

How to Prepare Meals for the Masses

by Pamela Fay

Cooking for a large number of people need not be intimidating. However, it requires more preparation than throwing together a dinner for four. Whether you are organizing a wedding reception or chairing a church gathering, you can cook successful for a crowd with some advanced planning.

As you plan the menu, consider the kitchen facilities and equipment that will be available and how the food will be served. Also, consider the number of people expected. The menu you plan for 50 people in a buffet line will probably not be the same menu you would plan for 24 people served by waiters. You want the food to look appetizing as it is presented and, if costs are a concern, you need to control portion sizes. Consider, too, how long the food will sit before it is served. For example, if you are planning an award banquet, the food may rest at serving temperature for an hour before the meal is served. Conduct a small-scale pilot to see how the food looks, tastes and holds up for the event time schedule.

Meal Ideas

Some simple prepare ahead buffet ideas include lasagna, chili, spaghetti and other pasta dishes, roast beef, barbecued chicken, casseroles, baked beans, scalloped potatoes, potato salad, tossed green salads and deep dish pies. However, you can use most recipes that can be prepared in advance or require little last minute preparation. If cost is a concern, consider your available serving pieces and utensils as you plan your menu. If you need to buy or rent serving pieces, this will increase the cost to feed the crowd.

Estimating Expense

Once you have a menu, you can estimate the cost. List the ingredients and determine a serving size for each. For example, for fruits and vegetables, use ½ cup and for roasted chicken, use 4 ounces. Also, add in the cost of linens, decorations, purchased or rented equipment, worker wages and promotional materials. Add an additional 10 percent to cover unanticipated expenses. You can reduce your costs by shopping at wholesale clubs and restaurant supply stores or soliciting donations.

Cooking Tips

Add salt sparingly to food as you prepare it. Diners can add more if needed. Disposable aluminum pans work well for lightweight dishes like baked beans or macaroni and cheese. Use metal pans for heavier dishes such as roasts. Complete as much as possible in advance. For example, if you are serving baked potatoes, wash them the day before. Fresh vegetables, however, should be cooked just before serving, if possible. Allow extra cooking time for foods that are refrigerated prior to baking. Also, when you multiple large pans in the oven, they may require more time.

Food Safety

Some bacteria strains love a buffet. (ref 2) Be sure to follow proper food safety protocol when preparing meals for crowds. Wash your hands before and after handling food. Wash all work surfaces prior to the meal preparation with hot, soapy water. Rinse with hot water. Be sure to keep raw meat away from other foods. Use a thermometer to cook all food to the recommended internal temperature. Once prepared, make sure dishes are covered and refrigerated promptly, particularly those with mayonnaise, cream or custard fillings.

References

The Good Housekeeping Cookbook; 1983

USDA; Keeping Food Safe on the Buffet Table

http://www.fsis.usda.gov/News_&_Events/Script_Buffet_Table/index.asp