

safety and sanitation 101 ...	92
look before you buy ...	93
cross-contamination nation ...	94
food storage and handling ...	94
choosing good equipment ...	98
cooking for a crowd ...	102
first aid for food ...	104
serving in quantity ...	106

the logistics of quantity cooking

The themed menus in *Do It For Less! Parties* all serve 12, 25, 50, and 75 guests and include shopping and do-ahead lists to make your preparation experience as stress-free as possible. We know all the recipes work—and work well, having tested them to rave reviews. Even when you're armed with quality recipes and menu countdowns, cooking for a crowd can be quite a daunting responsibility. It demands a different set of skills than does cooking for a family of four. So take the time to read this chapter thoroughly. Even the most experienced party-givers will find some words of wisdom here to improve their process of cooking for a crowd.

SAFETY AND SANITATION 101

Have you ever felt queasy a few hours after eating at a barbecue? The cause may not have been overeating; some unseen bacteria may have snuck into your coleslaw. Food contamination and food poisoning can be a serious problem. Follow this list of considerations to keep your food and guests safe.

personal hygiene

Without getting into gory details about the risks of contracting a nasty virus like Hepatitis A or a bacterial infection like salmonella, it is crucial to mention that meticulous personal hygiene is essential in any kitchen.

- **Clean hands.** Wash hands before, during, and after handling food, using soap, a nailbrush, and hot water. Wash hands after using the restroom, smoking, coughing, sneezing, or scratching, and don't cook with lotion on your hands.



- **Avoid jewelry.** Jewelry can get caught in appliances and end up in the soup. Use common sense and discretion when cooking while wearing any jewelry, or better still, remove your jewelry altogether.
- **Secure hair.** The rule for jewelry applies also to hair. If you don't want hair in the food, either tie your hair back or wear a hat.
- **Cover wounds.** Cover any cuts or open wounds with proper dressing. Wear disposable plastic gloves over the dressing to prevent any infection from spreading. Remember to change your gloves when switching from raw meats and unwashed produce to cooked foods.
- **Avoid eating while cooking.** If you are hungry, stop and take a break. Chewing food, gum, or toothpicks while cooking can lead to unwanted surprises in the food.
- **Tasting protocol.** Fingers are for pointing, spoons are for tasting. Use a spoon and not your finger to taste the sauce for seasoning. After tasting, wash the spoon before using again. No double-dipping. Alternatively, use plastic disposable spoons and discard after each use.

keep it clean

Keeping your work area clean will reduce the risk of contamination.

- **Disinfect surfaces.** Always wash cutting boards thoroughly with hot, soapy water when preparing different types of food. You don't want to contaminate your fruit and vegetables with chicken juices. Nor do you want your brownies to taste of garlic. Surprisingly, wooden cutting boards are safer to use than plastic for meats and poultry. Wash counters and work surfaces with hot, soapy water and an antibacterial cleanser or diluted bleach.
- **Clean as you go.** Get into the habit of washing pots, pans, and dishes as you go to keep things running smoothly and prevent a huge pile of dishes at the end of the day that nobody wants to clean. If you have a dishwasher, always empty it before you start cooking. Stopping to put clean dishes away while you work will only slow you down.

LOOK BEFORE YOU BUY

There are strict health and safety guidelines enforced by government agencies for anyone selling food of any kind. Always buy from a reputable grocery store or supplier.

The first step to sanitation starts in the grocery store. When buying packaged meats or other high-protein foods such as milk and deli products, cream, cheese, or tofu, check the "use by" or "best before" dates to ensure



helpful hint:

Bacteria can thrive on kitchen sponges, rags, and dishtowels, so they should be washed frequently, preferably in a bleach solution. To quickly disinfect a sponge or rag, dampen and then microwave on high for at least 1 minute.

optimum freshness. Sometimes if you look further back into the refrigerator case you will find fresher products. Beef, veal, and lamb should be red and fresh-looking. Ground beef, turkey, or chicken that has a gray tone is usually a few days old.

As tempting as it seems, avoid buying fish or shellfish from vendors parked in a truck stop or on the side of the street with a cooler and one of those "100 shrimp for \$10" signs. There is a reason why that shrimp is so unbelievably cheap.

When buying whole fish, look for a fresh, mild ocean smell. The eyes should be clear and shiny, not cloudy or sunken. Look for a red or pink color around the gills and shiny, bright scales that are tight on the skin. Pass on any fish that is soft to the touch. When pressed, the flesh should be firm and elastic; it should not dent easily.

As most recipes call for fillets or steaks, and that is most likely how you will be buying your fish, you must rely on your sense of smell to judge freshness. If in doubt, don't buy it; choose frozen fish instead. It is often the freshest fish on the market because it is frequently frozen on the boat immediately after being caught.

CROSS-CONTAMINATION NATION

Once you have selected your meat, place it in the lowest rack of the shopping cart where the juices will not drip onto ready-to-eat or raw foods. Meat "sealed" in plastic packaging can still drip everywhere and may contain bacteria that, if not thoroughly cooked or washed off of fruits and vegetables, could cause a guest to become sick. This transfer of bacteria is called cross-contamination and is responsible for many outbreaks of food poisoning. Be aware of cross-contamination when preparing food. If you use a cutting board to prepare raw chicken, do not use the same board for cutting lettuce unless it has been thoroughly washed with hot, soapy water. A safer and more hygienic solution is to have cutting boards designated for specific duties, e.g., one for raw meats, one for cooked meats, and one for fruits and vegetables. Look for plastic cutting boards in a variety of colors, and allot one color for each duty. If you have only one cutting board, choose wood. Another alternative is to use disposable cutting boards available in grocery stores.

FOOD STORAGE AND HANDLING

There are two reasons to store food properly: sanitation and expense. Holding foods at the proper temperatures in the proper containers will keep them from dehydration and spoilage. Spoiled food is money wasted; you want your food to last as long as possible in its ideal condition.

Proper refrigeration at all times preserves freshness and keeps bacteria at bay. Perishables must be kept at 40 degrees or less and frozen food at 32 degrees

or less. Bacteria thrives between 40 degrees and 140 degrees. We call this the "danger zone." Foods should not be kept in this range for more than 4 hours. Keep this in mind when serving a buffet, storing leftovers, and grocery shopping.

Temperatures vary widely for properly cooked, safe-to-eat chicken, pork, and beef. See the guides on page 80 for proper cooking temperatures. For packaged goods, read the label. Many product labels display the correct cooking temperatures on them.

ideal temperatures

location	temperature (°F)
Freezer	0°
Refrigerator	8° to 40°
Cool room temperature	65°
Warm room temperature	70° to 75°
Lukewarm or tepid liquid	95°
Warm liquid	105° to 115°
Hot liquid	120°
Boiling water	212°
Rising bread	80°
Low/slow oven	180° to 225°
Warm oven	300° to 325°
Moderate oven	350° to 375°
Hot oven	400° to 450°
Very hot oven	475° to 500°

Leftover food should be cooled, placed in airtight containers, and refrigerated as soon as possible. Eat refrigerated leftovers within three days. Be sure to reheat them to a temperature of 170 degrees to destroy any bacteria.

Plan your grocery-shopping trip so that perishables are unrefrigerated for the shortest time possible. You may want to consider having a cooler packed with ice or reusable cooling packs in your car if you have delicate items such as seafood that need to be refrigerated. A cooler will also come in handy if you are shopping in the middle of summer or the ride home is a long one. Once home, store all food in proper, well-sealed storage containers. Below are guidelines for you to follow when storing food:

- **Breads.** Bread dries out faster in the refrigerator than at room temperature, but is less likely to get moldy. Store in paper or plastic. Alternatively, wrap tightly in plastic wrap, cover with aluminum foil, and freeze.

 Buy coolers at the end of summer when they go on sale.