

Diane's Blog
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The Twelve Planning Tips of Christmas

The first verse of "The Twelve Days of Christmas" runs: *On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me – A partridge in a pear tree.*

If my true love gave me a partridge in a pear tree on Christmas Day, all I would be thinking is, "Sweet, but, that's another mouth to feed and another pet to clean up after," or better yet, "What do I stuff it with?" Now, if my true love gave me a cook, a baker, and a clean-up crew – that would be a gift. And, speaking of gifts, it wouldn't be so bad to rewrite the last verse and forego the twelve drummers drumming for twelve days of sunning. (After all, doesn't one need peace and quiet after the house guests leave?) Pick a beautiful, warm sunny spot, with a wait staff delivering cooling margaritas – it would all be bliss to me.

But what if Santa isn't that generous or attentive? Or your true love thinks a joint gift of a riding mower is the best present of all? Or your in-laws think that, since you have the largest house and love to cook, it makes sense for all of the family to gather with you and yours?

Gather a pen and pad of paper, because your gift from me is "The Twelve Planning Tips of Christmas." Consider this a self-help guide for the Christmas-challenged. I have thought through all that I do when planning for the holidays and have assembled a list of tips that will bring joy, organization, and a can-do spirit to the hassles and triumphs of entertaining for the holidays.

Style of Entertaining

The Christmas season is a time to celebrate and there are many ways to entertain. Throw a party that fits your lifestyle, budget, energy level, and timeframe. Ask yourself lots of questions: Do you like to entertain formally or informally, with lots of guests or just a few? Do you realistically have the time to organize an open house, or would a casual buffet dinner be less stressful? How many times over the holidays do you want to entertain? Do you have the kitchen space and living space to accommodate a few guests or a large group? Make it comfortable, manageable, and enjoyable for everyone – especially you, the host.

Setting the Scene

Of course entertaining is about food and drink, but it is also about setting a mood, especially at Christmastime. Decorating is a personal expression of your style and traditions. Your home doesn't need to look like a holiday scene from a glossy magazine; after all, those photographs are created by a team of stylists. However, simple holiday elements can make an event more memorable. Add pretty votives to the table, select Christmas music to play in the background, place a wreath on the door, arrange a red amaryllis on the counter in the kitchen, add one in the guest bathroom – decorating doesn't need to be elaborate – just enough to create a warm, inviting ambiance.

Making a List – Checking it Twice

I don't know what I would do without a series of lists for holiday entertaining – any entertaining, for that matter. Plan the guest list and send out invitations at least three, but

preferably four weeks in advance. This is a busy time of year and guests often receive multiple invitations. Plan the menu and make lists based on the menu. You'll need an organized grocery list—divide it according to the different stores you will have to shop at—the butcher shop, bakery, wine shop, flower shop, and supermarket. Have a separate sheet of paper for the errands you will tackle each day. Keep a pen handy to cross off the items you have purchased. Great satisfaction is gained from an errand list completed and all checked off. Separate from an errand list, I write a timeline for the holiday menu, this work plan keeps me from being harried and frazzled.

Planning Ahead—Food

If your holiday entertaining requires a turkey, goose, ham, standing rib roast, beef tenderloin, leg of lamb, or crown roast of pork, you'll make your butcher happy and yourself less crazed if you place your order one to two weeks ahead of time. You're more likely to get exactly what you want with advanced planning.

Planning Ahead—A Well-Stocked Holiday Pantry

A smart host keeps jars of olives, pickles, tapenade, and other delectable spreads on the pantry shelf during the holidays for spur-of-the-moment entertaining or unexpected guests. Stonewall Kitchens makes a terrific selection of condiments to spread on crackers or Crostini. Containers of nuts, plus boxes of crackers, chips, and breadsticks make it easy to assemble some snacks or party nibbles without a lot of fuss. I buy some interesting cheeses at the holidays to have on hand, and keep ready-to-eat crudités in the refrigerator, such as baby carrots, radishes, and celery hearts.

Planning Ahead—Kitchen Equipment

Once you have decided on a menu, check your kitchen to determine whether you have the right pots, sauté pans, baking pans, and utensils required for the recipes. Invest in a few things you think you'll use again and again. I bought a sturdy roasting pan and V-shaped roasting rack a number of years ago and use it throughout the year, but especially at Thanksgiving and Christmas. Quality baking sheets are another must-have for making holiday cookies and appetizers and, honestly, you can never have too many. Specialty pans, such as a Bundt pan or springform pan, are required for specific desserts, and it's hard to substitute another pan. Borrow one if you can, or buy and add to your kitchen arsenal. A food processor and mixer make certain tasks a snap—a strong arm and a whisk work, too. (Small kitchen appliances make great Christmas gifts!)

Planning Ahead—Tableware

Based on your menu, check to make sure you have the serving bowls, platters, and utensils you'll need. Also, look at your china, glassware, and silverware; count to see if you have enough of everything. For a large party, rent what you need or use disposable plates and utensils—buy high quality plates so the weight of the food doesn't collapse the plate. Think about the napkins, tablecloths, or placemats you will be using. Are they clean? Do they need to be pressed? Do you have enough? Simple white linen napkins can be made festive by tying them with holiday ribbon.

Setting the Table

Whether you are setting up a buffet or serving a sit-down dinner, set your table the day before the party. It takes longer than you think; you'll have one less thing to think about on the day of

the party; and any last-minute details you forgot, such as needing extra forks for both salad and dessert, will become obvious. For a buffet, I like to arrange the bowls and platters in place to make sure everything will fit, plus I write each recipe name on a post-it note and stick it on the bowl or platter so my kitchen helper or I can easily retrieve the right serving piece when needed. Mix and match the serving pieces to create variety and interest. I might place cookies on a silver platter I inherited from my grandmother and set it right next to the white china cake plate I bought at Target.

Beverages, Barware, Glassware

Cheers to the holidays, and cheers to the host who has thought through all the details of setting up a bar, with glassware, stirrers, shakers, etc. It takes planning! First decide the style of party and then decide what you are going to drink. Coordinate so you have the right glassware. Not every party needs to have a full bar with hard liquor and cocktail fixings. It is perfectly acceptable to offer a “house” cocktail such as the Pomegranate Martini featured in my book, and have Scotch, bourbon, gin, and vodka along with tonic and soda water, soft drinks, wine, beer, and other mixers at the bar. Or, serve champagne at the start of a party and follow with wine. For a large party, especially an open house or formal cocktail party, having someone staff the bar is helpful, whether it is a paid bartender, a friend, or your spouse. Have plenty of cocktail napkins at the bar and keep a roll of paper towels underneath in case of spills. Watch out for over indulgence and be prepared with a few designated drivers or someone to call a taxi.

Coordinated Entertaining

During the holidays, families often designate one home for entertaining but divide up the cooking responsibilities among many. This is a wonderful way to share in the spirit of the holiday as long as someone is coordinating the effort, usually the host family. My suggestion, especially with the ease of e-mail, is for the host to write up the menu so all agree and put names next to each item on the menu. This way, there is no confusion as to what is being served and who is cooking it. In addition, to prevent last-minute oven gridlock, determine if guests are bringing food hot and ready to serve or whether it needs to be baked before serving.

Kitchen Elves

Santa has helpers so what shouldn't you? Let there be a steady stream of happy, helping hands in the kitchen to make baking and cooking a joy. Don't just fill the house with the sweet smells of gingerbread or the savory scent of roast turkey and stuffing; have it overflowing with laughter and stories of Christmas past. If you are pressed for time, and the budget allows, and you have tasks without willing helpers, then by all means hire some help. A maid service can clean when you can't; a culinary school student, needing money and experience, can chop and prep while you tend to other tasks. Plan ahead and think through what it takes to make the holidays as stress-free as possible. That can be a gift to you.

Merry Memories

The twelfth planning tip of Christmas this author gives to you is the most important – celebrate the true spirit of the holiday, remember to make the season a memorable time for family and friends to be together, and laugh – even if a drink spills, an ornament breaks, or a latke burns. Here's a toast to organization and planning – now, may I please have a second cup of Wassail punch?

