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Chef's Apron

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Welcome November, the greyest month of the year. It's dark at 4:00, if not before. An icy drizzle falls constantly and the thermometer hovers around freezing. Or so it seems. However, there is a silver lining to the dreary cloud we call November. It is the start of the holiday season and a great time to throw a party. Pick your excuse for a celebration: Thanksgiving, Saint Nicolas Day, Chanukah, Christmas Eve and Day, right on through to New Year's, Three Kings Day and the Super Bowl.

For whatever reason, party planning can be a bit intimidating. Begin to set the date and already nerves start to twitch. Okay, deep breath. Date picked. Invitations sent. Now, the real worries kick in ... namely, what to serve? With just a little forethought and planning your party will be delicious, relaxed and fun.

A couple of things to think about before you start. Will you have help ... and are they helpful or helpless? Whether you rely on a professional caterer and staff or your spouse, a couple of close friends and the teenager next door, understand their strengths and limitations. Just as important, understand the strengths and limitations of your kitchen. Unless you've got a genie helping you, you probably can't squeeze two twenty pound turkeys, a huge vegetable gratin and six pies into your single oven. At least not at the same time.

Menu planning is the biggest bugaboos most hosts face. I like to begin with a simple theme, usually ethnic or regional. Typically I turn to the Mediterranean for ideas but I've been known to look to Asia, the Caribbean and my own native New England for inspiration. While every rule can and probably should be broken, I generally avoid combining too many complex dishes from every corner of the globe. Call me dull or unimaginative but I don't serve five-alarm chili and kimchi at my traditional New England Thanksgiving dinner or vegetable curry with veal Marsala. Instead, I create simple menus with flavors that complement and enhance each other.

Once I have a starting point, for instance an après ski fondue, French bistro or Italian comfort food, I figure out the meal's centerpiece. No, not the flowers for the table but a few star dishes. And I really mean a few. You don't need to choose the most complex, labor intensive dishes in your collection of recipes. Go overboard and you'll end up exhausted. Not to mention that your table will be filled with so many complicated concoctions that your guests will get taste bud fatigue.

In other words, if you slave for hours recreating Julia Child's famous Boeuf Bourguignon, keep your side dishes simple. Add few roasted baby potatoes and follow it with a fresh green salad. Streamlining the side dishes will save you untold stress and allow your guests to savor and appreciate your mastery of a French classic. On the other hand, if you are simply roasting a beautiful piece of beef, have some fun with an elegant gratin or an over the top dessert.

Okay so now you're set to go. You've planned the perfect menu and are ready to wow but not overwhelm. Before you head to the supermarket, take one last look at each and every recipe and ask yourself a few questions. Will the meal shackle you to the stove for the entire evening? Does your plan include anything fussy or temperamental or anything that must be served immediately? If yes, you might want to rethink! Don't forget your guests want to enjoy your company as well as your delicious food so find things you can make ahead. I have no doubt that you can create thirty perfect, individual chocolate soufflés ... but can you do it and still have fun at your own party?

Have a wonderful time and enjoy!

Bon appétit!

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Roasted Brussels Sprouts & Pearl Onions with Bacon & Walnuts

*Brussels sprouts are a wonderful addition to your holiday table. They are great with roast turkey, chicken or a beautiful piece of beef. And yes - you can make these earlier in the day and reheat. Enjoy!*

Serves 6 - 8

2 ounces thick-cut bacon, cut into 1/2 inch pieces  
1 1/2 pounds Brussels sprouts, cleaned, trimmed and cut in half  
1/2 pound frozen pearl onions  
2 tablespoons red wine vinegar  
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper  
1/2 cup chopped walnuts, toasted



Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

Cook the bacon in a large oven-proof skillet over medium heat until crisp. Remove the bacon from the skillet, drain and reserve.

Add the Brussels sprouts and onions to the skillet, sprinkle with vinegar, season with salt and pepper and toss to coat.

Roast the vegetables at 375 degrees for 40-45 minutes or until the sprouts are tender and golden. Add the bacon and walnuts and toss to combine.

