

Absolute HOLIDAYS

THE
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The Times-Picayune



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CELEBRATIONS

NATURAL SETTING

REAL CHRISTMAS
TREE SHOPPING
— OR CHOPPING
— CAN PROVIDE
SOME LIFE
TO HOLIDAY
SEASON

Marco Buscaglia

S hopping for a real Christmas tree can be a delightful holiday tradition for some families. For others? Not so much.

“Some of the biggest family arguments ever,” says Sean Doyle. “My father would bring us to the middle of nowhere on the first Saturday of December every year and it didn’t matter if it was a sunny day or a rainy day or freezing cold, we went. And most years, it was miserable.”

Doyle, from Chicago, says his family would drive to a tree farm in Michigan and travel as a pack to pick out a tree and then chop it down. “I feel bad because my brothers and sisters and I were probably little jerks and it was something my dad loved doing with us,” Doyle says. “Even my mom was into it—filling up thermoses with hot chocolate, making cookies for the drive there and back—and we were not into it at all.”

Photo by Hannah Olinger on Unsplash



One of Sean's three sisters, Erin Bellow, remembers it differently. "I had a lot of fun doing it," Bellow says. "We'd go with our cousins and run around in the snow, drag this giant tree back to our minivan and tie it up on the roof. It was the start of the holidays for me."

Both Doyle and Bellow don't go to tree farms with their families these days but they both still buy real trees. "It would feel weird to have an artificial tree since I'm so used to real ones," says Doyle. "It's more work, but it just feels like Christmas."

Bellow says she and her husband had an artificial tree each Christmas before they had children but decided to "go retro" after their children were born. "It's nostalgic, I guess, and it's a nice connection to my childhood and my mom and dad," Bellow says.



Photo by Felicia Buitenwerf on Unsplash



If you want to buy a real tree or chop down your own, don't show up unprepared. Have a plan. Here's a step-by-step guide to help you through the process:

1. Determine size: Before you leave the house, measure the ceiling height in the room where the tree will be placed. Remember to account for your tree stand and topper when determining the ideal tree height.

2. Decide on type: There are many different species of Christmas trees. The best type often comes down to personal preference. You can choose from one of the following:

- Fraser Fir: Known for its strong branches and fragrant smell
- Balsam Fir: Dark green color with a nice fragrance
- Douglas Fir: Soft needles and a sweet fragrance
- Noble Fir: Strong branches, ideal for heavy ornaments
- Scotch Pine: Known for not dropping its needles
- Blue Spruce: Distinctive blue foliage but sharp needles

3. Select location: You can purchase a Christmas tree from various places, including tree lots, which pop up in many urban areas and are often run by local charities. In addition to tree lots, you can find real trees at U-Cut farms, which allow you to choose and cut down your own tree. You can also pick one up at local retail and hardware stores.

4. Check out the tree: Be sure to examine the following elements when shopping for your tree, including:

- Freshness: The tree should be green. Needles should not fall off easily when the tree is gently shaken—they should be flexible and not brittle.
- Shape: Look for a symmetrical tree but remember that no tree is perfect.
- Branch strength: Ensure branches are sturdy, especially if you have heavy ornaments.
- Check for pests: Examine the tree for signs of pests or eggs that might hatch later.

5. Transporting the tree: Most tree lots will have a machine that wraps your tree in netting, making it much easier to transport back to your home. If you need to bring your tree home on the roof of your car, place the trunk facing the front of the vehicle. Use strong rope or bungee cords to secure it and ensure it's tight so the tree doesn't move during transportation.

6. Setting it up: Cut about 1-2 inches from the bottom before placing it in the stand. This will help the tree absorb water, which should be put into the stand as soon as the tree is put up. Remember to check the water level daily because a tree can drink a lot, especially in the first few days. It's important to place your tree away from fireplaces, radiators, heaters and direct sunlight to reduce the risk of fire and to keep the tree from drying out too quickly.

7. Be safe: Remember to always keep safety in mind. Keep the tree hydrated, avoid overloading electrical outlets and always turn off tree lights when leaving the house or going to bed.

8. Disposal: After Christmas, look for tree recycling programs in your community. Many areas offer curbside pickup for trees, turning them into mulch or using them for erosion control.





ENTERTAINMENT

THE (MID) MORNING AFTER

A LIGHT APPROACH TO HOLIDAY BRUNCH

After a late night decking the halls or ringing in the new year, your friends and family may feel a bit more full than usual. So much for your big post-celebration brunch. Or not. Consider going a little lighter instead of going all in on heavy breakfast foods and stomach-busting sandwiches. Your diners might enjoy something less gluttonous before diving into the football-game fare later in the day. Here are some delicious, refreshing and relatively easy recipes that are perfect for your day-after brunches or any occasion that begs for a lighter touch:

Avocado toast with poached egg

4 slices of whole grain or sourdough bread

2 ripe avocados

4 eggs (for poaching)

Salt, pepper, chili flakes and lemon juice to taste

1. Toast bread slices to your preference.
2. Mash avocado and mix with a squeeze of lemon juice, salt and pepper.
3. Spread the mashed avocado onto each toast.
4. Poach the eggs and place one on each piece of toast.
5. Sprinkle with chili flakes and additional salt and pepper if desired.



Photo by Ben Kolde on Unsplash



Mixed berry yogurt parfait

2 cups of Greek yogurt (or any yogurt of your choice)

Honey or maple syrup to taste

2 cups mixed berries (e.g., blueberries, strawberries, raspberries)

Granola for crunch

1. Layer yogurt, berries, and granola in a glass or bowl.
2. Drizzle with honey or maple syrup.



Photo by S'well on Unsplash

Green smoothie bowl

1 ripe banana

1 cup of spinach or kale

1/2 avocado

1/2 cup almond milk (or any other milk)

Toppings: chia seeds, sliced fruits, coconut flakes, granola, nuts, etc.

1. Blend banana, spinach or kale, avocado and almond milk until smooth.
2. Pour into a bowl and decorate with desired toppings.



Photo by Alexandra Golovac on Unsplash



Lemon and herb quinoa salad

1 cup cooked quinoa (cooled)
1/2 cucumber, diced
1/2 cup cherry tomatoes, halved
2 tbsp fresh herbs (e.g., parsley, mint), chopped
1 lemon (zest and juice)
2 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
Salt and pepper to taste

1. In a large bowl, mix quinoa, cucumber, cherry tomatoes and herbs.

2. Whisk together lemon zest, lemon juice, olive oil, salt and pepper.

3. Pour the dressing over the quinoa mixture and toss well.



Photo by Ella Olsson on Unsplash

Ginger-mint fruit salad

3 cups of mixed fruits (e.g., melon, pineapple, berries, kiwi)
1-inch piece of fresh ginger, grated
A handful of fresh mint leaves, chopped
Juice of 1 lime

1. In a large bowl, mix all the fruits.

2. Drizzle with lime juice, add grated ginger and chopped mint.

3. Toss everything together gently.

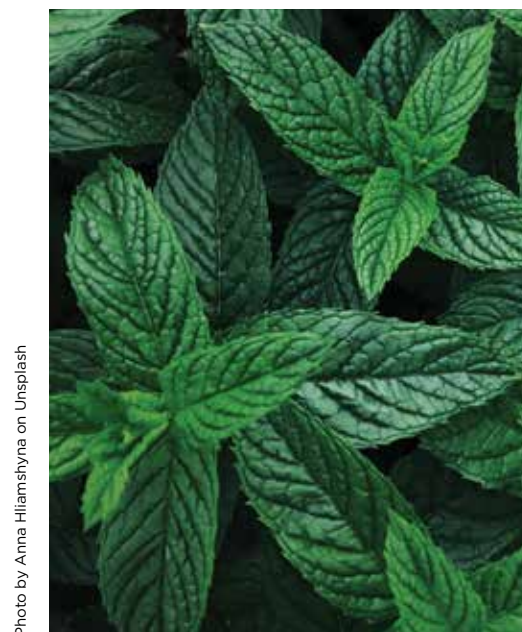


Photo by Anna Hliamshyna on Unsplash



Photo by NoonBrew on Unsplash



Photo by Briona Baker on Unsplash



Photo by Catia Climovich on Unsplash

Drinks

Mimosa with a twist: Add a splash of pomegranate or cranberry juice to your classic mimosa for a festive touch.

Herbal teas: Serve a selection of herbal teas, like peppermint or chamomile, for a soothing drink.



ENTERTAINMENT

OLD SCHOOL

HOLIDAY DRINKS SHOULD START WITH THE BASICS

Everyone just assumes you know the classics—songs, TV shows, books and, let's face it, drinks during a certain time of year. If the most thought you've put into the holiday drinks you serve is looking for something with a sleigh on the label, here are some classic Christmas drink recipes to get you started:

Classic Eggnog

4 egg yolks
1/3 cup sugar
2 cups whole milk
1 cup heavy cream
3/4 cup brandy or rum (optional)
Nutmeg for garnish

Whisk together egg yolks and sugar until creamy. In a separate pot, heat milk and cream until just beginning to simmer. Gradually whisk the hot milk mixture into the yolk mixture. Return all to the pot and cook until slightly thickened. Remove from heat, stir in brandy or rum and chill. Serve garnished with nutmeg.



Photo by Lars on Unsplash

Peppermint White Russian

2 oz vodka
1 oz peppermint schnapps
1 oz Kahlúa or coffee liqueur
2 oz heavy cream or milk
Crushed candy canes for rimming the glass

Mix vodka, schnapps and Kahlúa in a shaker with ice. Pour into a glass rimmed with crushed candy canes and top with cream.



Photo by Vladimir on Unsplash



Mulled Wine

1 bottle red wine (like Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot)
1 orange, sliced
8-10 whole cloves
3 cinnamon sticks
3-4 star anise
1/4 cup honey or sugar
Optional: Brandy or Grand Marnier to taste

In a pot, combine all ingredients and simmer (don't boil) for 20-30 minutes. Strain and serve hot.



Photo by Gaby Dyson on Unsplash

Cranberry Mimosa

Cranberry juice
Champagne or Prosecco
Fresh cranberries and rosemary sprigs for garnish

Fill half a flute with cranberry juice, then top with champagne. Garnish with cranberries and a rosemary sprig.



Photo by Marc Babin on Unsplash

Spiced Apple Cider Rum Punch

4 cups apple cider
1 cup dark rum
1/2 cup lemon juice
1/4 cup maple syrup
1 apple, thinly sliced
4 cinnamon sticks

Mix all ingredients in a pitcher and chill. Serve cold with apple slices and cinnamon sticks for garnish.



Photo by Tijana Drndarski on Unsplash



Cranberry Moscow Mule

2 oz vodka
1 oz lime juice
2 oz cranberry juice
3 oz ginger beer
Lime wedges and cranberries for garnish

Mix vodka, lime juice, and cranberry juice in a mug. Add ice and top with ginger beer. Garnish with lime and cranberries.



Kyle P.

Wassail

4 cups apple cider
2 cups orange juice
1/2 cup lemon juice
12 whole cloves
4 cinnamon sticks
1 pinch ground ginger
1 pinch ground nutmeg
Optional: 1 cup brandy or rum

Combine all ingredients in a pot. Simmer for 1 hour. Serve hot.



Photo by Marc Babin on Unsplash

Non-alcoholic Candy Cane Lane

1 cup milk
1 peppermint candy cane
Whipped cream for garnish

Heat milk in a saucepan. Once hot, add the candy cane and stir until melted. Serve topped with whipped cream.



Photo by Tijana Drndarski on Unsplash



Harvest Moon

Non-alcoholic Apple Ginger Punch

4 cups apple cider
1 cup ginger ale
1 apple, thinly sliced

Mix apple cider and ginger ale. Serve over ice and garnish with apple slices.



Photo by Elena Leya on Unsplash

Non-alcoholic Cranberry Sparkler

Cranberry juice
Sparkling water or lemon-lime soda
Fresh cranberries and a lime slice for garnish

Fill a glass halfway with cranberry juice and top with sparkling water or soda. Garnish with fresh cranberries and a lime slice.



ENTERTAINMENT

REVISED REFRESHERS

INNOVATIVE OPTIONS HELP SPLASH SOME LIFE INTO YOUR HOLIDAY PARTY

Sure, the standards are great but don't be afraid to ride on the fresh wave of innovative and modern twists to classic seasonal drinks. Here are some contemporary takes on holiday beverages.

Frosty Coconut Mojito

2 oz white rum
1 oz coconut cream
8 mint leaves
1 oz lime juice
1 oz simple syrup
Soda water

Mix all ingredients except soda water in a shaker. Pour into a glass filled with ice and top with soda water. Garnish with mint sprigs and coconut flakes.



Photo by Max P on Unsplash

Salted Caramel White Russians

1 oz vodka
1 oz Kahlúa or other coffee liqueur
1 oz salted caramel creamer (or to taste)
Crushed ice
Caramel and sea salt for garnish

Mix vodka, Kahlúa and creamer over ice. Drizzle with caramel and a pinch of sea salt.



Photo by Amanda P on Unsplash



Spiced Pear Bellini

1 oz pear puree
1/4 tsp ground cinnamon
1/4 tsp ground ginger
Prosecco or Champagne

Combine pear puree with spices in a champagne flute, then top with Prosecco or Champagne.



Photo by Gary Fratte on Unsplash

Christmas Tree Gin Tonic

2 oz gin infused with rosemary and cranberries for a few days
4 oz tonic water
A sprig of rosemary and fresh cranberries for garnish

The infusion turns the gin a pinkish hue, and the rosemary mimics the look of a tiny Christmas tree.



Photo by Alicia Fost on Unsplash

Candy Cane Martini

2 oz vanilla vodka
1 oz peppermint schnapps
Crushed candy canes for rimming the glass

Rim a martini glass with crushed candy canes. Shake vodka and schnapps with ice and strain into the glass.



Photo by Frank L on Unsplash



Rosemary Gin Fizz

2 oz gin
1 oz lemon juice
1/2 oz rosemary simple syrup (made by simmering sugar, water, and fresh rosemary)
Club soda
Rosemary sprig for garnish

Shake gin, lemon juice and syrup with ice. Pour into a glass, top with club soda, and garnish with rosemary.



James Wasky

Non-alcoholic Cinnamon Maple Latte

1 shot of espresso or 1/2 cup strong coffee
1 cup milk
2 tbsp maple syrup
1/4 tsp ground cinnamon
Whipped cream for garnish

Steam or heat the milk until hot. Froth if desired. Mix in maple syrup and cinnamon. Pour the espresso into a cup, followed by the flavored milk. Top with whipped cream.



Photo by Marc B on Unsplash

Non-alcoholic Coconut Mint Hot Chocolate

1 cup milk
1/4 cup canned coconut milk
3 oz chocolate (milk or dark)
1/4 tsp peppermint extract
Coconut flakes and crushed candy cane for garnish

Heat both kinds of milk in a saucepan. Add the chocolate and whisk until smooth. Stir in the peppermint extract. Pour into a mug and garnish with coconut flakes and crushed candy cane.



Photo by Svetlana on Unsplash



Non-alcoholic Golden Turmeric Latte (Golden Milk)

1 cup milk (almond, coconut, or dairy)
1 tsp ground turmeric
1/4 tsp ground cinnamon
1/4 tsp ground ginger
1 tbsp honey or to taste
Black pepper (just a pinch)

Whisk together all ingredients in a saucepan over medium heat until hot.



Photo by Quinten Cakes on Unsplash

Non-alcoholic Cinnamon Roll Milkshake

2 cups vanilla ice cream
1 cup milk
3 cinnamon rolls (mini-sized, store-bought)
1 tsp cinnamon
Whipped cream and a cinnamon stick for garnish

Blend all ingredients until smooth. Pour into glasses, top with whipped cream and garnish with a cinnamon stick.



Photo by Horst U on Unsplash

Non-alcoholic Pumpkin Pie Hot Chocolate

2 cups milk
1/4 cup cocoa powder
1/4 cup pumpkin puree
1 tsp pumpkin pie spice
Whipped cream and a sprinkle of cinnamon for garnish

Heat milk, cocoa powder, pumpkin puree and spice in a saucepan, simmer and whisk until blended.



Photo by Andre D on Unsplash



ENTERTAINMENT

TABLE TURNER

TURKEY AND HAM, MOVE OVER —
THERE'S A NEW HOLIDAY MEAL IN TOWN

Nothing against turkey or ham—or duck or goose for that matter—but there's nothing wrong with switching things up a bit this year for your holiday meal. If you're trying to do something different, here's a contemporary spin on a Christmas dinner that incorporates simple but updated flavors and encourages a modern presentation while maintaining a festive spirit.

DINNER: Sous-Vide Herb-Crusted Beef Tenderloin

Sous vide, you say? What's that? According to Bon Appetit magazine, it's cooking at a fundamental level. Sous-vide cooking is "sealing food in an airtight container—usually a vacuum-sealed bag—and then cooking that food in temperature-controlled water. In French, the term translates to 'under vacuum,' which makes sense. Chefs vacuum seal a protein with marinade, sauce, herbs or spices and drop it in a large pot of water. There's no contact with a heated metal surface. No contact with flames or steam or smoke, and the water never comes to a boil."

2 lbs beef tenderloin

3 cloves garlic, minced

2 tablespoons rosemary, minced

2 tablespoons thyme, minced

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

1 tablespoon olive oil

1. Season beef with garlic, rosemary, thyme, salt, and black pepper.
2. Vacuum-seal the beef in a plastic bag.
3. Sous-vide at 132°F (55°C) for 2-3 hours.
4. Heat olive oil in a skillet. Remove beef from the bag and sear on all sides until golden brown.

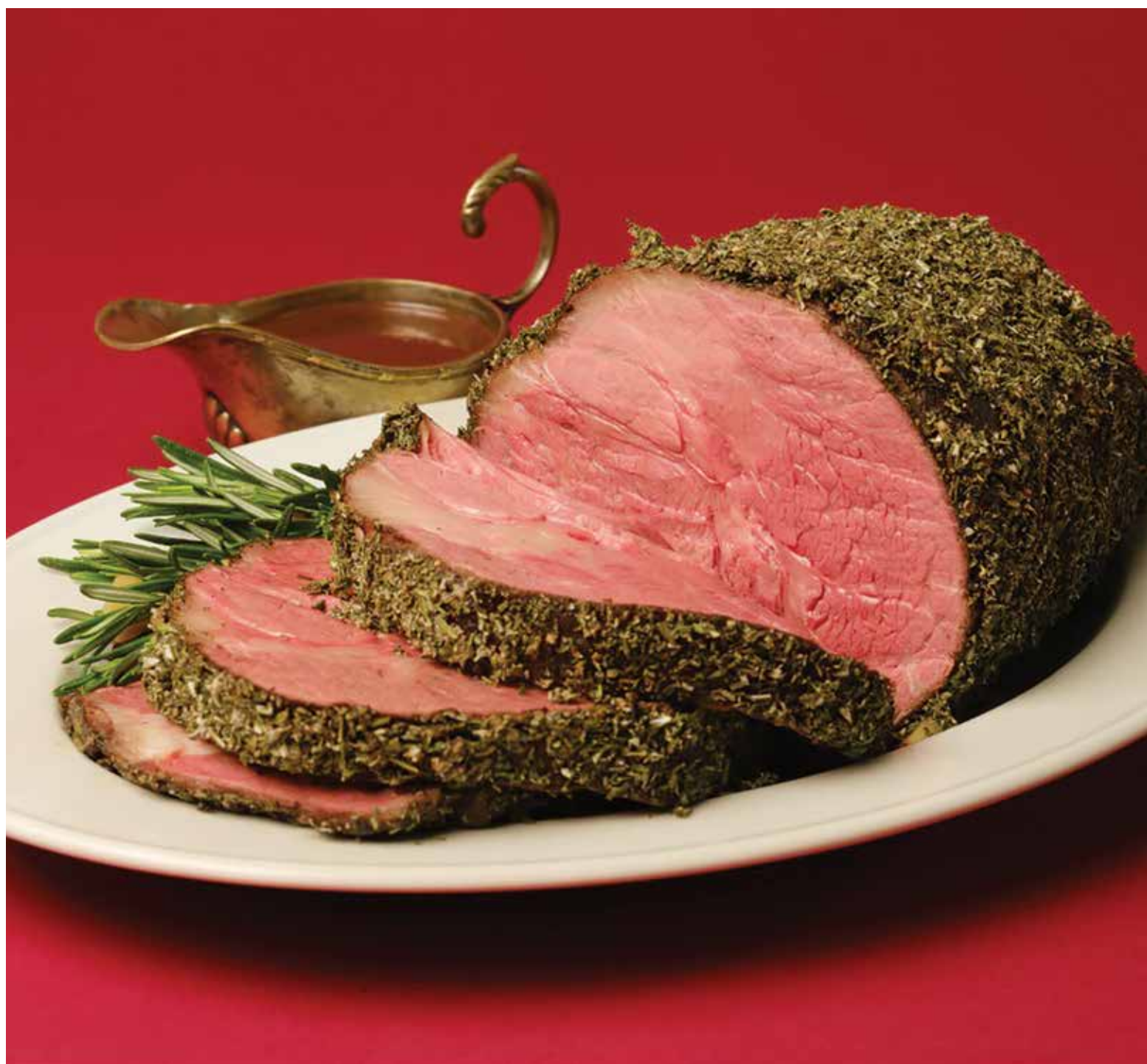


Photo courtesy Williams Sonoma



SIDE: Truffle-Parmesan Cauliflower Mash

1 head cauliflower, cut into florets

3 tablespoons butter

1/4 cup grated Parmesan

1 teaspoon truffle oil

Salt and pepper to taste

1. Steam cauliflower until tender.
2. Mash cauliflower with butter, Parmesan, truffle oil, salt and pepper until smooth.



Robert Townsend III

SIDE: Charred Brussels Sprouts with Lemon and Pecorino

1 cup milk

1 lb Brussels sprouts, halved

2 tablespoons olive oil

Salt and pepper

Zest of 1 lemon

1/4 cup shaved Pecorino cheese

1. Toss Brussels sprouts with olive oil, salt and pepper.
2. Char Brussels sprouts until blackened in spots on a hot grill or skillet.
3. Remove from heat, sprinkle with lemon zest and top with Pecorino.



Photo by Big B on Unsplash



BEVERAGE: Pomegranate-Cranberry Sparkling Mocktail

1/2 cup cranberry juice

1/4 cup pomegranate juice

1/4 cup sparkling water

Fresh cranberries and pomegranate seeds for garnish

1. In a glass, combine cranberry juice and pomegranate juice.
2. Top with sparkling water.
3. Garnish with cranberries and pomegranate seeds.



American Produce Assoc.

DESSERT: Chocolate Ganache Tart with Raspberry Sauce

1 prepared tart shell

8 oz dark chocolate, finely chopped

1 cup heavy cream

1 cup fresh raspberries

2 tablespoons sugar

1. Heat heavy cream until it just begins to boil.
2. Pour over chopped chocolate. Let sit for a minute, then stir until smooth.
3. Pour chocolate ganache into tart shell. Refrigerate until set.
4. For the raspberry sauce, blend raspberries with sugar and strain to remove seeds.
5. Serve tart slices with a drizzle of raspberry sauce.



Photo by Xavier Renoso on Unsplash



ENTERTAINMENT

CRUMB BY CRUMB

CHRISTMAS COOKIES COME IN ALL STYLES, SHAPES AND SIZES

Making cookies—alone, with family and friends or with children—can be a delightful experience. While you mix and butter and bake, there's a good chance your kitchen will be filled with holiday cheer in many forms—tunes, laughter, stories, bonding and more. With a little prep and a lot of enthusiasm, you can make cookies for everyone in your holiday circle, whether they're nephews and nieces, coworkers, your stylist or others.

And remember, the fun of Christmas cookies is not just in baking but also in decorating. Use various colored icings, sprinkles and other decorations to add a festive touch.

Here are several recipes covering a wide range of options, from classic and no-bake to vegan.

CLASSIC: Sugar Cookies

2 3/4 cups all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon baking soda
1/2 teaspoon baking powder
1 cup unsalted butter, softened
1 1/2 cups white sugar
1 egg
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1/2 teaspoon almond extract
3 to 4 tablespoons buttermilk
Sprinkles or colored sugar, for decorating

1. Preheat oven to 375°F.
2. In a small bowl, mix flour, baking soda, and baking powder. Set aside.
3. Cream butter and sugar until smooth. Beat in egg and vanilla and almond extracts.
4. Gradually blend in dry ingredients.
5. Roll rounded teaspoonfuls of dough into balls, and place onto ungreased cookie sheets.
6. Slightly flatten the tops of the cookies with the bottom of a glass dipped in buttermilk and slightly dampened. If you like, lightly brush cookies with buttermilk and sprinkle with colored sugar or decorations.
7. Bake 8 to 10 minutes or until slightly golden. Let stand on cookie sheet for 2 minutes before removing to wire racks.



Photo by Alexander Grey on Unsplash



CLASSIC: Gingerbread Cookies

3 cups all-purpose flour
3/4 teaspoon baking soda
1 tablespoon ground ginger
1 tablespoon ground cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon ground cloves
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/2 cup unsalted butter, softened
1/2 cup granulated sugar
1 large egg
2/3 cup molasses

1. In a bowl, whisk together flour, baking soda, ginger, cinnamon, cloves and salt.

2. In another bowl, beat butter and sugar until smooth and creamy.

3. Beat in the egg and then the molasses.

4. Gradually stir in the dry ingredients until combined.

5. Divide the dough in half and wrap each piece in plastic wrap. Refrigerate for at least two hours or overnight.

6. Preheat oven to 350°F. Roll out the dough on a lightly floured surface and cut into desired shapes.

7. Place cookies on a parchment-lined baking sheet and bake for 8-12 minutes.



CLASSIC: Fig and Walnut Cookies

1 1/2 cups dried figs, stemmed and coarsely chopped
1/4 cup orange juice (or brandy for a more adult version)
2 cups all-purpose flour
1 tsp baking powder
1/4 tsp salt
1/2 cup unsalted butter, softened
1/2 cup granulated sugar
1/2 cup brown sugar, packed
1 large egg
1 tsp vanilla extract
1 cup walnuts, chopped
Zest of 1 orange (optional for extra flavor)



1. In a small bowl, combine the chopped figs and orange juice (or brandy). Let this mixture sit for at least 30 minutes so the figs can soak up the liquid and soften. If possible, let them soak overnight for enhanced flavor.

2. In a medium-sized bowl, whisk together the flour, baking powder and salt. Set aside.

3. In a larger bowl, cream together the butter, granulated sugar and brown sugar until the mixture is light and fluffy. This should take about 2-3 minutes.

4. Beat in the egg and vanilla extract.

5. Gradually add the dry ingredients, mixing until just combined.

6. Fold in the soaked figs (along with any remaining liquid), walnuts and orange zest (if using).

7. Preheat your oven to 350°F and line baking sheets with parchment paper or silicone baking mats.

8. Drop the dough by rounded tablespoons onto the prepared baking sheets, spacing them about 2 inches apart.

9. Flatten each cookie slightly with the back of a spoon or your fingers.

10. Bake in the preheated oven for 12-15 minutes or until the edges of the cookies are lightly golden.

11. Allow the cookies to cool on the baking sheet for a few minutes before transferring them to a wire rack to cool completely.



CLASSIC: Snickerdoodles

1 cup unsalted butter, softened
1 1/2 cups granulated sugar
2 large eggs
2 3/4 cups all-purpose flour
2 teaspoons cream of tartar
1 teaspoon baking soda
1/4 teaspoon salt
3 tablespoons granulated sugar
3 teaspoons ground cinnamon

1. Preheat oven to 375°F
2. Cream together butter, sugar and eggs.
3. Mix in flour, cream of tartar, baking soda and salt.
4. Shape dough into 1-inch balls. Mix the 3 tablespoons sugar and cinnamon. Roll balls in cinnamon-sugar mixture.
5. Place 2 inches apart on parchment-lined baking sheets. Bake 8 to 10 minutes, until set but not too hard.



CLASSIC: Sugar Plum Christmas Cookies

Filling

1/2 cup dried plums (prunes), coarsely chopped
1/2 cup dried apricots, coarsely chopped
1/2 cup dried figs, coarsely chopped
1/2 cup golden raisins
1/4 cup honey
2 tsp orange zest
1 tsp ground cinnamon
1/2 tsp ground nutmeg
1/4 tsp ground allspice
1/4 cup chopped walnuts or almonds

Dough

1 cup unsalted butter, softened
3/4 cup granulated sugar
1 large egg
1 tsp vanilla extract
2 1/4 cups all-purpose flour
1/4 tsp salt

1. In a food processor, combine dried plums, apricots, figs, raisins, honey, orange zest, cinnamon, nutmeg and allspice. Pulse until the fruits are finely chopped and the mixture clumps together.
2. Transfer to a bowl and fold in the chopped nuts. Set aside.
3. In a large bowl, cream together butter and sugar until light and fluffy.
4. Beat in the egg and vanilla extract.
5. Gradually mix in the flour and salt until just combined.
6. Preheat your oven to 375°F and line baking sheets with parchment paper or silicone baking mats.
7. Take a small amount of cookie dough and flatten it into a circle in the palm of your hand.
8. Place about a teaspoon of the sugar plum filling in the center of the circle.
9. Encase the filling with the dough, forming a ball, and place it on the prepared baking sheet.
10. Repeat with the remaining dough and filling.
11. Bake in the preheated oven for 10-12 minutes or until the cookies are lightly golden on the bottom.
12. Let the cookies cool on the baking sheet for a few minutes, then transfer to a wire rack to cool completely.





CONTEMPORARIES: Salted Caramel Thumbprint Cookies

2 cups all-purpose flour
1/2 teaspoon baking powder
1 cup unsalted butter, softened
2/3 cup sugar
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
Salted caramel sauce (store-bought or homemade)
Flaky sea salt, for sprinkling

1. Preheat oven to 350°F.
2. Whisk together flour and baking powder.
3. Cream butter, sugar, salt and vanilla until smooth.
4. Gradually add the dry ingredients and mix until combined.
5. Roll dough into 1-inch balls, place on a lined baking sheet, and press a thumbprint into the center of each ball.
6. Bake for 12-14 minutes, or until lightly golden.
7. Once cooled, fill each thumbprint with salted caramel sauce and sprinkle with flaky sea salt.



CONTEMPORARIES: Matcha Shortbread Cookies

2 cups all-purpose flour
2 tablespoons matcha powder
1/4 teaspoon salt
1 cup unsalted butter, softened
1/2 cup powdered sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1. Preheat oven to 325°F.
2. Sift together flour, matcha powder and salt.
3. Cream butter, powdered sugar and vanilla until smooth.
4. Gradually add dry ingredients and mix until combined.
5. Roll dough to about 1/4-inch thickness and cut with cookie cutters.
6. Place on a lined baking sheet and bake for 15-18 minutes, or until edges are lightly golden.





CONTEMPORARIES: Peppermint Chocolate Crinkle Cookies

1 cup all-purpose flour
1/2 cup unsweetened cocoa powder
1 tsp baking powder
1/4 tsp baking soda
1/2 tsp salt
1 1/2 cups granulated sugar
1/2 cup vegetable oil
2 large eggs
1 tsp vanilla extract
1/2 tsp peppermint extract
1 cup confectioners' sugar (for rolling the cookies)
Crushed peppermint candies or candy canes for garnish



1. In a medium-sized bowl, whisk together the flour, cocoa powder, baking powder, baking soda and salt. Set aside.
2. In a larger bowl, combine the sugar, vegetable oil, eggs, vanilla extract and peppermint extract. Mix well.
3. Gradually add the dry mixture to the wet mixture, stirring until just combined.
4. Cover the dough and refrigerate for at least 2 hours or overnight. This helps the dough become more manageable and intensifies the flavors.
5. Preheat your oven to 350°F. Line baking sheets with parchment paper or silicone baking mats.
6. Place the confectioners' sugar in a small bowl. Take the dough out of the refrigerator.
7. Roll the dough into 1-inch balls, then roll each ball in the confectioners' sugar, ensuring they are thoroughly coated.
8. Place the sugar-coated balls on the prepared baking sheets, spacing them about 2 inches apart.
9. Bake in the preheated oven for 10-12 minutes. The cookies should still be soft in the center but set around the edges.
10. As soon as the cookies come out of the oven, while they are still warm, sprinkle crushed peppermint candies or candy canes over the tops, pressing gently to adhere.
11. Allow the cookies to cool on the baking sheet for a few minutes before transferring them to a wire rack to cool completely.



CONTEMPORARIES: Eggnog Cookies

Cookies

- 2 1/4 cups all-purpose flour**
- 2 tsp baking powder**
- 1/2 tsp ground cinnamon**
- 1/2 tsp ground nutmeg**
- 1 1/4 cups granulated sugar**
- 3/4 cup unsalted butter, softened**
- 1/2 cup store-bought eggnog**
- 1 tsp vanilla extract**
- 2 egg yolks**
- 1 cup white chocolate chips**

Icing

- 1 cup powdered sugar**
- 3 tbsp eggnog**
- Ground nutmeg for sprinkling (optional)**



1. Preheat your oven to 350°F and line baking sheets with parchment paper or silicone baking mats.
2. In a medium-sized bowl, whisk together the flour, baking powder, cinnamon and nutmeg. Set aside.
3. In a larger bowl, cream the sugar and butter until light and fluffy.
4. Beat in the eggnog, vanilla extract and egg yolks one at a time.
5. Gradually add the dry mixture to the wet mixture, mixing until just combined.
6. Fold in the white chocolate chips.
7. Drop rounded tablespoonfuls onto the prepared baking sheets, spacing them about 2 inches apart.
8. Bake in the preheated oven for 10-12 minutes, or until the edges of the cookies are lightly golden.
9. Remove from the oven and let them sit on the baking sheet for a couple of minutes before transferring them to a wire rack to cool completely.

Icing

1. In a small bowl, whisk together the powdered sugar and eggnog until smooth. If the icing is too thick, you can add more eggnog, a teaspoon at a time, until you reach the desired consistency.
2. Once the cookies have cooled completely, drizzle or spread the icing on top of each cookie. If desired, sprinkle a little ground nutmeg over the top of the icing for added flavor and appearance.



CONTEMPORARIES: Coconut Chocolate Macarons

4 large egg whites
1/3 cup granulated sugar
1 1/2 cups powdered sugar
1 cup almond flour
3 tablespoons unsweetened cocoa powder
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/2 cup unsweetened shredded coconut
Chocolate ganache or chocolate spread for filling

1. Preheat oven to 325°F.
2. Beat egg whites until frothy, gradually add granulated sugar until stiff peaks form.
3. Sift powdered sugar, almond flour, cocoa powder and salt into the egg white mixture. Fold gently until smooth.
4. Fold in the shredded coconut.
5. Pipe 1-inch rounds onto a lined baking sheet and tap to release air bubbles.
6. Let stand for 30 minutes to dry and form a skin.
7. Bake for 10-12 minutes. Cool completely.
8. Sandwich two cookies with chocolate ganache or spread.



FRUITIES: Cranberry Orange Shortbread Cookies

2 cups all-purpose flour
1/4 teaspoon baking powder
1/4 teaspoon salt
1 cup unsalted butter, softened
1/2 cup sugar
1 tablespoon orange zest
1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
1 cup dried cranberries, chopped

1. Preheat oven to 325°F.
2. Whisk together flour, baking powder and salt.
3. Cream butter, sugar, orange zest and vanilla until smooth.
4. Gradually add the dry ingredients, mixing until combined.
5. Fold in the chopped cranberries.
6. Roll dough into 1-inch balls and place on a lined baking sheet, flattening slightly.
7. Bake for 18-20 minutes until edges are lightly golden. Cool on a wire rack.





FRUITIES: Fig and Walnut Biscotti

2 cups all-purpose flour
1 cup sugar
1 teaspoon baking powder
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/2 cup walnuts, chopped
1 cup dried figs, chopped
2 large eggs
1 teaspoon vanilla extract

1. Preheat oven to 350°F.
2. Whisk together flour, sugar, baking powder and salt.
3. Add walnuts and figs, mixing to combine.
4. Beat in eggs and vanilla until a dough forms.
5. Form the dough into a long, flat log on a lined baking sheet.
6. Bake for 25-30 minutes. Remove from oven and let cool slightly.
7. Slice the log into 1/2-inch thick slices and lay each slice on its side.
8. Return to oven and bake for 15-20 minutes, turning once, until crisp.



FRUITIES: Raspberry Almond Thumbprint Cookies

1 cup unsalted butter, softened
2/3 cup granulated sugar
1/2 teaspoon almond extract
2 cups all-purpose flour
1/2 cup raspberry jam (or your preferred fruit jam)
1/2 cup powdered sugar
3/4 teaspoon almond extract
1-2 teaspoons milk

1. Preheat oven to 350°F.
2. Cream butter, sugar, and 1/2 teaspoon almond extract until smooth.
3. Gradually add flour, mixing until a dough forms.
4. Roll dough into 1-inch balls and place on a lined baking sheet.
5. Press a thumbprint into the center of each ball and fill with jam.
6. Bake for 14-18 minutes, or until edges are lightly golden. Cool on a wire rack.
7. Mix powdered sugar, 3/4 teaspoon almond extract and milk until smooth for the glaze. Drizzle over cooled cookies.





UNBAKEABLES: Chocolate Oatmeal Cookies

1/2 cup unsalted butter
2 cups granulated sugar
1/2 cup milk
4 tablespoons unsweetened cocoa powder
1/2 cup peanut butter (smooth or chunky, based on preference)
2 teaspoons vanilla extract
3 cups quick-cooking oats

1. Combine butter, sugar, milk and cocoa powder in a large saucepan. Bring to a boil and let it bubble for 1 minute.
2. Remove from heat and stir in peanut butter, vanilla extract, and oats.
3. Drop spoonfuls of the mixture onto wax paper or a silicone baking mat.
4. Allow to cool and harden (this can be expedited in the refrigerator).



UNBAKEABLES: Peppermint Chocolate Clusters

2 cups semi-sweet chocolate chips
1 cup white chocolate chips
1/2 teaspoon peppermint extract
3 cups crushed peppermint candies or candy canes
1/2 cup nuts (like almonds or pecans, optional)

1. Melt the chocolate and white chocolate chips together in a microwave or over a double boiler.
2. Once melted, stir in the peppermint extract, followed by the crushed peppermint candies and nuts (if using).
3. Drop spoonfuls of the mixture onto wax paper or a silicone baking mat.
4. Allow to cool and harden. You can also place them in the refrigerator to set faster.





UNBAKEABLES: Coconut Snowballs

3 cups unsweetened shredded coconut, divided
1 cup condensed milk
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1/4 cup powdered sugar (optional, for rolling)

1. Combine 2 1/2 cups of shredded coconut, condensed milk and vanilla extract in a mixing bowl. Stir well until a thick mixture forms.
2. Form the mixture into small balls.
3. Roll the balls in the remaining 1/2 cup of shredded coconut. You can also roll them in powdered sugar for added sweetness and aesthetics.
4. Place on a tray lined with wax paper or a silicone baking mat and refrigerate for several hours until they set.



VEGAN: Chocolate Chip Cookies

1/2 cup coconut oil, melted
1/4 cup coconut sugar or brown sugar
1/4 cup maple syrup
1/4 cup almond milk (or any plant-based milk)
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
2 cups all-purpose flour (or gluten-free flour blend)
1 teaspoon baking soda
1/2 teaspoon salt
1 cup vegan chocolate chips

1. Preheat oven to 350°F and line a baking sheet with parchment paper.
2. Mix melted coconut oil, coconut sugar, maple syrup, almond milk and vanilla extract until smooth.
3. Add flour, baking soda and salt to the wet ingredients and mix until combined.
4. Fold in the chocolate chips.
5. Drop dough by spoonfuls onto the prepared baking sheet.
6. Bake for 10-12 minutes or until edges are lightly golden. Allow to cool on the baking sheet.





VEGAN: Peanut Butter Cookies

1 cup natural peanut butter
1/2 cup coconut sugar or brown sugar
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1/3 cup almond milk (or any plant-based milk)
1 cup all-purpose flour (or gluten-free flour blend)
1 teaspoon baking soda
A pinch of salt

1. Preheat oven to 350°F and line a baking sheet with parchment paper.
2. In a bowl, mix peanut butter, coconut sugar, vanilla extract and almond milk.
3. Add flour, baking soda and salt and mix until a dough forms.
4. Roll dough into 1-inch balls, place on the baking sheet, and flatten with a fork to create a crisscross pattern.
5. Bake for 10-12 minutes or until lightly golden. Cool on a wire rack.



VEGAN: Oatmeal Raisin Cookies

1/2 cup coconut oil, melted
1/2 cup maple syrup or agave nectar
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1 1/2 cups rolled oats
3/4 cup all-purpose flour (or gluten-free flour blend)
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/2 cup raisins

1. Preheat oven to 350°F and line a baking sheet with parchment paper.
2. In a large bowl, mix melted coconut oil, maple syrup and vanilla extract.
3. Add rolled oats, flour, baking soda, cinnamon and salt. Mix until combined.
4. Fold in the raisins.
5. Drop dough by spoonfuls onto the prepared baking sheet.
6. Bake for 10-12 minutes or until edges are lightly golden. Allow to cool on the baking sheet.





GIVING

GIFT GUIDANCE

HOW TO BUY FOR NEARLY EVERYONE
ON YOUR SHOPPING LIST

Marco Buscaglia

Shopping for others can often be difficult because there may be a real difference between what gifts you think your recipients will like and what they want. Consider the seniors on your list. You may buy grandma and grandpa something skewing toward an older, relaxed lifestyle when what they're looking for may be closer to an active, adventurous way of living.

That's why it's important to choose gifts for others that resonate with their interests, needs and lifestyles.

"One of our biggest problems buying gifts for others is that we often assume things about the recipients that they may not assume about themselves," says Joan Raye, a former buyer for Nordstrom and Macy's who now works as a 'shopper-for-hire' in San Francisco. "Seniors are a perfect example. You may have grandparents who are avid bike riders but your gifts only reflect what you think they're doing—playing bingo, watching old TV shows and baking cookies."

There's nothing wrong with playing bingo, watching old TV shows and baking cookies, Raye says. But you might be wasting your money if the people on your gift list aren't into those activities.

Dana Fenwick, a gift consultant in Chicago, says she advises her

clients to approach gift-giving in two ways—but she has a definite preference. "Practical gifts are great because they fill a need. Just think about how many guys never buy socks and underwear because they know they'll get that stuff from their wives or mothers on Christmas," Fenwick says. "And then there's the school of thought that gifts are things people want—or even need—even if they don't know it. I'm a fan of giving people things they love—large or small—that they'd never buy for themselves."

Raye says that approach is fine, as long as you think about what you will purchase, create or offer to people on your list instead of finding something on sale at the mall or online. "You have to know things about people; if you don't know, ask," says Raye. "People offer insights into what they love all the time."

But that's not to say people also don't appreciate practical gifts. "One of the best gifts my son bought me last year was a year of unlimited car washes at a place in our town," Raye says. "Now I get the car washed once a week—compared to once every two or three months—and I love driving in my clean car."

One thing to not do is to assume you can win someone over when they clearly aren't interested. "You don't give a book to someone who hates reading or dance classes to someone who is incredibly shy," Fenwick says. "Even if you think they'll enjoy it, that's not really your call. Gifts should make people feel welcome and loved, not awkward and nervous."



To help put you into a buyer's mindset, here are some steps and suggestions to help you select the perfect gift for various people in your life:

- **Listen throughout the year:** Often, people will casually mention things they like, need or are interested in. Keep an ear out for these hints and note them for future reference.

- **Personalize the gift:** Custom-made gifts show thoughtfulness. Consider items like personalized jewelry, custom illustrations, monogrammed items or a book with a handwritten note inside.

- **Experience over material:** Sometimes, the best gifts aren't physical objects. Think about experiences like concert tickets, cooking classes, weekend getaways, spa days or workshops in a field they're interested in.

- **Handmade and DIY:** Craft something yourself or buy handmade items from platforms like Etsy. Handmade gifts have a personal touch and often carry more sentimental value.

- **Think about their hobbies:** Whether it's gardening, painting, reading or any other hobby, find a gift that aligns with their passion.

- **Subscription boxes:** There are subscription boxes for almost everything—books, gourmet foods, wines, cosmetics, hobbies and more. It's a gift that keeps on giving throughout the year.

- **Interactive gifts:** Puzzle games, DIY kits or anything they can engage with can be fun and memorable.

- **Local and artisanal goods:** Explore local markets or artisanal stores for unique items. These could be gourmet foods, handcrafted items or specialty products unavailable in mainstream stores.

- **Gifts that give back:** Consider gifts from companies with a social cause. Many brands donate some of their proceeds to charity or have a buy-one-give-one model.

- **Books with a twist:** No, not mysteries, although they're fine. We're talking about a book with a unique element. Instead of just any bestseller, consider a limited edition, a first edition, a signed copy or a beautifully illustrated version of a classic.

- **Unique gadgets:** Look for quirky gadgets that align with their interests. It could be something for the kitchen, office, the car or outdoors.

- **Memory lane:** Create a scrapbook, a photo album or even a digital slideshow or video that captures memorable moments you've shared.

- **Classes and courses:** Enroll them in a course they've expressed interest in, be it pottery, dance, photography or something else that piques their interest.

- **Nostalgia:** Remind them of a shared memory or something from their past. Consider items like vintage toys, a record of a favorite old album or a book they loved.



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ENTERTAINMENT

A DIFFERENT TAKE

20 TUNES THAT PUT A SPIN ON THE HOLIDAYS

While traditional Christmas songs have their charm, there are plenty of alternative Christmas tunes that offer a different vibe, adding a little variety to your playlist of tried-and-true holiday standards.

Here are some of the best alternative Christmas tracks

1. Ramones: "Merry Christmas (I Don't Want to Fight Tonight)"
2. The Killers: "Don't Shoot Me Santa"
3. The Waitresses: "Christmas Wrapping"
4. Phoenix: "Alone on Christmas Day"
5. Sufjan Stevens: "Come On! Let's Boogie to the Elf Dance!" (Actually, Sufjan has a whole collection of alternative Christmas songs!)
6. Low: "Just Like Christmas"
7. Run-DMC: "Christmas in Hollis"
8. Julian Casablancas: "I Wish It Was Christmas Today"
9. Blink-182: "I Won't Be Home for Christmas"
10. Death Cab for Cutie: "Christmas (Baby Please Come Home)"
11. Eels: "Christmas Is Going To The Dogs"
12. She & Him: "Christmas Day"
13. Coldplay: "Christmas Lights"
14. Bright Eyes: "Blue Christmas"
15. Florence + The Machine: "Last Christmas"
16. Vampire Weekend: "Holiday"
17. Cocteau Twins: "Frosty the Snowman"
18. LCD Soundsystem: "Christmas Will Break Your Heart"
19. Tom Waits: "Christmas Card from a Hooker in Minneapolis"
20. The Raveonettes: "The Christmas Song"



Photo by Sarah Dao on Unsplash



CELEBRATIONS

GLOBAL WARMING

INTERNATIONAL SANTA-LIKE FIGURES SPREAD
HOLIDAY CHEER — AND FEAR — WORLDWIDE

Many cultures worldwide have versions of Santa Claus or similar jolly—and not-so-jolly—gift-giving figures associated with the holiday season. Getting a little bored with Old Saint Nick? Try out one of the following figures for a little international flair:

1. Father Christmas (United Kingdom): Originally represented the spirit of good cheer during Christmas and New Year's, Father Christmas has since merged with the characteristics of Santa Claus.

2. Père Noël (France): The French equivalent of Santa Claus—or St. Nicholas, more likely. Children leave their shoes by the fireplace on Christmas Eve and Père Noël fills them with gifts.

3. Babbo Natale (Italy): Represents Santa Claus in Italy. However, children also await “La Befana,” a witch-like character who brings gifts (or coal, just like her counterpart from the North Pole) on the night of January 5th.

4. Sinterklaas (Netherlands): Celebrated on December 5th, Sinterklaas is an elderly, stately figure who arrives from Spain by boat, accompanied by his controversial helper “Sooty Pete.”

5. Weihnachtsmann (Germany): Translates to “Christmas Man,” Weihnachtsmann is similar to Santa Claus.

6. Ded Moroz and Snegurochka (Russia): Ded Moroz (Grandfather Frost) and his granddaughter Snegurochka (Snow Maiden) deliver presents to children. They celebrate the New Year more than Christmas in Russia.

7. Joulupukki (Finland): Translated as “Yule Buck,” Joulupukki, also known as Old Man Christmas, comes from Lapland to deliver presents to children.

8. Reyes Magos (Spain and Latin America): The Three Wise Men or Three Kings bring gifts for children on January 6th, known as “El Día de Reyes” (Day of the Kings).



9. Belsnickel (German-American communities): A fur-clad Christmas gift-bringer, Belsnickel comes from folklore of the Palatinate region of Germany.. Fans of “The Office” may remember the episode where Dwight Schrute dresses up as Belsnickel and provides an awkward, coworker-annoying schtick to the annual holiday soiree.

10. Christkind (Austria and parts of Germany): Representing the Christ child, this angelic figure brings gifts on Christmas Eve.

11. Mikulás (Hungary): Celebrated on December 6th, Mikulás (or St. Nicholas) visits children and rewards them based on their behavior throughout the year.

12. Krampus (Central European folklore): A horned, anthropomorphic figure, described as “half-goat, half-demon,” who punishes children who have misbehaved.

13. Tió de Nadal (Catalonia, Spain): A wooden log with a painted face, which produces gifts for children when it’s hit on Christmas.

14. Nisse or Tomte (Scandinavia): A mythological gift-bearing creature from Nordic folklore, usually imagined as a small, elderly man resembling a garden gnome.

15. Knecht Ruprecht (Germany): A companion of Saint Nicholas, he would ask children if they knew their prayers, and then reward or punish them accordingly.



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CELEBRATIONS

CLOTHES CALL

HOLIDAY ATTIRE RANGES FROM CASUAL TO COUTURE

Marco Buscaglia

Creating the perfect holiday outfit requires a blend of comfort, style and occasion-appropriateness. “You base your outfit on the party you’re attending. Are you celebrating in a hotel ballroom? Are you hanging out at your local bar? Are you hosting a party in your home? You base your outfit on where you’ll be and who you’ll be with,” says Roberta Schilling, a wardrobe consultant in Dallas, Texas. “Regardless of where you’ll be, you should think about what you’re wearing. Even a New Year’s party at home with close friends calls for more than the usual hoodie and jeans. After all, it’s New Year’s Eve. And you want to look your best when saying goodbye to 2023 and welcoming in 2024.”

You want to feel confident and comfortable, says Schilling, offering the following five tips:

- Work with a color palette: New Year’s Eve outfits often feature metallics (gold, silver), deep shades (navy, burgundy) or classic blacks and whites.
- Layer wisely: If you’re in a cold climate, ensure your layers are both stylish and functional.
- Make sure your clothes fit: Ensure your outfit fits well and allows movement, especially if you plan to dance.
- Add a personal touch: Remember to infuse your personal style into the outfit, whether that’s through a favorite color, unique accessory or signature style element.
- Comfort: With footwear, make sure you’re comfortable enough to enjoy the night.

Whether you’re heading to a formal event, a casual get-together or celebrating at home, here’s a guide to help both men and women look their best:

FOR MEN

Formal event

Suit: Opt for a well-fitted suit in black, navy or charcoal. A tuxedo is also a classic choice for ultra-formal events.

Shirt: A crisp white or light-colored dress shirt.

Accessories: A bowtie or slim tie, cufflinks and a pocket square to add flair.

Shoes: Polished black or brown leather dress shoes.

Finishing Touch: A sleek wristwatch.

Casual party

Shirt: A stylish button-down shirt or a smart polo.

Trousers: Chinos or well-fitted jeans.

Layering: Consider a blazer or a leather jacket, depending on the vibe.

Shoes: Leather boots, loafers or clean sneakers.

Accessories: A casual leather belt, bracelets or a beanie if it’s chilly.

At-home celebration

Comfort: Opt for a comfortable sweater or a long-sleeve tee.

Bottoms: Soft joggers or relaxed-fit jeans.

Footwear: Warm socks or cozy indoor slippers.

Accessorize: Even at home, a nice watch can elevate your look.



FOR WOMEN

Formal event

Dress: An elegant evening gown or a sophisticated cocktail dress.

Shoes: Heels, either strappy or pumps.

Accessories: Statement jewelry such as earrings or a necklace. Clutch to complement the dress.

Hair and makeup: Consider an updo or wavy curls. Wear makeup that accentuates your best features.

Casual party

Top: A stylish blouse, sequined top or even a festive sweater.

Bottoms: Tailored pants, trendy culottes or a chic skirt.

Shoes: Ankle boots, kitten heels or stylish flats.

Accessories: Layered necklaces, bangles and a crossbody bag or tote.

Outerwear: A tailored coat, leather jacket or a faux fur jacket for added warmth and style.

At-home celebration:

Comfort: A cozy knit sweater or a comfortable dress.

Bottoms: Leggings or relaxed-fit pants.

Footwear: Warm socks or soft indoor slippers.

Accessories: Minimal jewelry like stud earrings or a dainty necklace.



Photo by freestocks on Unsplash



GIVING

DON'T FORGET FIFI

A FEW GIFT IDEAS FOR YOUR BEST FRIEND

They shower you with affection all year and then sit patiently as you and your family open your gifts on Christmas morning. How about throwing your dog a bone this year—literally—and letting them in on the holiday fun? If you're looking for some gift ideas for the dogs in your life, here are some of our favorites: It's only natural to want to spoil your pet with the best pet products available, so we've put together a list that has been tested and approved (two paws up!) by our trusted companions.

Benebone Bacon Flavor Wishbone Tough Dog Chew Toy (\$22.95 at Chewy)

Super-chewers can't resist these really tough chew toys from Benebone. In fact, they are about the only chew toy that doesn't get destroyed in a matter of minutes. Your dog can spend hours just gnawing on this nylon bone, and the wishbone design makes it really easy for him to hold and get a good chew going.



A Better Treat Freeze-Dried Beef Dog Treats (\$15.99 at Amazon)

Dogs go bananas for these simple, single-ingredient treats from A Better Treat, a family-owned small business out of California. Review: "Because our dog has sensitive skin, we are generally wary of mass-produced treats, so these are perfect for us as well. The treats come in chicken and wild-caught salmon, which our dog loved (maybe more than the beef or chicken) but we found it a little smelly. Since it's got great ingredients for his coat though, we'll keep feeding them."



Nina Ottosson by Outward Hound Brick Puzzle Game (\$10.50 at Chewy)

Puzzle games are a real lifesaver for folks with extra smart canines. A mere 15 minutes of mental stimulation has the same impact on your dog's well being as 30 minutes of exercise. So those days when you can't take long walks, it's great to have a puzzle to help keep them occupied and interested. This particular puzzle has ways to make it more difficult as your pup advances through the stages.



Orvis ToughChew Memory Foam Bolster Dog Bed (Starting at \$389 at Orvis)

While primarily known as the go-to retailer for outdoor gear, Orvis is also famous for their quality dog products. Dogs love to snuggle up against a bolster, which we suspect is why our dog has commandeered our favorite fluffy chair. If he had his own bolstered bed, like this one, maybe we'd get it back. Unlike our chair, the bed is also resistant to chewing and scratching so it's good for younger or more mouthy dogs.



Lickimat Classic Soother Slow Feeder (\$8.99 at Chewy)

When a dog spends an extended time licking, endorphins are released that calm and soothe the savage beast inside, but often that excessive licking is misdirected and can lead to hot spots or other injuries. Using a lick mat like this one helps your dog self-soothe without self-harm. It's also great for slow feeding of soft food, administering medications, or just plain fun.





Mr. Q



CELEBRATIONS

IT'S A TRAP!

NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS SHOULD SET YOU UP FOR SUCCESS, NOT FAILURE

Marco Buscaglia

Hannah Mitchell, a 37-year-old financial planner in Chicago, says she has a great history of sticking to her New Year's resolutions. For about a week.

"That's about all I'm good for — seven days, maybe if I'm focused on it," Mitchell says. "I don't even know what

stops me. I go all in for a few days and then lose interest."

Every January, a New Year's resolution symbolizes a fresh start, based on the hope of improving ourselves in the coming year. But sometimes, we make plans we can't follow and set goals we can't reach. Make resolutions you can keep — with some work, of course — instead of setting resolutions that could hurt your confidence instead of providing a boost.

Here's a step-by-step guide to help you create and stick to your New Year's resolution:

Reflect: Look back on the past year. What went well? What could have been better? Consider areas in your personal or professional life where you'd like to see improvement.

Be specific: Instead of general resolutions like "lose weight" or "save money," be precise: Vow to "lose 10 pounds by summer" or "set aside \$200 every month for retirement."

Make it achievable: Ensure your resolution is realistic and attainable given your current circumstances and resources. Remember, it's better to make smaller, achievable resolutions than larger ones that may set you up for disappointment.

Break it up: Divide your resolution into smaller, more manageable goals. For instance, if you resolve to read more books in the year, set a goal to read one book each month.

Write it down: Put your resolution in writing. This act can make it feel more official and serve as a reminder throughout the year.

Share it: Tell friends or family about your resolution. Sharing can create a sense of accountability and you might receive encouragement and support.

Visualize success: Imagine the benefits of achieving your resolution. How will it improve your life or make you feel? See yourself in a new light and remember that you're on your way to achieving your better self.

Create a plan: Outline the steps you'll take to achieve your resolution. If you want to exercise more, schedule specific days and times for workouts.



Keep a journal. Tracking your ups and downs can help you understand what causes your obstacles and how to overcome them.

Monitor progress: Regularly check in on your progress. Monthly reflections can help you adjust your approach if needed.

Stay flexible: Life is unpredictable. If circumstances change, adjust your goals accordingly. The key is to remain committed to self-improvement, even if the path differs from your original plan.

Celebrate milestones: Recognize and reward yourself when you reach significant milestones related to your resolution.

Stay positive: There may be setbacks, but it's essential to stay positive. Instead of getting discouraged, learn from mistakes and continue moving forward.

Commit: Finally, make a sincere commitment to your resolution. Every decision that brings you closer to achieving it counts.



Photo by Hannah Olinger on Unsplash



ENTERTAINMENT

GAME ON

LIVEN UP YOUR NEW YEAR'S EVE PARTY WITH SOME SIMPLE GAMES

Marco Buscaglia

Having some friends over for New Year's Eve? Don't rely on television specials to entertain your crew. Instead, try some of these party games to ring in the new year and ensure your guests have a memorable evening. Here are some game ideas to consider:

Resolution guessing game

Guests write down one resolution for the coming year, place them in a bowl, shuffle and have each guest pull one out and read it aloud. Your guests can guess who wrote each resolution.

Two resolutions and a lie

Each guest says three resolutions: two true, one false. Others guess the false one.

Memory jar

Guests can drop in their favorite memories from the past year. Read them aloud before the countdown. This could be the melancholy—by “melancholy” we mean weepy—portion of the evening, so make sure you follow it up with something guaranteed to get some laughs.

Champagne pong

OK, you got us. This is beer pong, just classier. Play using champagne or any sparkling drink.

Midnight balloon pop

Fill balloons with small challenges or dares, and pop them as the clock counts to midnight. You can tailor your questions to your crowd. Keep it kid-friendly if your party includes children, but if it's adults only, feel free to go to whatever level of raunch your grown-up guests will enjoy.

New Year's charades

Play charades using New Year's themed prompts or significant events from the past year. If you're more of the morbid type, you can play this game using noteworthy figures who have died from the past year.



Photo by Abstral Official on Unsplash

Karaoke

Include the biggest hits from the year or pick a theme, like No. 1 songs from the past 50 years.



ENTERTAINMENT

RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

A CROWD-PLEASING RECIPE AND TIPS EVERY HOME CHEF SHOULD KNOW

Brandpoint

If you're a home chef, you know how fun and fulfilling it is to host friends and family. However, entertaining a large group can also be challenging and a bit stressful.

To help you elevate your holiday entertaining prowess, Signature Kitchen Suite's executive chef Nick Ritchie offers the following recipe and four tips every home chef should know.

Prepare multipurpose batches of food

Ritchie suggests cooking multipurpose batches of food like pesto, hummus, ratatouille, caponata and baba ganoush, which pair well with grilled chicken, fish and meat. You can prepare and store a sizable batch of recipes up to a week ahead.

Check out this parmesan dip recipe courtesy of Ritchie that is sure to be a crowd-pleaser. You can serve it as a topping for fresh bread, crostini or bruschetta, toss it with pasta, spoon it over fresh sliced tomatoes, add to

a salad, dollop it on steak or chicken breast, and use it as a pizza base.

Chef Nick's Parmesan Dip

Prep time: 10-15 minutes

Yield: 2.5 cups

Ingredients

8 ounces Parmesan cheese, broken into 1-inch chunks

8 ounces Asiago cheese, broken into 1-inch chunks

1 tablespoon chopped garlic

1 tablespoon freshly ground black pepper

2 tablespoons chopped parsley

2 tablespoons chopped basil

2 tablespoons thinly sliced scallions

1 tablespoon pepper flakes

1-1/2 cups extra-virgin olive oil

Directions

1. Place the cheese chunks in the bowl of a food processor. Pulse for about 10 seconds to break the cheese into small granules. (Use a rubber spatula to scrape down and recombine between every couple of pulses.)

2. Add the remaining ingredients except olive oil and pulse briefly.

3. Using a spatula, remove all to a mixing bowl. Fold the olive oil into the

blended ingredients and mix well by hand.

4. Transfer the dip to a sealed container and refrigerate for up to two weeks. Bring to room temperature before serving.

Sous vide to save time

Don't let the fancy name fool you. The sous vide cooking method, which has been used by world-renowned chefs for years, is just as easy for home cooks. "Sous vide" (pronounced "sue-veed") is French for "under vacuum," and it's an innovative cooking technique known for achieving the perfect temperature every time. Food is vacuum sealed, then submerged in water and slow-cooked at a constant precise temperature until it is perfectly cooked.

Sous vide has become the go-to method in the world's best restaurants for years and for good reason. It brings food to the precise temperature chefs look for and delivers perfect doneness, edge-to-edge, every time with little effort.

Let's say you've prepared a bone-in ribeye using the sous vide method.



As you cut into your steak, you'll notice something right away. The doneness you were hoping for goes all the way through your steak, without that gray-to-pink gradient and thin band of desired doneness that you get when simply grilling steaks.

Even better, you can use sous vide to do a "reverse sear." Sous vide will ensure your steak is cooked to the desired temperature. Then, you can put it on the hot grill for that tasty, smoky char only outdoor cooking can give you.

Baby back ribs are another popular staple that can be prepared using the sous vide method. With the perfect fall-off-the-bone doneness from the sous vide, a nice smokey finish from the grill and a brush of barbecue sauce, you'll have all-day ribs without the all-day work.

You can even make batches of sous vide cocktails and mocktails for a large group, so you don't spend your whole event mixing drinks. Ritchie recommends popular libations like limoncello, an old fashioned and cherry gin.

Embrace technology

Cooking and kitchen appliances can help you save time, elevate your cooking and simplify preparing and storing dishes for entertaining and everyday cooking. To make recipes shine, Ritchie advises at-home chefs to upgrade the tools and equipment—especially appliances and other must-haves they use every day. He recommends today's ultraversatile appliances, like those from Signature



Photo courtesy Brandpoint Media

Kitchen Suite, which feature multiple modalities—from steam and gas to induction and even industry-first sous vide built right into the cooktop—to deliver elevated creations and make your cooking experience easier and more successful.

Take it easy on yourself

Keep it simple. Serve your dishes buffet or family style on platters for an easier

setup and cleanup.

Opt for eco-friendly, compostable plates and utensils that are attractive so you can skip washing dishes after your guests have gone home.

Impress your guests and enjoy your dinner party or get-together that those in attendance won't soon forget. Using these tips, you'll be ready to host any event this holiday season.



PACKAGE DEAL

5 TIPS TO HELP KEEP YOUR HOME AND DELIVERIES SECURE THIS SEASON

Brandpoint

Make sure you'll be able to fully relax and enjoy the holiday season by taking a few steps to help keep your home secure – including protecting deliveries that might be made while you're gone.

Here are some tips and tools to help increase your peace of mind while you're away from home.

1. Alert your neighbors – but not social media

Before a holiday trip, chat with trusted neighbors to let them know you'll be on gone. Those extra eyes on your home can help you feel better about taking off. Just don't post about your trip on social media – there's no need to let the world know you'll be out of your house.

2. Help make your deliveries safe

Instead of worrying about a package arriving while you're gone, use Amazon Key In-Garage Delivery, a convenient, secure way to receive Amazon packages. With In-Garage Delivery, drivers scan your package to receive one-time access to deliver inside the garage. No need to give out garage codes or let the driver in yourself. Porch pirates don't stand a chance and it also helps protect from weather damage, so you can keep any packages secure until you're home.

Amazon Key is free for Prime members and easy to set up. Plus, it gives you more flexibility and control over your

Amazon deliveries by allowing you to select a preferred delivery method and choosing when and where you want your packages delivered – inside your garage or to your doorstep. At checkout, just select In-Garage Delivery and Amazon Key will take care of the rest. You'll receive real-time notifications every step of the way, and by adding a Ring Camera (sold separately), you can even watch your packages be safely delivered in real-time.

3. Monitor your home while you're away

You can set up Motion Alerts to notify you when there's activity at your front door with a Ring Video Doorbell or near one of your Ring security cameras. You'll be able to see what's happening in real-time and choose to use Two-Way Talk as needed to chat with someone on your property. For additional whole home protection, the Ring Alarm Security Kit works on any house, condo or apartment. You'll have peace of mind that your home is always protected, so you can just relax and enjoy whatever you're doing, wherever you are.

4. Set timers for lighting

Another important tactic while away for the holidays is to use lighting to make it appear someone is home. You can connect smart lights to your home security cameras to have lights turn on/off, or set up light schedules with Alexa to turn lights on and off at certain times each night. Even if you just set one lamp near a front window, it will look like someone is home.



Photo courtesy Brandpoint Media

5. Pre-set your HVAC

Completely turning your HVAC off to save money can be a bad idea. Not only will it look like nobody’s home if your heating unit isn’t running while it’s cold, but you could also damage internal structures of the house due to excessive temp drops. On top of that, your heating unit will have to work nonstop to get the temperature back up when you return, eliminating cost savings you hoped for by shutting it off completely. A good rule of thumb is to lower the temperature about 5 degrees from your usual setting when you leave town. To be able to adjust the temperature while you’re away, consider installing a smart thermostat that you can control remotely.



ENTERTAINMENT

LIGHTEN UP

GIVE THE GRAVY A BREAK — TRY A SALAD OR THREE THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

Brandpoint

Holiday eating can be a wonderful experience, but sometimes you just want a light night or simply don't have the time for an elaborate dinner. You could order takeout, but there's a certain joy and satisfaction in re-creating the same delectable dishes within the comfort of your own kitchen.

An easy way to expand your kitchen prowess and eat fresh, tasty, restaurant-inspired meals is to try new salads.

To help you explore your culinary passions and delight your taste buds, California Pizza Kitchen (CPK) has teamed up with Lighthouse to launch restaurant-style dressings, including Thai, Ranch, Caesar, Italian and BBQ Ranch that embody the restaurant's spirit of creativity and convenience with a California twist.

While you can use these dressings on anything, including seasonal party appetizers, it's nice to have simple, quick, tasty ideas to try. Check out these three salads that will shake up your mealtime and encourage you to try new, bold, unique flavor profiles this season.

1. Thai Steak Salad

Thai steak salad is a wonderful mix of tender meat and fresh vegetables that will keep you happy and full long after your meal. A peanut-flavored (yet peanut free!) Thai dressing is a must for a restaurant-style meal. You can also use the dressing for other salads, pasta dishes and as a dipping sauce for spring rolls.

2. Baja Shrimp Fajita Salad

Shrimp fajita salad will have you dreaming of a seaside vacation. Tossing the shrimp in a savory spice creates a wonderful contrast to the salad's fresh green mix. Topped with ranch dressing, this salad will have you dreaming of being by the beach. Keep the bottle of ranch out to accompany a pizza, a fresh Cobb salad, burgers, wings or fresh-cut veggies to elevate your at-home meal experiences!

3. Nicoise Salad

This classic French salad is a filling yet refreshing dish for lunch or dinner with plenty of protein, thanks to hard-boiled eggs and tuna paired with plenty of fresh vegetables. Don't forget the creamy and bold CPK Caesar dressing. Not only is this dressing the key ingredient for this salad, it's also perfect for pasta salads and wraps.

Let these three salad ideas spark your creativity for a holiday of fun, fresh meals drizzled in delicious, restaurant-style dressings for any occasion. For more inspiration about how to elevate holiday meals at home with new CPK salad dressings and access recipes for these ideas, visit cpkathome.com/recipe.



Photo courtesy Brandpoint Media



ENTERTAINMENT

CLAIM TO FLAME

8 SAFETY TIPS TO HELP YOU ‘CANDLE WITH CONFIDENCE’

Brandpoint

If you enjoy candles, you probably love the way their flames illuminate a darkened room, set a holiday mood or bring a sense of fun, romance or wonder to your life. Candles are a vital element in many festivals, religious events, birthdays and holiday celebrations. Scented candles at a spa or near a bubble bath can also help you to relax and unwind.

As daylight shortens during the autumn and winter months, this is the perfect time to “Candle with Confidence.” Here are tips to help everyone use candles safely:

1. Follow basic candle safety practices. Never leave a burning candle unattended, and make sure candles are not lit on or near anything that might catch fire. Always keep candles out of the reach of children and pets.

2. Prevent candle smoking. Before lighting your candle, trim the wick to 1/4-inch before every use, and be sure to

place candles away from drafts, vents or air currents. If a candle continually flickers or smokes, it is not burning properly and should be extinguished. Allow the candle to cool, trim the wick, make sure the area is draft free, then re-light.

3. Beware of “make-your-own” candleholders. Not all glass is the same, so it’s best to avoid burning candles in glass containers that are not specifically designed for candles. Glass candleholders are manufactured to withstand the temperature changes that occur when burning a candle. Everyday glassware is not designed for burning candles.

4. Make votive cleaning easier. Add a few drops of water to the glass of votive holders before inserting the candle to make them easier to clean. Caution: Don’t add more than a few drops of water, and don’t add water unless you intend to burn the candle immediately afterward. Over time, a candle wick could absorb the water and won’t burn properly. Also, never use water to extinguish a candle.

5. Prevent candle fading. Avoid placing candles where they will be directly exposed to sunlight or harsh indoor lighting, as candles may fade if they are left in bright light for an extended period of time.

6. Store candles carefully. Keep your candles in a cool, dark and dry place. Tapers or dinner candles should be stored flat to preventing warping.

7. Keep candles clean. You can remove dust and fingerprints from a candle by gently rubbing the surface with a piece of nylon or a soft cloth that is dry or slightly dampened with water.

8. Care for your candleholders. Remove wax drippings from candleholders by running hot water over them. Alternatively, some home care experts prefer removing wax by first placing the candleholder in the freezer for an hour or so. This allows the wax to shrink and easily pop out when the candleholder is removed from the freezer.



Photo courtesy Brandpoint Media



ENTERTAINMENT

HOST IN STYLE

4 WAYS TO RENOVATE YOUR HOME THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

Brandpoint

With just a few changes, you can make your home into a more functional space and create a warm, inviting atmosphere in which you and others will enjoy spending time for many holiday seasons to come.

Let these four home renovation ideas inspire you to spruce up your space.

1. Make over the mudroom

If you have a mudroom, you know how helpful this space can be during the holiday season. A mudroom can help keep your house clean and organized by containing the mess of wet coats and slushy boots.

Upgrade your mudroom to make it more functional and easier to maintain. For example, you can incorporate storage solutions to store and organize your boots, add a bench to sit on while you take your shoes off and install hooks to hang coats.

2. Upgrade your flooring

One way to bring a whole new look to your home is by bringing in new flooring, which can serve as the foundation for all interior styles. And, while there are so many great flooring options to select from, many homeowners today are opting to seek out floors that not only look great but also can stand up to busy households and traffic.

A great option that brings fantastic, real-wood looks coupled

with kid-and-pet-proof performance is LL Flooring's new ReNature by CoreLuxe. This floor is waterproof and resistant to dents, scratches, scuffs, and stains – plus it's made from 25% recycled materials, another perk for homeowners who prioritize aesthetics, functionality and responsible manufacturing. DIY'ers will love this easy-to-install flooring.

3. Give your fireplace a facelift

As the weather cools down, it's time to light your fireplace. But before you do, give your fireplace a makeover so you can transform your living room into a relaxing and welcoming space for your friends and family.

Some easy ways to give your fireplace a facelift include updating or replacing the mantel or replacing the current surround with new stone or tile. If you're feeling ambitious, add a built-in seating area nearby. This seating area makes it easier to enjoy the warmth and glow of the fireplace and acts as a focal point for holiday gatherings.

4. Extend your entertaining space outdoors

Don't limit your entertaining to the indoors. With a few additions, you can easily extend your living or dining room into your outdoor space.

Add a firepit or fire table to your deck or patio so you can have cozy conversations around the fire underneath the stars.

This holiday season, give your home a little time, love and care. Using these four tips, you'll be well on your way to turning your home into a space you'll love to spend time in this season and beyond.



Photo courtesy Brandpoint Media



CELEBRATIONS

ME TO YOU

HOLIDAY TOASTS CAN HELP KEEP FOCUS ON OTHERS

Marco Buscaglia

Giving a perfect holiday toast involves a combination of sincerity, preparation and a touch of eloquence. “There are people who think they do their best work when it’s spontaneous so there’s always this temptation for a toast-giver to think, ‘I’m just going to live in the moment and go with it. I’m going to make it up as I go along,’” says Ajay Patel, a Miami-based life coach who helps clients with public speaking opportunities. “But no matter how much you think you can improvise your toast, the key to a good toast is preparation. And holiday toasts, which can be emotional, absolutely deserve some thought and consideration.”

Patel says it’s important to remember that the most impactful toasts are those that come across as sincere and heartfelt. “The words matter less than the emotion and warmth behind them,” he says.

To create a memorable holiday toast, Patel suggests the following:

Prepare in advance: Even if you’re good at speaking off the cuff, having a few key points in mind is helpful. Think about the message you want to convey and any specific sentiments or stories you’d like to share.

Get everyone’s attention: Begin your toast by getting others to focus on you. A simple “If I may have your attention, please,” or a gentle clink of a glass can do the trick.

Address the occasion: Acknowledge the specific holiday or reason for the gathering. Whether it’s Christmas, Hanukkah, New Year’s or another holiday, mention the special significance of the day.

Be brief: A toast shouldn’t be a long speech. Aim for a minute or two. If it’s too long, you may lose your audience’s attention.

Speak from the heart: Genuine sentiments resonate most deeply. Share personal anecdotes or stories if appropriate, express gratitude and convey warm wishes.

Acknowledge those present: Thank any hosts or people who made the gathering possible. Recognize friends and family, and if some guests or individuals might be celebrating the holiday for the first time with your group, make them feel welcome.

Be cautious with quotes: If you’re using a quote or proverb, make sure it’s relevant and adds to your message.

Avoid controversial topics or past grievances: Steer clear of divisive or sensitive subjects. The goal is to uplift and unite, not to provoke or offend.

Raise your glass: As you conclude, raise your glass high. This is the universal signal that you’re wrapping up and that it’s time for everyone to join in.

Finish with a clear sentiment: This could be a simple “Cheers,” “To love and laughter,” “To a year of blessings,” or “To family and friends, near and far.”

Drink: After you finish, take a sip from your glass. This completes the toast and is the cue for others to do the same.

Practice: If you’re nervous, practice a few times beforehand to build up your confidence.



Photo by Scott Warman on Unsplash

