

The Right Way to Buffet

Serving the right foods and being organized are the keys by DIANNE JACOB



A BUFFET IS ONE OF THE BEST WAYS TO ENTERTAIN. YOU CAN INVITE A CROWD, BECAUSE THERE'S NO WORRY ABOUT SEATING EVERYONE COMFORTABLY AROUND YOUR DINING ROOM TABLE. And once you put the food out, you get to enjoy the festivities without thinking about timing and serving. Still, there are a few challenges, namely what to serve and how to present it efficiently. Before you make your next party self-serve, here are a few things you should know about choosing a menu and setting up.

the menu

First, you'll need to choose dishes that taste good at room temperature and hold up well, or figure out ways to keep them at the proper temperature. Many foods can be kept hot on a warming tray, in a slow cooker, or even on the stove, if your kitchen design allows

you to serve the buffet from there. Make as much as possible in advance, since you don't want to be cooking when your guests are hovering and the rest of the food is already out. Try to offer foods that don't require cutting, especially if people won't be seated at a table.

Choose foods that are visually appealing and designed to be served on

platters, even if they're as simple as a variety of cheeses, crackers, and grapes. Create assortments: raw vegetables, breads and crackers, cookies. For variety, put them in baskets or bowls instead of on plates. Use fresh herbs as garnishes to add color, and select especially colorful foods such as peppers, spinach, or saffron rice. (See "Creating a Beautiful Table" at right for tips on making the meal even more attractive.)

Put out large serving spoons, forks, and even spatulas to make it easy to get the food from table to plate without making a mess. Choose main-dish foods that are almost foolproof to pick up with a utensil, such as lasagna.

If simplification is your goal, build your buffet around a particular dish, such as a bowl of chili or soup, or a paella. Then place colorful accompaniments,

such as breads, salads, and toppings, in bowls near the main course. You don't even have to serve entrees: You can create a buffet consisting entirely of appetizers or desserts (just be sure to warn your guests appropriately on the invitations so they don't expect a meal).

When it comes to setting up the buffet, your primary goal is to create a feast for the eye. Remember to watch the table and have more food on hand to refill the serving dishes, because the best buffets look bountiful.

the organization

You don't have to use your dining room table as your showplace for the meal—many successful buffets are served from the kitchen counter, especially when the emphasis is on a dish warming on the stove. A sideboard, with people moving in a single line, works equally well. If you do use the dining room table, you can place it against the wall so it functions as a sideboard. Or keep it in the middle of the room, making sure that people can move all the way around it. Traffic should flow in a logical manner and not become congested. Do a walk-through beforehand to test.

A great way to avoid buffet gridlock is to place plates at the front end of a line and napkins and silverware at the end. It implies a process, and best of all, lets people choose foods without having to juggle a napkin and cutlery. Arrange the dishes in the order that guests will most likely choose them, such as salads, main dishes, starches, vegetables, and bread.

Because they cut down your workload, use separate stations to serve drinks and dessert. That way, guests can get their beverages as they arrive while you finish setting up the buffet table for the meal. Later, guests can head to the same drink table to replenish their wine or beer. And offering self-serve sweets such as cookies or tiny cakes at a separate station lets you avoid having to clear the buffet to serve dessert.

Once guests have made their way from the buffet with their plates piled high, they'll be looking for a place to sit.

Select Solutions

The least comfortable way to consume food is while standing up or balancing a plate in your lap, so make sure you have enough flat surfaces where people can put things down. Ideally, everyone will have a table nearby, whether it's a TV tray, a coffee table, or your dinner table. If that's not possible, offer pillows on

the floor, stools, and even the stairs if they're in the vicinity. By the time your guests are enjoying the food and relaxing on your furniture, floors, and stairs, you'll have joined the party as well, instead of being stuck in the kitchen—and that's the beauty of a buffet.



creating a beautiful table

THE RIGHT TABLECLOTH, CUTLERY, AND ACCESSORIES CAN ADD TO THE VISUAL APPEAL OF YOUR SPREAD. Use your most beautiful platters, baskets, and bowls, and lay them out in varying shapes, colors, and heights. Create height with plates placed on pedestals or a stack of books under the tablecloth, or by decorating with tall vases of flowers or candlesticks. Use unusual table coverings such as a bedspread, burlap, colored paper, curtains, quilts, sheets, or taffeta (preferably something that is stain resistant). Stand cutlery in a glass, a jug, or a vase for guests to pick out for themselves. Or wrap sets of cutlery in napkins and stack them, perhaps tying each bundle with flowers, raffia, or ribbon. Since people won't be sitting around the table, you can adorn it with larger flower arrangements and tall candles, making a greater statement with the centerpiece. For a formal buffet, get out your best tablecloth and your finest napkins, silver, and china.