



HOLIDAY ENTERTAINING

Tips from Chef Matthew Pietsch

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You do not have to be an executive chef or own a restaurant to serve up a great holiday gathering for family and friends. You just need a little patience, some creativity and a passion for culinary entertaining. I recently sat down with Matthew Pietsch, executive chef at Salt of the Earth – a rustic American eatery, in Fenwickville, to get some insider tips to holiday entertaining. “You want to be able to enjoy your party instead of spending the entire evening in the kitchen,” Pietsch says. “That means planning ahead and doing as much work in advance as possible.”

TIP 1: PLAN AHEAD AND ORGANIZE!

Write out your shopping list(s) days in advance. Write detailed prep lists prior to shopping to ensure you have the product you need, as well as to keep yourself organized. Estimate the amount of time required to prepare each item on your menu and build in some wiggle room. Pre

Pumpkin Spice Cheesecake

FOR THE CRUST:

1/2 cup all-purpose flour
2/3 cup ground pecans
1/2 cup whole oatmeal
1/3 cup raw sugar
4 ounces (1 stick) unsalted butter

DIRECTIONS:

Mix all of the dry ingredients together in a medium-sized bowl. Pecans could be substituted for walnuts or hazelnuts if desired. Melt the butter and add to the dry mixture until mixture is tacky and sticks together. Grease an 8-inch-by-8-inch pan and transfer crust mixture into pan. Push crust mixture down in an even layer across the bottom of pan. Set aside.

FOR THE CHEESECAKE FILLING:

1 pound (2 packages) cream cheese
at room temperature
2 eggs
1/2 cup raw sugar
5 ounces pumpkin puree
1 teaspoon cinnamon, ground
1/4 teaspoon nutmeg

DIRECTIONS:

Place the room temperature cream cheese into a mixing bowl fitted with a paddle attachment. Add the sugar to the cream cheese and mix until this mixture is light and smooth. Do not beat on too high of a speed, as this will break down the fats in the cheese. Stop the mixer and scrape the sides of the bowl to prevent the formation of lumps. Add the eggs one at a time. Stop the mixer and scrape the bowl after each addition of eggs. Continue to beat on low-medium speed until the eggs are fully incorporated and no lumps appear. Add the pumpkin puree and spices, mix until well combined. Pour batter into a well-greased 8-inch-by-8-inch pan loaded with crust and smooth well. Bang pan four to five times to release any air bubble that may remain in the batter. Place the small pan into a large, high-sided pan and fill outside pan with water. Place into a 350-degree oven for 30-35 minutes or until the cheesecake is set, or the temperature is 185°F. Cool completely before cutting.

CHEF'S TIP:

Instead of purchasing pumpkin puree from the store (which may have various amounts of preservatives and processed sugars), make your own. Find a baking pumpkin from your favorite patch, cut into chunks (skin on) and roast in a shallow pan, covered with tin foil until tender. Scrape the pumpkin and puree until smooth in a food processor.

Cranberry Citrus Jus

This is a fresh and bright seasonal sauce that allows for multiple applications. Use the jus as a sauce for poultry, pork or seafood, and even dessert. Use the jus as a base for a simple vinaigrette for a lighter finish.

INGREDIENTS:

24 ounces cranberries
6 ounces honey or all-natural sugar
4 ounces water
juice of 2 oranges
juice of 1 lemon
juice of 1/2 grapefruit
zest of 1 orange
kosher salt, to taste
fresh ground black pepper, to taste
4 sprigs fresh thyme (optional for savory application)*
6 leaves fresh sage (optional for savory application)*
1/2 teaspoon fresh ground cinnamon
(optional for both dessert and savory application)*

DIRECTIONS:

Place honey and water in a heavy-bottomed saucepot and place over medium heat. Allow honey to dissolve and add cranberries. Add citrus juice and allow to cook until cranberries are soft and broken down. Season with salt and pepper. Leave sauce chunky for a more rustic appearance, or strain well for a refined presentation.

*Add fresh herbs whole at beginning of cooking process if using for a savory application. Pull whole herbs out at end of cooking and discard.

pare items that will allow prior preparation a day prior to your party.

“If the atmosphere and invite list allows, involve your guests in the kitchen,” he says. “Sometimes, the best dinner party is the one where everyone helps prepare the food.”

TIP 2: INVOLVE YOUR GUESTS!

This could mean that select members are actively involved in your kitchen the day prior or the evening of the event, or this could simply mean asking your guests (in advance) to supply a portion of the meal. You could assign a specific course to each guest and pick a theme. You could also treat the dinner almost as a potluck, and allow guests to bring side courses and you, the host, prepare the entrée.

“You want this party to be an enjoyable experience for everyone, so don’t overextend yourself or do too much,” advises Pietsch.

TIP 3: KEEP IT SIMPLE!

It is a bad idea to design a menu for a party that features a preparation the host or hostess has never attempted. It is easy to get fired up by a challenging dish that you want to show off to your friends and family. Stick to dishes that you know you can pull off.

The emphasis now around Michigan is to keep things local, so take this philosophy home with you as well. Chef Pietsch (protégé of ‘Iron Chef’ Michael Symon), specializes in creating seasonal menus using fresh ingredients, sourced locally whenever possible. In doing so, not only does he deliver a higher quality menu, but he reinforces his relationship with local growers and supports the state’s thriving culinary and agri-tourism industries.

“The strategy really is simple,” Pietsch admits. “No matter what you’re cooking, no matter whom you’re cooking for or what season you’re in, you can boil it down to these simple tips every time you step into the kitchen to create.”

Use fresh and local ingredients whenever possible. The product will be fresher, taste better and have less impact on the environment. You are also supporting your community and local growers.

Use quality ingredients. Never skimp on quality, especially in simple dishes or preparations. The true quality of your ingredients will shine through. Your finished product will only be as good as the ingredients you start with.

Use fresh herbs and spices. Go to your spice cabinet, find every dried herb and spice that is more than six months old, and throw them away! Herbs and spices lose a great deal of their essential oils and flavors in a relatively short period. Buy fresh herbs and add them at the last minute for great flavor. When possible, buy whole spices and toast and grind them fresh before using. You’ll be surprised by what a difference this makes.

Of course, the perfect pairing of local wines, beers and even spirits will add to the overall entertaining experience. Michigan is making some great products these days, so you will have no problem finding the perfect pairing. If you have questions, reach out to your local chef, winemaker or brewmaster for suggestions. You can also post pairing questions on the Internet – seeking qualified sources such as the Michigan Wine Council or Michigan Brewers Guild for recommendations. You will be amazed at the feedback you’ll receive. 