

## Spend time with guests, not your stove

Over the years, I've moved away from impressive gourmet dinner parties that left me stressed and tired to simpler, more social gatherings I can actually take part in. It's easy to forget our guests come to spend time with us, not focus on the food we so slavishly prepare. I'm asked what the key to a successful dinner party is, and the answer is simple: It's a relaxed host.

Don't think that's possible? Here's how.

### Menu Planning 101

I'm easily distracted and have been so caught up socializing I've been known to scorch steamed broccoli. Other times, I've been so absorbed whisking lumps from the gravy I've missed out on some great stories. Where possible, take a hands-off approach to cooking. You don't want to be flipping, stirring or basting when guests arrive.

With this in mind, stews, braises and curries are perfect choices for carefree dinner parties. They can be left unattended for extended periods of time and result in familiar, comforting dishes your guest will love. When planning a menu:

### Do

- Ask about dietary restrictions when you issue the dinner invitations. When planning the menu, avoid the problematic ingredients altogether or put them on the side.
- Plan a well-rounded meal with vegetables, protein and starch.
- Start with salad. If you don't have time to prep one ahead of time, use pre-mixed salad blends and get fancy with the dressing.



Charmian Christie

- Select tried-and-true recipes you're confident in. You don't need the stress of wondering if a new dish will turn out or not.

- Prep as much as you can ahead of time and reheat or finish at the last minute.

### Don't

- Plan a meal that demands a lot of attention, such as frequent basting, constant stirring or precise temperature requirements.

- Make too many dishes. No one will starve if you don't have six options.

### Fake Fancy

You don't need themed napkins or splashy centrepieces to make a meal special. You can give your party plenty of flair with little extra work, if you:

- Add make-ahead finishes like a yogurt raita for curries or gremolata (see recipe below) for stews and braises.

- Jazz things up with individual servings. No ramekins? Use mason jars, water goblets or even tea cups.

### The Secret Is Timing

Once you've decided on the menu, map out an efficient game plan. My simple menu includes: salad, stew, rice and berry crisp with Chantilly cream.

### Here's how I get it all done quickly:

I start with dessert. While the crisp cooks, I prep the stew, which is ready for the oven about the time the crisps emerge. They cool on racks while the stew cooks. Meanwhile, I make the salad and gremolata. Everything green gets covered and refrigerated until needed. Since the oven is in use, I use the stovetop to cook the starch. While the rice cooks, I whip the cream. Then it's clean up and wait for the guests to arrive.

### Setting, Clearing and Cleaning

I know a woman who refuses to vacuum before guests arrive. There's bound to be spills, so she saves the cleanup for after the dinner party. She just turns the lights low and gets a drink into their hands as soon as they arrive. I've never noticed her floors.

Whether or not you vacuum and dust for guests, you can make the day less hectic if you:

- Set the table the night before or that morning after breakfast.
- Empty the dishwasher so it's ready to load.
- Clean out the fridge. You'll need space for prepped food.

With simple dishes, a bit of planning and well-timed prep work, a relaxed dinner party isn't only possible, it's practically guaranteed.



Simple & Party Fare



## BEEF STEW WITH ORANGE-WALNUT GREMOLATA

Less expensive stewing beef yields a flavourful and tender dish thanks to the long, slow braise. Designed to fit any schedule, this stew can be prepped up to two days in advance.

### Stew

- 1.6 to 1.8 kilograms** (3½ to 4 pounds) stewing beef, cut in 5-cm (2-inch) cubes
- 60 ml** (4 tablespoons) all-purpose flour, divided (cornstarch for gluten-free stew)
- 2 ml** (½ teaspoon) salt
- 1 ml** (¼ teaspoon) pepper
- 30 ml** (2 tablespoons) olive oil
- 1 large** onion, finely chopped
- 5 ml** (1 teaspoon) fennel seeds

- 4 cloves** garlic, smashed
- 15 ml** (1 tablespoon) balsamic or red wine vinegar
- 625 ml** (2½ cups) dry red wine
- 5 ml** (1 teaspoon) dried thyme
- 2 large** bay leaves
- 50 ml** (¼ cup) tomato paste
- 500 ml** (2 cups) low-sodium beef or chicken stock
- Finely grated** zest of 1 navel orange
- 50 ml** (¼ cup) cream

### Gremolata

- 2 cloves** garlic, roughly chopped
- Zest of 1** orange, finely grated
- 125 ml** (½ cup) roughly chopped parsley
- 125 ml** (½ cup) finely chopped, toasted walnuts (optional)

### Stew

- 1.** Preheat the oven to 500 F. Grease a large roasting pan.
- 2.** Toss the beef, flour, salt and pepper in a plastic bag to coat evenly. Spread the beef in the roasting pan and roast until browned, stirring once, about 10 to 15 minutes. Once the beef is browned, set aside and reduce oven to 300 F.
- 3.** Meanwhile, heat the oil in a large Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Sauté onion and fennel seeds until onion is translucent, about eight minutes. Add garlic and cook one minute more.
- 4.** Add the vinegar and a good splash of the wine. Stir to deglaze the pan, scraping up all the flavourful browned bits from the bottom. Stir in the rest of the wine and bring the sauce to a boil. Reduce the heat to a simmer and cook, stirring occasionally, until the sauce has reduced to almost half, about five to 10 minutes.
- 5.** Add the thyme, bay leaves, tomato paste and one cup of stock. Place the browned beef gently in the liquid. If the beef isn't almost covered in liquid, add up to one cup more stock. Cover and cook for about three hours. (If prepping ahead, cool then cover and refrigerate for up to two days. Gently reheat at 350 F until hot, about 45 minutes.)

### Gremolata

- 1.** While the stew cooks, make the gremolata. Place the garlic and orange zest on a cutting board and mince with a chef's knife using a pivoting motion. Add the parsley and continue chopping until fine. Cover and refrigerate until ready to serve.
  - 2.** When ready to serve, stir the orange zest and cream into the stew. Taste, adding more salt and pepper if needed. Cook for three to five minutes to infuse the flavours, stirring occasionally. Stir the walnuts into the gremolata, if using. Ladle stew into bowls and sprinkle with gremolata.
- Makes 8 servings*
- Prep time:** 30 minutes  
**Cook time:** Three hours

## MIXED BERRY CRISP

Frozen mixed berry fruit makes this crisp an easy dessert any time of year. Single-serving ramekins turn this simple dessert into something fancy. Alternatively, a glass or ceramic baking dish will do the trick. The Chantilly cream – a fancy name for whipped cream with vanilla added – can be refrigerated for hours thanks to the stabilizing effect of the icing sugar.

### Topping

- 375 ml** (1½ cups) panko bread crumbs (or rolled oats for gluten free)
- 125 ml** (½ cup) brown sugar
- 125 ml** (½ cup) chopped walnuts (optional)
- 75 ml** (⅓ cup) melted butter (or coconut oil for dairy free)

### Filling

- 125 ml** (½ cup) lightly packed brown sugar
- 15 ml** (1 tablespoon) cornstarch
- Zest of 1** orange, finely grated
- 1 kg** (7 cups) frozen mixed berries
- 5 ml** (1 teaspoon) vanilla extract

### Chantilly Cream (optional)

- 500 ml** (2 cups) whipping cream
- 30 ml** (2 tablespoons) icing sugar
- 5 ml** (1 teaspoon) vanilla extract

### Topping

- Preheat the oven to 350 F.
- 1.** In a medium bowl, toss the panko, brown sugar and walnuts, if using, to combine. Pour the butter over the crumbs and toss to coat well. Set aside.

### Filling

- 1.** In a large bowl, mix the brown sugar, cornstarch and orange zest until evenly combined.
- 2.** Add the fruit, sprinkle with the vanilla, and toss gently to coat evenly. Spoon evenly into eight 250-ml (one-cup) ramekins, or an eight-inch-square glass baking dish.



### Assembly

- 1.** Spoon the crumbs evenly over the fruit. Place ramekins on a baking sheet and bake for 35 to 45 minutes, or until the fruit is bubbling and the topping is crispy. (Bake in 20-cm (eight-inch) square dish for 50 to 60 minutes.) Allow to cool for 30 to 45 minutes before serving. The crisp can be served warm or at room temperature. Eat as is or topped with Chantilly cream.

### Chantilly Cream

- 1.** In a medium bowl, whip cream, icing sugar and vanilla on low to combine. Increase speed to high and beat until soft peaks form. Cover and chill until ready to use.
- Makes 8 servings*
- Prep time:** 15 minutes  
**Cook time:** 45 minutes