

Getting in the Christmas Spirit

Thanksgiving leftovers are gone, my children have gone back to New York, and the crisp autumn chill is turning to the cold of winter—it's time to begin planning for Christmas! The leaves and pumpkins have been replaced with lights and garland, and I am in the kitchen preparing twenty pounds of my Christmas Pecans to send to friends, family, and colleagues. A tradition that my family looks forward to year after year, I practically have to hide them from my husband, Greg. As soon as the toasty, caramelized aroma fills my kitchen and permeates throughout the house, the family knows that Christmastime has arrived.

This year our family will celebrate together with a few close friends. My daughter, Molly, will be home for a whole month(!), so I'll enlist her help in planning the menus. We will start with cookies—Grandma Rose's Sugar Cookies, Coconut Orange Snowballs, Cocoa Clouds, and Chocolate-Dipped Shortbread Stars hot out of the oven when my son Eric arrives a few days before Christmas Eve with an empty stomach. Speaking of Christmas "spirit," now that my children are grown, we can enjoy the festivities of the holidays with delicious seasonal cocktails—serving Ginger and Apple Hot Toddies while we decorate the tree and Blood Orange Mimosas when we open presents Christmas morning. Luckily, the days of being awakened at 7:00 a.m. to see what Santa left under the tree are gone, and we can sleep in before enjoying our Christmas brunch.

This Christmas is a special one for me. Since releasing my latest cookbook, *The Christmas Table*, I've received more requests than ever for advice about planning and preparing for the holiday. For the book, I wrote a section titled, "The Twelve Planning Tips of Christmas" in response to so many questions I have received from readers asking how best to manage the holiday cooking rush. Whether you are up for an open house with an extensive guest list, or an intimate dinner with close friends, the important thing to remember is to maintain the season's spirit. Don't over extend yourself. Make it a celebration, not a chore. Your home doesn't need to look like the cover of a decorating magazine—remember, magazines have a myriad of stylists making those houses look sparkly and light. A few festive touches are enough to set the scene.

I make lists to stay organized and plan my menu in advance, this way I have time to shop and stock the holiday pantry. A terrific tip is to double check that you have all of the necessary kitchen equipment and tableware. For instance, the fabulous eggnog cheesecake on page 124 requires a 9- to 10-inch springform pan. It's an amazing do-ahead dessert and a little planning means you have the right pan when you are ready to bake.

Recruit friends and family! E-mail the menu and kindly delegate duties—just because you are hosting the dinner, doesn't mean that you have to prepare *all* the food. My friends and family share the joy of cooking our Christmas Dinner. I even recruit "kitchen elves" (usually my husband and children), to help me with the chopping and cleaning. The day

before entertaining, I set the table and stock the bar, then on the day of the party I can finish cooking and enjoy—making merry memories.

A few years ago, we hosted two holiday parties in one weekend—the first, my husband’s company party, the next day, friends and family. Sounds daunting, I know. Though it seems like a lot of work, the planning, purchases, and preparation were kept to a minimum, since I was able to decorate and cook once for both parties and use the rented plates and glassware twice. A quick cleanup and refresh of the house between the parties, and it was like we hosted two parties for the efforts of one.

Well, I’m certainly in the holiday spirit. Time to go cut down the tree and unpack the ornaments!