



Guests will toast the host
(that's you) after they sample
this creative party fare

Very *Inviting*

Tips for Holiday Party Hosts

Kim Otten, a Lowcountry caterer, offers these two key pieces of advice for holiday entertaining:

- **Make lists and plan ahead**, because during the holidays you're jostling oven space and refrigerator space.
- **Focus on balancing a good combination of colors, textures and flavors on the menu.** "You don't want everything to be creamy or cheesy," she says.

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◀ Bourbon Pecan Pound Cake, page 37.

Founded on religious tolerance and fueled by a liberal appetite for good times and good manners, Charleston has been known as a polite, partying town for more than three centuries.

This time of year, when the sea breezes take on a chilly bite and halls are decked with greenery, ribbons and bows, the celebratory mood of the holiday season settles in with a seasonal stream of holiday parties.

Though the party tradition remains, the way many Lowcountry residents put on a party has changed thanks to our increasingly busy schedules. "Women just don't have the time and energy to put into all these days and days of baking like we used to and like I did when my children were little," says downtown resident Ina R. Hoover, a retired minister, mother of two and grandmother of five. "It comes down to what's important for us, and for me it's getting the family together."

During the holidays, she and her husband, Ronald, keep the festivities focused on family and keep things very simple. She concentrates on getting the house decorated while her son Mark helps Ronald take over the preparation of food and libations.

In the kitchen, the menu of holiday party fare remains the same, with

an emphasis on family favorites such as macaroni pie, sweet potato soufflé, oyster stew and a lime congealed salad – all prepared using recipes handed down through several generations of family members.

To keep things as cool as possible in the kitchen, she orders holiday cakes (choices include coconut, chocolate, and bourbon pecan pound cake) from Kim Otten, a local caterer who describes herself as "mostly a mom that happens to cater for friends and family."

Like Hoover, Otten's busy schedule and her role as a wife and mother of two young boys prevent her from hosting as many parties as she would like. But her active social life (much of it revolving around St. Matthew's Church) and her catering business keep her busy attending parties and preparing food for many of them.

The largely self-taught cook, who worked as an assistant to cookbook author and cooking instructor Judith Olney before moving from Raleigh to Charleston eight years ago, says hors d'oeuvres are in high demand at Charleston holiday parties. "They're easier to serve and easier for me to do," Otten says.

Favorites include cornmeal muffins with smoked turkey, rosemary butter and cranberry conserve; ham

biscuits with pimiento cheese; and Parker House rolls with ham and mustard sauce. "Baked brie is always really popular with various toppings, and I do a hot shrimp and artichoke dip," she adds.

Otten also enjoys making beautiful holiday vegetable platters. "It's great to have something beyond carrot sticks and celery sticks. It makes a huge difference." Instead, she keeps 'em guessing and reaching for more by adding asparagus, haricot verts (very young, thin green beans), sweet pepper strips, broccoli, sugar snap peas and mushrooms. She recommends always blanching any green vegetables before plating them. "They look better, they taste better and they're easier to eat," she says.

Otten describes the Lowcountry's typical holiday party mood and attire as "mid-range formal."

"We don't go to a lot of black-tie, pull-out-a-lot-of-silver kind of things, but people seem to enjoy having the opportunity to dress up, wear nice clothes and pull out the china," she says. "I think it's more formal than other places I've lived, especially because people here do have beautiful platters and their grandmother's silver, and it's a shame to leave it locked up in the china cabinet." *recipes, page 33*

Photography by Terry Kuzniar | Written by Holly Herrick

This is a great Southern (and Low-country) variation on the classic artichoke dip, says Otten. She likes to serve it with toasted pita triangles lightly brushed with olive oil and a mixture of dried thyme and oregano, then baked for about 7 minutes at 350 degrees to get them nice and crisp. Alternatively, she recommends good-quality wheat crackers. Simple as can be, this dish can be prepared ahead of time and baked just before serving. She says she can't make enough of it during the holidays – it's that much of a hit.



Kim's Holiday Hot Artichoke and Shrimp Dip

*½ pound cooked shrimp,
peeled and deveined
1 (13-ounce) can unmarinated
artichoke hearts, drained
1 (6-ounce) jar marinated
artichoke hearts, drained
1 cup mayonnaise*

*½ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese
1 or 2 dashes Worcestershire
sauce (optional)
1 or 2 dashes Texas Pete or
other favorite brand of hot
sauce (optional)
Fresh thyme for garnish (optional)*

Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Finely chop shrimp and both types of artichoke hearts. Place in a medium bowl. Add mayonnaise, Parmesan, Worcestershire sauce and hot sauce, and mix well. Spoon into a lightly greased 1-quart shallow baking dish. Bake for 10-15 minutes or until hot and bubbly. Serve warm with pita chips or crackers. Garnish with fresh thyme if desired. Makes 10-20 appetizer-size portions.



In this simplified version of one of Otten's most popular appetizers, corn muffins are the starting point for an edible envelope filled with turkey and cranberry sauce (as assembled in the photograph here). Here are two recipes – one for Otten's corn muffins, and one for a simple cranapple chutney that appeared years ago in Food & Wine magazine. To assemble the appetizers, slice the muffins in half horizontally. Spread a thin layer of the chutney on the bottom half, top with a thin slice of turkey, top with the muffin, and secure with a rosemary sprig "toothpick" (with the bottom leaves removed). Assemble just before serving.

Corn Muffins

<i>2 cups unbleached all-purpose flour</i>	<i>½ teaspoon salt</i>
<i>1 cup fine stone-ground yellow cornmeal</i>	<i>2 large eggs</i>
<i>(Otten suggests House Autry or Arrowhead Mills)</i>	<i>¾ cup sugar</i>
<i>1½ teaspoons baking powder</i>	<i>8 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted and cooled slightly</i>
<i>1 teaspoon baking soda</i>	<i>¾ cup sour cream</i>
	<i>½ cup milk</i>

Preheat oven to 400 degrees with a rack in the center position. Grease muffin tins (miniature or regular size) with shortening and set aside.

In a medium bowl, whisk together flour, cornmeal, baking powder, baking soda and salt. Set aside. In another medium bowl, whisk the eggs until lemon-colored and well-combined. Add the sugar and whisk vigorously until thickened, about 30 seconds. Add the butter in three parts, whisking to combine each time. Add half the sour cream and half the milk. Whisk to combine. Whisk in the remaining sour cream and milk and combine. Add the wet ingredients to the dry ingredients, folding gently with a spatula until just combined. Divide batter evenly among the muffin cups. Do not flatten the tops.

Bake until golden brown, about 12-14 minutes for miniature muffins and 18 minutes for standard size. Rotate muffin tins from front to back halfway through baking. Cool the muffins in the pan for 5 minutes, then invert onto a wire rack, stand the muffins upright and cool completely before slicing and filling. Makes about 24 miniature or 12 regular sized muffins.



Cranapple Chutney

<i>1 pound cranberries</i>	<i>½ teaspoon ground nutmeg</i>
<i>1 cup granulated sugar</i>	<i>¼ teaspoon ground cloves</i>
<i>½ cup brown sugar</i>	<i>¼ teaspoon ground allspice</i>
<i>½ cup golden raisins</i>	<i>1 cup water</i>
<i>2 teaspoons cinnamon</i>	<i>1 cup diced onion</i>
<i>1 teaspoon ground ginger</i>	<i>1 Rome beauty apple, cored, chopped</i>

Simmer first 10 ingredients in a 2 quart saucepan over medium heat until berries pop, about 15 minutes. Reduce heat, stir in onion and apple, and simmer uncovered until thick, about 15 minutes. Refrigerate, covered, up to 2 weeks. Makes 3 cups.

Variations on macaroni pie have been a staple on Southern holiday tables for generations. This modified version comes from Hoover's family recipe file and she says she's been making it since she was first married, nearly a half century ago. She prefers to prepare the dish a day ahead of time.

While Hoover usually serves the pie family style for the holidays, the salty, creamy, crunchy delights of macaroni and cheese make the perfect party-food match for sweet and flirty ham served together in individual "pockets." It's best to prepare the macaroni a day ahead, as Ina does, so it can set up overnight. The following day, take a scoop of the mac 'n' cheese and roll it in thinly sliced Virginia ham, seal it with a toothpick, garnish with a bit of sage leaf (as shown here) and reheat in a low oven. It's as easy as pie!

Ina's Macaroni Pie 'n' Ham Pockets

8 ounces elbow macaroni, uncooked
1 tablespoon salt
7 ounces best-quality aged white cheddar cheese, grated
4 ounces fontina cheese, grated
½ stick butter
Salt and fresh ground pepper, to taste
1 egg

3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
1 cup milk (or half-and-half is "yummy and wonderful")
8 leaves fresh sage, finely chopped
1 pound good-quality baked Virginia ham, thinly sliced
Toothpicks and fresh sage leaves, to garnish

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Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Cook the macaroni in boiling water, adding 1 tablespoon salt to the water, for 7-8 minutes or until just al dente, but not too soft; stir while cooking to prevent lumping. Drain macaroni and set aside.

Butter a medium-sized casserole dish. Line the dish with half of the cooked macaroni. Combine the two kinds of cheese in a small bowl. Top the macaroni layer with half of the grated cheese, spreading evenly. Add about ten "dots" of butter on top and season with a layer of salt and pepper to taste. Repeat with another layer of macaroni, cheese, salt, pepper and the remaining butter.

In a separate bowl, beat the egg with a fork. Gradually pour the egg into a medium-sized bowl with the flour, stirring well as you pour to prevent lumps. Then add milk (or cream) slowly, stirring as you go, and finally, the chopped fresh sage. Season with salt and pepper. Pour the mixture over the macaroni and cheese mixture. Poke the top gently with a fork to ensure that the liquid makes it all the way through to the bottom.

Bake 25 minutes, uncovered. If not browned at the end of 25 minutes, place under the broiler for added color. Hoover warns that if you cook it any longer, "you will have a very dry casserole." Cool to room temperature, then cover and refrigerate overnight.

On party day, preheat the oven to 325 degrees. To assemble the macaroni pie 'n' ham pockets, place a scant tablespoon of the casserole in the center of half of a slice of ham cut into a triangular shape. Roll the ham around the filling tightly, sealing the ends with a toothpick. Do not overfill! Arrange the pockets on a single layer on a baking sheet. Cover. Bake about 15 minutes or until heated through. Garnish with fresh sage leaves and serve immediately. Makes approximately 50 appetizer portions.

"This is the old and traditional Southern recipe sure to be found on every Sunday dinner table, anytime company is coming or during the holidays," Hoover says about her sweet potato souffle recipe.

To dress things up a bit, I decided to "puff up" the souffle with the addition of eggs and bake the souffle in individual, prepared tart shells. They're too cute when topped with a whole pecan and just three mini-marshmallows. More savory than sweet, this will be a favorite at your holiday fête!

Savory Sweet Potato Souffle Tartlets

5 medium sweet potatoes, scrubbed

About ½ cup lightly packed dark brown sugar (more or less to taste)

¼ cup whole cream

1 teaspoon allspice

2 tablespoons butter

2 egg yolks

Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste (taste especially carefully for the right amount of salt)

½ cup chopped pecans

½ cup raisins or currants

2 egg whites, whipped into firm peaks

Small bag of mini-marshmallows (optional)

Pecan halves

16 prepared tartlet shells, such as Dutch Am brand (or you can make your own)

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Pierce each potato and bake until done, about 35-45 minutes. Set aside to cool. Reduce oven heat to 350 degrees.

When the potatoes are cool enough to handle, remove their skin casings and discard. Place the cooked flesh in a medium-sized bowl. Puree or beat until smooth. Mix in the sugar, cream, allspice, butter, egg yolks, salt and pepper, seasoning to taste. Blend thoroughly with a blender or hand-held mixer until light and fluffy. Fold in the nuts and raisins.

Whisk in one-third of the whipped egg whites, then fold in the remainder until just blended. Scoop a generous mound (about ¼ cup or so) of the mixture into each tart shell. Top each with a pecan half and a cluster of 3 mini-marshmallows. Arrange on a baking sheet. Bake at 350 degrees for 25 minutes. Increase heat to 375 degrees and bake another 10 minutes. Serve warm and fairly soon after baking, but don't worry – these souffles will not fall. Makes approximately 16 tartlets.

Otten describes this cake as both moist and light. "It's one of my favorites for holiday entertaining because it keeps beautifully and freezes well," she says. "You can make variations by substituting golden rum for the bourbon, using either pecans or skinned, chopped hazelnuts, or by using light rum and sliced almonds in place of the bourbon and pecans. If you use almonds, add 1 teaspoon of pure almond extract to go along with the vanilla in the original recipe."

This cake smells absolutely delicious while it's baking and won't disappoint once it's on the plate. Since I came across some mini-Bundt molds – on sale, no less! – just days before I planned to bake the cake, I decided to see how it would do in individual portions. The mini-cakes are gorgeous dusted with powdered sugar and garnished with a sprig of holly. No matter what the size, this cake packs a wallop of decadent holiday cheer.

If you would rather use a regular-size Bundt pan, make the baking time 60-75 minutes; otherwise, the procedure is the same.



Bourbon Pecan Pound Cake

*2½ cups bleached all-purpose flour
1 cup packed light brown sugar
1 cup granulated sugar
2 teaspoons baking powder
½ teaspoon salt
2 sticks unsalted butter,
softened*

*4 large eggs
3 large egg yolks
½ cup good-quality Kentucky bourbon
2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract
1½ cups finely chopped toasted pecans
tossed with 1 tablespoon flour
Powdered sugar for dusting*

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Place a rack in the lower third of the oven and preheat to 325 degrees. Grease and flour 10 mini-Bundt molds and place them on baking sheets.

Place the flour, sugars, baking powder and salt in the bowl of a heavy-duty mixer. Mix briefly with the paddle attachment. Add the softened butter, cut into 1-inch pieces. Beat on low speed for about 2 minutes or until the ingredients are well-combined.

In a separate mixing bowl, combine the eggs, egg yolks, bourbon and vanilla. Mix well.

Using a spatula, scrape down the flour mixture from the sides of the mixing bowl. Add one-third of the egg mixture. Mix at medium speed for 2 minutes, then stop the mixer and scrape down the bowl and the beater. Add another third of the egg mixture, beat for 2 minutes and scrape the bowl again. Finally, add the remaining egg mixture, beat and scrape the bowl as before.

Scrape and stir the batter a final time, then fold in the floured pecans. Guide the batter with a spatula into the prepared pans. Leave a ¼-inch space at the top of each pan to allow room for the cakes to rise. Smooth the tops.

Bake for about 35-40 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted into the cakes halfway between the side of the pans and the center emerges clean. Cool the cake in the pans on a rack for 15 minutes, then invert onto the rack to finish cooling. Just before serving, dust the cakes generously with powdered sugar. Makes 10 mini-cakes or about 20 servings. 