

## Creating Your Perfect Plan for the Holidays *With some adjustments, of course*

It's that time of year when we look forward to celebrating the holidays with family and friends. With Thanksgiving, Christmas and Chanukah coming up, we look forward to the excitement that comes with holiday parties. This year, holiday party planning looks a little different.

With the pandemic in full swing, the CDC and our state government officials have given us guidelines as to how to have a safe holiday, which adds a little more stress on top of the stress that typically comes with holiday party planning.

This doesn't diminish why we celebrate the holidays. This does however, present new opportunities to form new traditions. These are my top tips to planning your perfect holiday party to help reduce your stress levels and enjoy the process.

### TIMING IS EVERYTHING

Give yourself time to plan your celebration. As you get busier, time seems to fly past you, and before you know it, you're scrambling to create the perfect party. So start early and let your guests know early so that they can RSVP ASAP.

Give yourself at least 6 to 8 weeks. The earlier you start planning the better. If you find yourself starting to plan closer to the holiday season you can still create something special. The key here is to KEEP IT SIMPLE.

### BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND

Imagine that your party is complete. How do you imagine yourself feeling after the party? What kinds of compliments are your guests expressing about your party? For example, you could feel like your party was fun, stress free and joyful.

By thinking about your party with the end in mind, you are giving yourself a frame of reference to focus on. You will be focusing on the end result of your party, which will be the foundation of the experience for you and your guests.

**★ PRO TIP:** Write your intention on a piece of paper and presence yourself to that piece of paper every time you feel overwhelmed. Not only will the party be exactly what you intended, the process of creating the party will be that too. For example, if you want your party to be fun, stress-free and joyful, look at that piece of paper to remind yourself to be fun, stress-free and joyful.

### THE INVITATION

Create your invitation list at least 6-8 weeks ahead and use an online invitation app like EVITE or Punchbowl.

Using an online invitation allows you to keep track of who is coming, while allowing you to send updates and messages. Some apps have features that allow guests to sign up to bring dishes or other items you may request. You also have the option to ask your guests some precautionary COVID questions such as "have you travelled outside of the state in the last month" or "have you or anyone you live with tested positive for covid."

### ✂️ Butternut Squash Soup ✂️

Serves 4-6

- 1 ½ pound butternut squash
- 1 tbsp olive oil
- ½ cup caramelized onions
- ½ tsp ground cardamom
- ¼ tsp ground nutmeg
- ¼ tsp all spice
- 1 tsp salt and pepper



Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Cut the Butternut Squash in half and take out seeds. Leave the skin on. Drizzle the olive oil, salt and pepper on the meat of the squash and place on a baking sheet. Bake in the oven for about 30 minutes so it is cooked completely.

Let the squash cool slightly and remove the skin

Using a blender or Vitamix put the squash, one cup of water or veggie stock (if vegan) or chicken broth and caramelized onions and blend until smooth.

Put the mixture in a pot on the stove and bring up to a simmer. Add spices.

Simmer for 10-15 minutes until spices are blended. Best if cooled and let sit overnight and served the next day.

### ✂️ Siesta Key Rum Orange / Cranberry Sauce ✂️

Serves 6

- 1 packages fresh cranberries - preferably organic
- ¾ cups organic or raw granulated sugar
- ½ fresh whole orange - grate the rind first, then juice
- 2 shots Siesta Key Spiced Rum



Add enough water to the orange juice to make 1½ cup of liquid.

Add all of the above ingredients to a large enough sauce pan so it won't boil over.

Cook on medium heat until cranberries pop and it begins to thicken. Let cool and serve. You can adjust consistency with more water if necessary if you like a thinner sauce.

**Variation:** Be creative. Add one teaspoon cinnamon. Finish off with spiced pecans.

**For a more traditional cranberry sauce:** omit the rum and orange and follow same directions.

### CHOOSE THE THEME

Choosing a theme is a fun way to create a central focus around your party. This could be as simple as a particular color, a favorite holiday flower, a dessert, or a memory of years past.

A great way to get some inspiration is to look through your closets to see if you have any accent pieces, decorations, or cloth that spark your vision for your party. You can also choose a music genre to set the theme of your party. Set up a playlist on Pandora or Spotify prior to the party to keep the theme for your party going. Once you choose your theme, Stick With It. The idea is to create a central focus for yourself and your guests.

### THE VENUE

To keep everyone safe, consider having your party outdoors. The CDC has shared with us that parties indoors increase the spread of COVID-19. An outdoor party will be perfect for this holiday season. Renting a pavilion at the beach or park definitely gives a Florida vibe. Plus, the air is cooler and Florida is simply more beautiful at night.

If you're not able to have your party outdoors, consider opening up your floorplan by moving furniture to a spare bedroom. This way you can encourage guests to practice social distancing at the party.

### BE REAL WITH YOUR TASK LIST

Look at your schedule, and ask yourself how much time can you really devote to planning a party? Make a list of all the tasks that need to be completed in order to make this party happen (decorations, venue, music, food, clean up, etc). The list keeps you organized and will help with stress relief. After making your list, consider, who can I hire or ask for help? Is it a family or friend? Or perhaps you want to hire a professional.

### MENU - my favorite part

If you are particular about what foods you want to serve at your party, (like I am) decide on your "must haves" and delegate the rest, this includes some or all of the cooking, serving and cleaning involved with your menu.

Food is a time-consuming task, so consider hiring a caterer who can take some of that stress off your plate. You could plan for a signature dish and cocktails that match your theme, and ask others to bring their favorites too.

A great caterer will be able to give you ideas to help enhance your space and keep your guests satiated throughout your event.

With all of the planning, remember that the holidays are a time to reconnect with the people you care about. This holiday can be especially meaningful when you take a breath, and create a space for yourself and those around you to enjoy each other in new ways. Planning the perfect holiday doesn't have to be stressful or costly.

I hope this information will allow you to create your perfect holiday season. From my kitchen to your table, may the holiday season fill your home with joy, your table with abundance and your life with a healthy and happy New Year! — Chef Alyson Zildjian

### ✂️ Stuffed Acorn Squash ✂️

Serves 2-4

- 1 whole acorn squash - Cut in half and remove seeds
- 1 cup brown rice cooked according to directions
- ½ cup quinoa cooked according to directions
- ¼ cup golden raisins
- ¼ bunch chopped fresh parsley
- 1 cup cooked garbanzo beans
- ¼ tsp cinnamon
- 1 tsp salt & pepper
- olive oil



- ½ cup caramelized onions
- 1 tbs agave
- 1 tsp granulated garlic

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Cut the acorn squash in half and take out the seeds. Leave the skin on drizzle the 1 tsp olive oil, salt and pepper on the meat of the Squash and place on a baking sheet. Bake in the oven for about 15-20 minutes so it is cooked three quarters of the way.

While the acorn squash is baking, add the caramelized onions to a saucepan, the brown rice and water and cook brown rice according to directions.

In another pan cook your quinoa with 1 tsp of granulated garlic, salt and pepper cook according to directions

Once the brown rice and quinoa is cooked - cool it down slightly and combine together with the golden raisins, fresh chopped parsley, cinnamon and agave.

Taste for any additional salt and pepper needed.

Take the cooked and cooled acorn squash and fill the squash with about 1 cup of the rice mixture filling it a good amount to around the rim of the squash.

Put the stuffed acorn squash back in a 350 degree oven and finish baking another 15-25 minutes until the squash is completely cooked and the filling is hot.

This may also be made up a day ahead and reheated before serving.

Recipes and advice courtesy of Chef/Owner **Alyson Zildjian** of **Zildjian Catering and Consulting**. They're an Award-Winning Sarasota Catering and Events Company located in Sarasota. They also have fresh food to go, chef-prepared meals and peak performing catering where they feed athletes who train and compete locally. They're located at 6986 Beneva Road, Sarasota. Call (941) 363-1709 or visit [www.zildjancatering.com](http://www.zildjancatering.com) or [www.peakperformancecatering.net](http://www.peakperformancecatering.net)

