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The Art of Potluck

BY TIFFANY OWENS

After the hustle and bustle of the summer months, winter brings a slower pace to Maine. With many restaurants closed for the season, it's time for home cooks to heat up the stove, pore over favorite cookbooks, and try out those new recipes they have been salivating over for months. For hosts feeling housebound by the cold, gray days, it's also the perfect opportunity to gather friends together to sit, eat, and chat by the warmth of a roaring fireplace.

And what better way to celebrate with friends than with a potluck dinner party? Potlucks are infinitely more fun because they're a group effort: Everyone contributes a dish, so the host doesn't have to spend hours—or even days—slaving away in the kitchen or spending a week's paycheck at the market. The wonderful variety of dishes at a potluck party also reflects the individual tastes, personalities, and abilities of everyone who participates.

A neighborhood potluck in Thomaston



photograph by Jim Bazin © 2008

The tradition of potluck parties in America dates back to the first Thanksgiving.

A history born of tradition

The Oxford English Dictionary traces the term “potluck” to the 16th century, then defined as: “One’s luck or chance as to what may be in the [cooking] pot: used in reference to a person accepting another’s hospitality at a meal without any special preparation having been made for him.”

However, the tradition of potluck parties in America dates back to the first Thanksgiving held at Plymouth Colony in 1621, originally intended to be an annual autumn celebration of faith and feasting.

In Maine, the tradition of bean suppers also seems to have its origins with the country’s early settlers. The custom has continued for centuries, and bean suppers are still held on Saturday nights in such community institutions as churches and granges. They have become a lasting, integral part of Maine’s heritage and history.

Tips for a successful potluck

“I think I have had almost every problem that could happen,” laughs *Gourmet Potluck* author Beth Hensperger, “such as not enough oven space for a large casserole dish, a radiant cook-top that never heats up when using regular cookware, or forgetting important ingredients. My worst mistake was a Cioppino dish with the seafood pieces still in their shells—people were eating with plates in their laps and it was too much work for everyone.”

These tips from the experts will ensure a successful gathering every time:

Go native. Hands down, the best potluck parties I’ve attended revolved around a particular theme, country, or cuisine, such as Mardi Gras, Morocco, or Italian cuisine. Limiting contributions to thematic or native foods and beverages guarantee that they naturally complement each other. Other festive theme ideas might include vegetarian night, Spanish tapas, or a Hawaiian luau.

By the numbers. Let your guests know how many people are attending the potluck and plan your menu accordingly. “If you are having 10 to 12 people,” advises *Crowd-Pleasing Potluck* author Francine Halvorsen, “you’ll want two or three appetizers, one main dish, two sides, a salad, good bread and butter, condiments, two desserts, and beverages.”

Food for thought. Plan the main courses or entrées first to give your guests direction for their own dishes. I learned early on the importance of planning and assigning dishes after one particularly

disastrous mishmash menu that included sushi and pumpkin ravioli. From then on, a group e-mail was sent to coordinate menu options and avoid future fusion confusion. It’s always helpful to suggest a general category or ask what people prefer to make: appetizer, salad, side dish, or dessert. The guests then have the option of picking something seasonal, or a dish to complement the entrée or party theme.

Party favors. Have a list of ideas ready for busy friends who don’t have time to cook, such as fresh flowers, fruit, bread, sparkling water, juice, wine, beer, coffee and tea, bakery goods, ice cream, candles, firewood—or even extra glasses, silverware, or dinner plates.

Bowled over. Do you already have the proper serving dish on hand? “Over the decades, I have found that searching out basic, practical serving platters and bowls in advance is worth the time and expense,” says Hensperger. “There is rarely time to purchase suitable tableware the day of the party.” She recommends visiting large warehouse stores or restaurant supply houses to stock up on heavy-duty plastic salad bowls or platters with snap-on lids, as well as oversized serving utensils, salad scissors, and spreading knives.



photograph by Jim Bazin © 2008

A cut above. Always pre-cut or slice your potluck offering into serving-size portions to make dishing up easy at the buffet table.

Twice as nice. Instead of doubling your favorite recipe for larger gatherings, consider making two smaller duplicate dishes instead. Not only will they be easier to handle and transport, but they won't take up as much room on the buffet table. And when the first dish is empty, it can be easily replaced with the remaining full one.

On the road. Transporting foods can be tricky. Hot foods will stay heated in coolers lined with dish towels or newspapers. Keep cold foods chilled in coolers surrounded by frozen blue-ice packs. Chili, soups, and stews travel best in Thermos-style containers; to serve, pour into cups or mugs. Chef Emeril Lagasse likes to take his fried

“The most important rule of potlucking is to make it an enjoyable venture, rather than overly ambitious and stressful,” Hensperger notes.

chicken and biscuits to potluck parties in a cardboard box lined with waxed paper.

In the bag. If you have leftovers to take home, consider taking along a plastic drawstring bag. At the end of the party, slide your dish and utensils inside the bag and tie shut to prevent spills.

Go with the flow. “The most important rule of potlucking is to make it an enjoyable venture, rather than overly ambitious and stressful,” Hensperger notes. Things happen and sometimes don't turn out as planned, but don't panic. Remember that you are hosting the party because you want to spend some quality time with your friends, so expect (and embrace) the unexpected, relax, and have a good time.

Overall, once you get into potluck mode, you can easily plan any event—birthday parties, weekend suppers, even wedding parties—as a group effort. And who knows? Your first potluck dinner might be such a success, that your guests may begin planning the next one before the party's even over.



Additional Potluck Recipes and Ideas

Need some additional recipes or ideas? These five new cookbooks offer sage and sumptuous advice for creating your own memorable potluck party:

The Gourmet Potluck: Show-Stopping Recipes for the Buffet Table by Beth Hensperger

Hensperger is a James Beard award-winning author of more than 18 cookbooks, a successful caterer, and a popular food columnist. Her creative flair for cooking is evident in this generous, savory collection of her 50 favorite potluck recipes; some serve an intimate party of eight, while others serve a large buffet of 36. Helpful preparation and serving notes accompany these sophisticated, straightforward recipes, which focus on fresh ingredients and are conveniently indexed according to season.

Crowd-Pleasing Potluck: 225 Delicious Recipes Guaranteed to Win Rave Reviews by Francine Halvorsen

Halvorsen draws on her decades of experience as a popular caterer and culinary consultant for recipes that are “simple to make and easy to take.” She reveals her secrets for finding fresh, quality ingredients, as well as practical cooking techniques and tips for transporting and serving food for both small and large affairs. The 225 recipes feature dishes for the entire event—from soup to nuts, drinks to dessert—with helpful hints and step-by-step instructions for success on the first attempt. Halvorsen has also thoughtfully included 30 mix-and-match potluck party menus for every occasion.

Emeril's Potluck: Comfort Food with a Kicked-Up Attitude by Emeril Lagasse

This tasty collection from television personality, chef, and restaurateur Emeril Lagasse features 147 easy, attractive recipes for every type of potluck gathering. Beyond the bland or ordinary, Emeril claims that his trademark potluck recipes are “straightforward, delicious and meant to be shared.”

The Big Book of Potluck by Maryana Vollstedt

Author of more than a dozen bestselling “Big Book” cookbooks, Vollstedt offers this book with “endless inspiration for eating good food—and lots of it—with family, friends and neighbors.” The 275 crowd-pleasing recipes feature a wide range of flavorful, no-nonsense dishes for every festive occasion, as well as helpful hints for both the potluck host and guest.

Park Avenue Potluck: Recipes from New York's Savviest Hostesses by The Society of Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center and Florence Fabricant

Cooking with a cause? *New York Times* food writer Fabricant has compiled a collection of more than 100 heirloom recipes from New York's top hostesses to benefit America's leading center for cancer research and treatment. Featuring an array of tempting dishes, the cookbook is an indispensable resource for chic party food that will turn your next event into the talk of the town. Not to be missed is the whimsical “Guide for Entertaining” section, which features a wealth of anecdotes and advice on how to plan the perfect party, from pantry staples to after-dinner drinks.

Dried Winter Fruit Compote with Raisin Sauce

"Perfect for dark winter nights, a shimmering dessert compote, glistening in a bowl, is redolent of summer," says Francine Halvorsen, author of *Crowd-Pleasing Potluck*. "It is a cook's pleasure and a bit of kitchen magic. Handfuls of dried fruit simmering with spices will bring smiles before the dish is eaten. Perfect for potlucks, you can add or substitute the fruit combinations of your choice. It can be made a day or two beforehand and served chilled or at room temperature."

The compote is an attractive dish served as is, but for a more dramatic presentation, Halvorsen recommends placing the compote in a heatproof bowl and topping with 2-4 tablespoons of flaming brandy, bourbon, or the liquor of your choice. To do this, pour the small amount of liquor into a long-handled soup ladle, hold at arm's length and light with a long match. Tilt the flaming liquor into the compote. Wait until the flame goes out before inserting the serving spoon.

Or, for a more sweet and savory dessert, omit the Raisin Sauce and accompany with a cheese platter—perhaps Stilton, a crisp cheddar, and chèvre—along with whole-meal crackers. Cinnamon or vanilla ice cream and a dollop of whipped cream, flavored with maple syrup, may also be substituted for the Raisin Sauce.

1 pound dried figs, preferably whole, not pressed
½ pound dried plums, pitted and picked over for broken pits
½ pound dried pears
½ pound dried apple slices
½ pound dried mango or papaya
¼ pound dried blueberries
¼ pound dried cherries, pitted and picked over for broken pits
3 quarts boiling water
¾ cup bourbon or any gold brown liquor such as brandy or scotch, or equal amount of water
½ cup sugar
2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
Raisin Sauce (recipe follows)

Place all the fruit in a large heatproof bowl and mix together. Pour the boiling water over the fruit. Let rest for 45 minutes, stirring two or three times. Drain the fruit and set aside 1½ cups of liquid.

In a saucepan large enough to hold all the ingredients, heat the liquor, reserved liquid, sugar, and cinnamon to the boiling point over medium-low heat. Add the drained fruit, lower the heat, and simmer gently for 30 minutes.

Let cool, remove to a serving bowl, cover, and chill for up to 24 hours before serving. The dish can keep longer, but the fruit will get softer.

Raisin Sauce

1 cup raisins, soaked in 1½ cups water for 24 hours, then drained
2 cups light sour cream
1 cup heavy cream
½ teaspoon pure vanilla extract
⅓ cup pure maple syrup

In a large bowl, mix all the ingredients, cover, and refrigerate for up to 24 hours.

To serve: Place the fruit in a deep serving dish with a ladle, and accompany with the Raisin Sauce in a smaller bowl with a small ladle.

Makes 10 servings.

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photo courtesy of Rodale Books

Sweet Potato Torta with Apple, Parmesan, and Fresh Thyme

Beth Hensperger claims that this Sweet Potato Torta recipe from her *Gourmet Potluck* cookbook is one of her all-time favorites. In addition to being “fabulous and yummy,” she notes that it’s also “easy to prepare and transport, has recognizable ingredients, and isn’t messy.”

For best results, Hensperger recommends using a mandoline or slicing disk on a food processor to make uniform 1/8-inch-thick slices of apples and potatoes. The dish can be prepared up to a day ahead if refrigerated, but should be served warm. To reheat on-site, cover dish and bake at 375° until heated through, about 30 minutes. Let hot torta sit for five minutes before unmolding. To serve, invert warm torta onto a serving platter and cut into pie-shaped wedges.

3 Tablespoons unsalted butter
 1½ teaspoons chopped fresh thyme, plus a sprig for garnish
 ½ cup thinly sliced or chopped green onions, white and green parts
 ½ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese
 1 Tablespoon flour
 ¾ teaspoon salt
 ½ teaspoon sugar
 Freshly ground black pepper
 1½ pounds red-skinned sweet potatoes (yam variety), peeled and thinly sliced
 1 large, tart, green apple such as Granny Smith, peeled and thinly sliced

Melt the butter in a small saucepan or microwave. Generously brush a 9-inch cake pan or springform pan with some of the melted butter. If using a springform pan, wrap foil around the outside to prevent leaking. Place the thyme sprig in the center of the pan. Preheat the oven to 375°.

In a bowl, combine the chopped thyme, green onions, Parmesan, flour, salt, sugar, and pepper. Toss to blend well.

Carefully arrange a single layer of sweet potato slices in concentric circles, overlapping slightly, without disturbing the thyme garnish in the center of the pan. (This layer will be visible when the torta is unmolded.) Next, evenly layer with half of the apple slices. Sprinkle with about 2 tablespoons of the Parmesan mixture, and drizzle with about 2 teaspoons of the butter. Use half of the remaining sweet potatoes to make the next layer, top with the remaining apple slices and Parmesan mixture, and drizzle with butter. End with a layer of the remaining sweet potatoes, and drizzle again with butter. Press down gently to flatten.

Cover the pan with aluminum foil and bake until the potatoes are just tender, about 45 minutes. Remove the foil and continue baking, uncovered, until lightly browned at the edges, 25 to 30 minutes longer. (If preparing in advance, allow the torta to cool, then cover and leave at room temperature for 1 hour, or refrigerate for up to 1 day).

Serves 8-10.

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