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Cooking

Happy Holidays from the Diva of Do-Ahead: A Year of Feasts to Celebrate with Family and Friends

Diane Phillips
Harvard Common Press
978-1-55832-320-9
(September 20, 2006)

Does anyone really plan a Memorial Day picnic six weeks ahead? The author, the self-proclaimed "Diva of Do-Ahead," does, and says that her foresight helps overcome the "food anxiety" associated with last-minute preparations.

Phillips teaches cooking classes, and once cooked fifty-two demo turkeys plus her own prior to Thanksgiving. She is also the author of *Perfect Party Food*, nominated for a James Beard Award.

Menus and tips for twelve holidays are arranged in this book, in calendar order. Phillips offers everything from New Year's Eve cocktails for twenty to a Valentine's dinner for two. Along with the recipes, she gives suggestions on what music is appropriate and what centerpiece would be most effective.

The recipes themselves cover plenty of ground. Foods for breakfast Denver Omelet Casserole), lunch Tuna Niçoise Sandwich), and dinner Roasted Brisket with Apricots and Plums); cocktails Limonata alla Lambrusco), and desserts Peaches-and-Cream Grand Marnier Bread Pudding with Raspberry Sauce) are all included. Ingredients are not exotic, nor are preparations arduous. Additional "diva wisdom" is scattered throughout. For example, at the end of her recipe for Fiesta Chocolate Cupcakes with Cinnamon Buttercream Frosting, Phillips advises: "For cooked or baked items, I recommend vanilla bean paste because it contains less alcohol, which burns off during cooking, leaving less vanilla flavor. For uncooked items, frostings, whipped creams, extract is fine."

Although “do-ahead countdown” planning schedules may be best suited to the veteran party-giver, the introduction is particularly helpful for the novice. Phillips lists essential kitchen tools, herbs, and dry pantry items. She explains how to calculate the amount of food needed for the number of guests invited, and how much time to allow for different types of gatherings.

Those who have heavy work or family obligations can still entertain in style, says the author: “there are some things you just won’t have time to do, and there are plenty of service people out there who are ready and willing to help.” She even tells how much to tip them.

Above all, she assures prospective hosts and hostesses that rewards await them if they can get past the jitters. “Holiday parties … should be fun, filling you with joy, excitement, and love for the people who will be coming and the knowledge that you will be creating happy memories.”

Frances O. Thomas