once your beef bourguignon is ready, it is ideal to serve this with charlotte potatoes or small new potatoes with vine roasted cherry tomatoes on the side.

It is not as complicated to make beef bourguignon as you may have thought. Moreover, it is a really tasty dish that will be enjoyed by most people. So as not to have too much of an overdose of red wine, beef bourguignon would be very well served by a nicely chilled bottle of rose wine.

Thai Cuisine: A Fusion of Exciting Regional Flavors.

Thai cuisine really does incorporate the very best of the foods that are available on their own doorstep, plus the best flavors from neighboring countries. There are a large number of vegetables available to the Thai cook and many of these grow locally and would be freely available. Thai cuisine cleverly uses meats that are accessible at certain times of the year and the traditional dishes are adapted accordingly. Fish would be one of the most popular additions to meals as this would tend to be more widely available at any time of the year.

When people consider Thai cuisine, their minds often begin to think about the addition of certain herbs and spices, which are synonymous with this type of food. Some of the most popular examples include lime juice, lemon grass, ginger, coconut milk and fresh coriander.

The Thai people can thank India for the introduction of coconut milk into many of their dishes, especially desserts, and China for the way a number of dishes are now fried. Fried rice noodles being a very good example.

The Thais really do take cooking very seriously. They always try to ensure that there is a perfect mix of flavor, within any of the dishes that are prepared. Often, this can lead to a dish having a combined sweet and sour mixture of tastes. Many Thai soups tend to follow this trend.

Some popular examples of Thai soups are Tom Yam Kung, which is a spicy soup with lime juice, lemon grass, mushrooms and shrimps. Tom Khaa gai, which is a soup with galangal root, chicken feet and coconut milk. Kaeng Som is a soup that may be considered to be the Thai national dish, as it is served in slightly varying adaptations across the country.

Shrimps often appear in Thai main dishes and will regularly be mixed in with other meats, such as chicken and beef. Khao phat includes fried rice and shrimps with either beef, pork or chicken.

Other popular entrées include khao man gai which is sliced boiled chicken over marinated rice. Khao no phet is roast duck over rice and laot naa is rice noodles, meat and vegetables in a thick gravy sauce.

For fans of curried dishes, Thailand has not escaped the regional influences from India and China and they have a number of their own unique choices. Gaengmus sa man is a rich and spicy curry with beef or chicken. Gaeng khiaw waan is a curry that is more in keeping with what you would expect from Thai cuisine. It is a sweet green curry with coconut milk, shrimps and either chicken or beef.

Thailand has quite cleverly taken the best regional ingredients that are available to them and adapted them to become a unique style of food which they can be and are extremely proud of. As Thai cuisine is becoming increasingly popular, the sampling of one or two of their traditional dishes. We will soon reveal the reason why.

Why Not Sample the Delights of Viennese Cuisine?

It would be very fair to state that Viennese cuisine does not get the attention of food critics as much as it should. Austrian food, generally, is extremely wholesome and always includes a combination of top ingredients to create some truly scrumptious dishes. Most people would probably have already heard of apple strudel and possibly even wiener schnitzel, but they would not tend to be that familiar with Viennese cuisine as a whole. Everything is mentioned about Italian and French cuisine, but poor Austria seems to take a bit of a back seat. Is this fair, when they have such gorgeously unique food to offer?

Viennese cuisine has seen most of its influence come from the old Austro-Hungarian Empire. Modern day Hungarian and Austrian dishes are not too dissimilar, with the well known goulash hotpots featuring as one of each country's national dishes. Influences have also come from other neighboring countries, and it is believed that wiener schnitzel itself, may have originated from Milan in Italy, during the 15th or 16th centuries.

As Austria can have a notoriously cold alpine climate, it is common for a main meal to start off with a steaming bowl of hot soup. A very popular soup in Austria will seem, at first glance, to be an ordinary hearty chicken noodle soup. However, closer inspection of the noodles would reveal that they are actually strips of pancakes. Sounds strange, but this really does work.

Wiener schnitzel does remain as a popular dish in Austria, although it would tend to be made of either pork or turkey now, rather than the more traditional veal. The dish is flattened and seasoned meat, wrapped in breadcrumbs and is ideal when served with a squirt of fresh lemon juice.

Austrian Gulasch is very similar to the paprika seasoned Hungarian goulash and other popular savory dishes include tafelspitz, which is boiled beef served with apple and horseradish sauces. For the more adventurous, and you would need to be exceptionally brave for this one, you may like to sample beuschel, which is a ragout made of calf lungs and heart.

Viennese cuisine is probably best known internationally for their excellent desserts. Apple strudel is a popular choice in many countries, as the apple, cinnamon and raisins, wrapped in thin pastry is such a simple, but delicious idea for a sweet. Sachertorte is equally popular in Austria and is an apricot filled chocolate cake that is far more complicated to make than the strudel. People generally tend to enjoy this in cafés or purchase it from a shop now, as they have less time in their more hectic lives. This chocolate cake is often served with whipped cream and this is perfect to accompany the richness of the cake.

So, here's to good old fashioned Austrian cuisine. Let us not keep it quite so understated in the future!

Mexican Cuisine: A Multi Colored Feast.

When people think of Mexican food, tortillas, nachos and tomato based sauces immediately spring to mind. However, much like the country itself, the traditional foods offer a carnival like fusion of colors and tastes, thanks to the inclusion of many strong and spicy traditional ingredients.

Like so many dishes, the ingredients used vary from region to region. The north of Mexico tends to favor meat based menus, to include beef, goat, even ostrich! The central region is more varied and influenced by the surrounding areas. Chicken proves to be a popular choice, along with the more specialized carnitas, made from braised pork, and menudo, a spicy tripe soup.

The south east region, particularly the coast of the Yucatan peninsula, has a more Caribbean influence. Often sweeter dishes invariably containing seafood, spicy chicken, pineapple or chocolate, the most necessary ingredient in mole sauce. Ceviche, a raw fish marinated in lime, or huachinango, red snapper are popular fish choices here. Pollo pibil is a real Yucatan specialty. This consists of chicken marinated in orange with spices, barbecued and traditionally served in locally sourced banana leaves.

The basis of so many of the traditional menus will inevitably include tomatoes, chilies, garlic and onion. Put these ingredients together with your choice of meat, fish, cheese, beans or vegetables. These may be used to fill a tortilla, a thin flat bread made traditionally from maize or alternatively wheat flour. Enchiladas consist of baked, folded tortilla, coated in tomato and chili sauce, stuffed with meat or vegetables. Chiles renellos are large chilies stuffed with spicy meat and cheese, great served with rice and fresh salad.

Other options are tacos, a crispy fried tortilla which folds around your choice of filling, making them a versatile snack to eat from your hand, when on the move. These can then be accompanied by jalapenos or guacamole and topped with melted cheese, washed down with a Mexican beer, such as Corona or Sol, or perhaps a tequila based margarita.

No traditional Mexican meal would be complete without a delicious desert. The most popular choices are tres leches, a moist cake, or platanos machos, fried spicy bananas covered with sour cream. Desert enchiladas, a rich sweet version of the traditional enchilada where the meat filling is replaced by fresh fruit, baked and covered in chocolate laced with cinnamon.

In terms of diversity in using local ingredients, Mexican food must be applauded for its imagination in both creating and displaying its dishes, which reflect the culture of this remarkable country.

Christmas Lunch: The Traditionally British Way.

The one thing that most Christian societies worldwide really take seriously is the traditional Christmas meal, which is avidly looked forward to each year. This is the one excuse for all of the family to get together and enjoy each other's company and some good celebratory food and drink. The UK is no exception to this and when it comes to the Christmas lunch, everything will be done to ensure that the prepared meal will have been worth the year long wait.

Because so much emphasis is placed on the main course and dessert, it is less common for the British to partake in a starter or first course. Those that do, would probably be inclined to restrict this to a light bowl of soup with a small amount of bread.

The British tend to pull out all of the stops for the main course. Often the turkey is cleaned, stuffed and prepared on Christmas Eve. The designated cook will wake up early on Christmas Morning to begin roasting the turkey in the oven. The turkey usually has rashers of streaky bacon lined along the top of the bird, to provide some extra basting fat during the cooking process.

The British absolutely love their roast potatoes and quite often, the way that these have been cooked, will be the deciding judgment on whether the cook has done a good job with the meal generally. There is a lot of hype about using goose fat to create the best 'roasties', but often butter will do just as well. The potatoes should be part-boiled, drained, tossed and then added to the hot melted butter to roast slowly with the bird. More so in the English Midlands, mashed potatoes may also be served alongside the roast potatoes, but never instead of.

The most traditional vegetable to serve with the British Christmas lunch is definitely Brussels Sprouts. Even if some people may not be particularly keen on them, they will still tend to find a small pile gracing their plate. Carrots mashed with broccoli florets, cauliflower, garden peas and cabbage are all other popular vegetable choices.

The main meal would not be complete without all of the traditional trimmings that are expected alongside. A breadcrumbs and herb stuffing mix must be included. In recent years, most households would now opt not to actually stuff the bird with this mix and tend to prepare it separately instead. Small chipolata sausages are also very popular and these are often wrapped in streaky bacon. The gravy has to be made using all of the vegetable and meat juices, to maximize the gorgeous flavour when it is smothered over such a delicious roast.

When people have managed to find enough space, which is usually during the Queen's Speech at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, the traditional Christmas pudding is served. This is a very rich and fruity pudding, often laced with your favorite alcoholic liquor. Brandy sauce, custard or cream accompany this pudding usually, but by far the best way to round it off, is with a large dollop of thick Westcountry clotted cream.

America, Ireland and other countries all have a similar way of preparing their Christmas meals. But for that perfect traditional roast turkey Christmas meal, this is the way that things are done in Britain.

Greek Cuisine : Tastes From the Tavernas

When thinking of Greek food, Moussaka must be the first dish that would spring to most people's mind, understandable as it is officially the national dish. This is a layered casserole type dish, made from ground lean beef mixed with beaten eggs, milk onion cheese and seasoning, traditionally topped with sliced eggplant, though this may be substituted by potato.

Another highly enjoyable dish is Kleftiko, which in Greek translates as stolen meat. This stems from the legend where the dish is made from a lamb stolen from an unsuspecting shepherd's flock. To avoid detection, the meat would then be cooked in a hole in the ground, sealed with mud, to avoid the thief being given away by steam. In modern day cooking methods the hole in the ground is fortunately substituted with paper packaging, in which a shoulder cut of lamb is added to garlic, lemon juice and the inevitable olive oil.

Souvlaki is a much lighter meal, consisting of a choice of meat, for example chicken, lamb or even swordfish or shrimp, marinated with oil, lemon and oregano. This is then cooked on a skewer, the literal translation, and served with rice and fresh vegetables or salad.

The fried meatball dish Keftedes is another popular choice, along with Stifado, which is a game stew cooked in red wine sauce with onion and cinnamon. Delicious served with Psomi, a traditional Greek bread.

No traditional meal is complete without the accompaniment of appetizers, sides, dessert and of course drink. Meze is the collective name for a selection of small appetizers, such as calamari, fried squid, or alternatively Greek salad or tiganita, which is fried vegetables such as courgettes, mushrooms, egg plant or peppers, often served with a yoghurt dip.

For dessert, baklava is readily available. These are light pastry layers filled with nuts and syrup, or karidopita, walnut cake. Children will enjoy traditional Greek cookies, koulouraki, made from butter or olive oil.

The most readily identifiable Greek cheese would be feta, a white cheese made from a blend of goat and sheep's milk. Other popular cheeses, often not readily available outside Greece, are kasseri and graviera.

All good meals should be washed down by a traditional drink, such as retsina white wine, an unfiltered frappe coffee. For those really looking to let their hair down, there is of course the eighty per cent proof Ouzo, best drunk with caution, or of course an ordinary beer for the less adventurous!

Experience Sunny Bajan Delicacies

The island nation of Barbados seems to have been successful in capturing the best examples of neighboring cuisine styles, along with keeping hold of the traditional influences from Africa and England, in the past. When you put these factors together, you come up with the Bajan style of cuisine, which should be celebrated for being a very unique example of food from the Caribbean.

Fish is extremely important, within the Bajan's diet, as it is so readily available throughout the Caribbean. Bajan cooking does also include meats such as pork and chicken though.

It is fair to state that all Caribbean islands have a particular choice of seasoning that they like to put in with their food. For example, Jamaica is World famous for its 'jerk' seasoning. Barbados is no exception and whilst the jerk style of seasoning can be found on the island, Bajan food tends to have a more unique style of its own. Thyme, marjoram, green onions and parsley are some of the herbal ingredients, which are favored on the island.

The national dish of Barbados is widely accepted to be flying fish with cou cou. This is quite a simple recipe which makes good use of a species of fish that are abundant throughout the local warm waters. The dish consists of fried flying fish and the cou cou is a combination of cornmeal, okra, salt, peppers and seasoning, which are all made into a mash.

Other popular Bajan dishes include 'pie and fish' which is a type of macaroni cheese pie, again served with the ever popular flying fish. 'Rice and peas' is Bajan black eyed peas simply served with rice and Bajan candied sweet potatoes are made with plenty of locally grown brown sugar, which can be fried or even mashed.

For something sweet, fried plantains are very popular. These are similar to sweet bananas and are deep fried and coated with cinnamon. 'Conkies' are a mixture of cornmeal, coconut, pumpkin, sweet potatoes and corn flour, which are all served in a banana leaf. These are particularly popular in November, when the Bajans celebrate their independence.

There would appear to be a number of myths about the food that you will find on Barbados. A lot of people automatically presume that it will be too hot and spicy, like some other Caribbean national dishes. Whilst hot food would be available to you, this does not provide a good example of overall Bajan food and you would tend to find that this is quite far from the truth.

A Steaming Hot Bowl of Irish Stew: the Real Winter Warmer!

There is nothing better, during those long and cold winter nights, than to settle yourself down to a hearty bowl of steaming Irish stew. This traditional and rustic Irish favorite, really will take the chill out of your bones and make you feel as though you will have a good source of central heating for any cold night that may lie ahead. This exceptionally tasty meal is easy to make and will be a hit with all members of your family.

To get started, chop 4 medium potatoes into four pieces each. Then roughly chop 4 medium carrots and 2 medium onions. It is advisable to cut the chunks quite large, as this adds to the dish's rusticity.

Next, dice about 1lb (454g) of lamb and fry in a pan for about five minutes to seal in the juices and lightly brown the meat. Add the meat to a casserole dish and add the chopped vegetables, but not the potatoes at this stage. Pour over about 450ml of lamb stock, which can be very simply made by adding two lamb stock cubes to this amount of water. Alternatively, if you have been using the meat from a bone, you can use the bones to create a really tasty stock.

Place the potatoes on top of all the other ingredients to ensure that they are cooked through steaming.

For the seasoning, you should then add 2 tablespoons of freshly chopped parsley, some fresh thyme, one tablespoon of pearl barley, which is essential for the Irish stew theme, 2 shakes of Worcestershire sauce and some salt and pepper.

Place in the oven and cook for about 1¾ hours at around 160 degrees Celsius. About half way through this cooking time, you should prepare a roux, which will help to thicken the gravy in the stew and give it a much more hearty consistency. Take 50g butter and 50g flour, mix them in together and cook in a saucepan. Add some of the stock, from the half cooked stew, and stir this in with the roux, cooking it in the saucepan. Be careful not to allow the roux to get stuck to the bottom of the pan. Then, simply add this back into the casserole dish for a thicker and more appetizing Irish stew.

Once the stew has cooked for the correct amount of time, all you have to do is to serve it on to warmed plates and then really tuck in and enjoy it.

Warming the Cockles With Spicy Mulled Wine.

Nothing takes off the chill of a cold winter's evening more than the delightfully spicy aroma of mulled wine cooking on the stove. This popular winter warmer is present in many European cultures, but they all tend to follow the same sort of ingredients and cooking methods. Mulled wine has been around for centuries and is still just as popular today, especially around Christmas time, as it has ever been. If you follow these simple directions, you too can enjoy the very civil sociability of sharing steaming hot glasses of spicy mulled wine with your friends and family.

For a large batch, which will be more than enough to share around, you should take two bottles of red wine. Apparently, country wines tend to be better than commercially available wines. For example, wines that have hints of bilberry, damson, blackberries and black plums make excellent choices.

Next, you need to take four small oranges and insert four cloves into three of them. With the fourth orange, grate the peel and keep it to one side. Squeeze the juice and add this to a cup. Grate the peel from a lemon and keep to one side, squeeze the juice and add this to the cup of orange juice.

Add the contents of the cup, along with the three other oranges, to a pan. Add two, three inch long cinnamon sticks to the pan. Also add some fennel and aniseed for a more spicy tasting wine.

Pour the two bottles of red wine into the pan and heat gently to around 140 degrees Fahrenheit or 60 degrees Celsius. It is essential that you do not allow the contents of the pan to boil, as this will cook off the alcoholic content of the mulled wine.

Finally, you should add the fruit peels, which you should have placed to one side earlier. If the wine is too bitter for you, at this point either add sugar or some honey, according to your own preference. Make sure you keep stirring it.

You are now ready to serve it to your friends and family. It is often a good idea to warm some glasses before hand, so that the heat of the mulled wine remains for longer. But this is up to you.

Spicy mulled wine is usually a hit with most people and is especially popular at Christmas parties. It makes a perfect alternative to punch and fills the air with such a delightfully cheerful aroma. As it is so easy to make, why not try making your own batch?

Sensational Summer Pudding!

A lot of people take one look at summer pudding and automatically presume that this dessert is going to be quite complicated to make. This could not be further from the truth. Summer pudding is an easy treat to make and will guarantee a splendidly refreshing ending to any summer meal. What is more, it will make the most of the summer berries, when they have come in to season.

In order to create your own summer pudding, take a 1½ pint pudding basin bowl and butter the insides all around. Place 8oz or 225g of redcurrants, 1 lb or 450g of raspberries and 4oz or 110g of blackcurrants into a saucepan with 5oz or 150g of caster sugar. Heat the ingredients just long enough for the sugar to have been dissolved and for the fruit to start exuding some of its juices.

Line the pudding bowl with pieces of good quality sliced white bread. You should ensure that the whole bowl has been lined and that there are no holes to be found. Next, set about half a cup of the berry mixture to one side and pour the remainder into the pudding bowl. Take some more white bread and place over the top of the mixture. Again, ensure that there are absolutely no holes.

Place the pudding into the refrigerator for the night, so that it will set. When you are ready to serve the pudding, simply remove it from the pudding basin, on to a large enough plate and pour over the remaining berry juices that you are kept to one side the day before. This way, if there are any last remaining white bread areas, the mixture will cover them to give them an all over classical red color.

It is most ideal to serve summer pudding with lashings of thick cream. If you can get hold of some Cornish clotted cream, so much the better, as this will take away the sharpness of the pudding and provide an excellent accompaniment.

Summer pudding is best enjoyed *al fresco* and when shared with friends or family. A nice and fruity rose wine will round the pudding off perfectly.

So, as you can see, summer pudding is far from being as complicated as you may have once thought. Try making it yourself, the next time you are able to lay your hands on these summer berries and let other people think that you have spent hours creating a complex master piece for dessert.

Unique Dinner Party Themes

When most people throw dinner parties, they tend to focus on one main theme, usually around a holiday or special event. While those are the most common concepts in the way of themes for dinner parties, they are not the only ones available. If you want your party to be a bit more memorable than others, a unique theme is a great option.

Most people are more focused on the theme of the party and the festivities than on the menu. But, if you are looking for a common, basic theme to begin building around for your menu, steak or chicken are great options. At the same time don't forget that you can involve the menu in your theme of your party and in fact, it is often fun to do so.

If you are throwing your party in July, you could do a Christmas in July theme. This could involve having your fourth of July party be a great backdrop for a secret Santa at the end of the night. With a simple twist of colors, from red, white, blue and green, your party could serve for both holiday themes.

Some ideas to include in your party may be some great candy cane cocktails or sugar cookie ice cream sandwiches. At the same time you could reverse the aspects of this party of Christmas in July and use all of the summer decorations. For example, you could have as a backdrop traditional summer icons while dressing in a sunny dress. Keep the cocktails simple such as beer and tea and you've got summer twice this year. Don't forget the bar-b-q!

A black tie event is not something everyone gets to attend within their lifetime. So if this seems a bit out of the ordinary for your crowd, then this is the perfect theme party for you to throw. Everyone can wear their best dresses and suits and walk down the red carpet to your door. If you want to spring for a "paparazzi" to flash a few shots as the guests arrive, it's sure to bring a smile to those arriving.

Keep in mind that the menu could be heavily influenced here as well. Keeping things simple is out of the question here so play it up with all the glitz you can handle. Also keep in mind that people will be wearing their best clothing so I'd stick to white wine or champagne. Also keep a few emergency clean up kits hidden just in case.

Tips For Christmas Cooking

Christmas is one of the biggest holidays of the year, a holiday where food becomes extremely important in homes around the world. It can also be the time of year when many people stress over what to serve and how to prepare everything they want to serve! Following are some tips that can help you stay sane during the holiday season.

Christmas wouldn't be complete without all that homemade Christmas baking. Many people have traditional family baking goodies that they make every year. However, it can be overwhelming if you decide to do all of your baking in one day. Try to plan your baking time across more than one day. Choose recipes that aren't too complicated or you'll soon grow frustrated as you try to get them all done before the holidays. Get your kids involved if you can, but give them tasks they can perform that match their skill level. A great tip when it comes to holiday baking is get all of your shopping done at least a day or two before you plan to bake. This way you'll have everything on hand before you start.

Perhaps the most important meal during the holidays is Christmas Day dinner. There are so many options when it comes to Christmas dinner, whether you stick with the traditional turkey or branch out and try something new, such as cooking an ethnic dish from your heritage. If you're cooking for a large crowd don't feel shy about asking some of your guests to bring over some of the side dishes or dessert. If you try to do it all you'll surely find yourself far too stressed out to enjoy the day. A great idea is to have some people prepare one of their own family traditions to share at the table.

It seems like every day during the holidays is filled with cooking and food. All leading up to the finale of the season, New Year's Eve. Consider keeping things simple this year so you can sit back and enjoy the ending to the year. If you're having guests over you can still focus on festivity without making things complicated for yourself. Prepare easy appetizers such as homemade dip, chicken skewers, mini quiches, and bacon wrapped scallops. Another great food choice for New Year's Eve is a fondue. Although a bit more complicated than appetizers, you can still keep it simple by serving a cheese fondue followed by a chocolate one.

No matter what you decide to bake, cook, and serve this holiday season, make sure you take the time to sit back and enjoy what you've prepared!

Vegan Alternative Main Dishes

A lot of people in today's world have chosen an alternative eating style. Whether it's vegetarian or vegan, they are both a little hard to find meals to prepare at home. Generally speaking, vegetarian is easier to find and prepare options that a vegan lifestyle.

If you're a vegetarian, you have the option to consumer dairy and eggs, which are both around in large quantities. But if you are a vegan, your diet is completely free of all animal products; no dairy or eggs. This is where it gets a bit tricky for someone not used to prepare food for consumption as a vegan. For example, if you prepare cookies, you may think that they are harmless. But, they typically contain butter or eggs.

Green Beans

The main thing to start with when making a vegan alternative is to start out with the right ingredients. This could be just about anything, but for now we will talk about green beans. I know that they are usually a side dish, but for this purpose they can be a main dish. You can spice them up with a little bit of almond butter and a vegan pastry. You can also make little bundles of pastry filled with green beans, some herbs and a little pat of almond butter and you've got a dish called money bags.

Tofu

Something else to keep in mind when preparing vegan dishes is tofu. This is usually easy to come by, with most grocers carrying the item in their produce section. There are several

different types of tofu, from silken to firm. And, the textures range from very soft and creamy to firm like a block of hard cheese.

They also make tofu in plain and other flavors, but you don't need to worry if you can only find plain. Tofu picks up flavors and holds on very well, usually in only a few minutes and you can cook using about any technique possible. The most important thing to keep in consideration is the texture of tofu. Make sure that its texture agrees with the dish that you are preparing.

Tofu spaghetti is a great dish to make that's very easy. As a matter of fact, you can take just about any dish and substitute the meat with tofu. To prepare tofu spaghetti, start out by chopping the firm tofu into the sizes you want. Then, sauté the tofu pieces with a little bit of tomato sauce and a chopped bell pepper. After a few minutes when the tofu is stained red, you can add the rest of the sauce and continue to simmer until fully warmed.

How To Keep a Well Stocked Bar

Most everyone knows that for any big party you will want a well stocked bar so that you can entertain your guests. Whether it's as simple as a large variety of wines, or as complex as a mixer for every drink you can think of, you will want to make sure you have a decent supply as well as the right equipment.

When it comes to cocktails, it's always best to keep a very basic list on hand since most cocktails are made of just basic liquor and a mixer. Bourbon, rum, scotch, whiskey, and vodka are usually your best options when it comes to having a nice list, but at the same time a lot of drinks have undertones of some of the less versatile drinks such as amaretto, grand mariner, triple sec, vermouth and even Irish crème liqueur. Sometimes you will even run into drink where these undertones are the base instead.

The next important thing when it comes to the actual drinks is to have a good stock of mixers. These are almost always cheaper than the liquor itself and have a large variety to choose from. With flavors such as appltini and strawberry margarita, it's the best thing to have in order to round out a shallow liquor stock.

Another thing to keep in mind is to make sure that you have plenty of the right garnishes for the drinks you plan on serving. Some garnishes are almost a required staple, such as celery and olives, as well as mint and cocktail onions.

Surprisingly a large amount of drinks can be made either on the rocks or blended, which means that a blender will be a wise choice to have on hand as well as an easy to use bottle opener and a variety of cocktail glasses. Other equipment to keep on hand would be coasters, which can be as simple as cocktail napkins, or as complex as engraved silver disks. Also a sink and bar towel are good to have close by so you can clean up spills and glasses when needed.

If you don't want or can't afford to have a large variety of drinks on hand then you can also keep a menu type board posted above the bar so that everyone knows what type of drinks you have

the ability to make. Another thing to consider is to make it a drink themed bar. You could use anything from a wine bar to a martini bar, which would significantly cut down your supply list and you could just stock up on a good list of mixers for the different flavors.