

Baking shortcuts for time-pressed entertainers



'Tis the season for baking cookies, cakes and other treats. However, during the holiday rush, it's easy to get side-tracked or tired, and perhaps even a little bit overwhelmed by all the things to do in such a short period of time. Holiday baking doesn't have to add to seasonal stress. With these tips and shortcuts, there will be plenty of sweet treats for the family.

Stick with tested recipes

Although holiday bakers may want to branch out a bit with their culinary creativity, recipes that have previously been prepared with great success can take some of the work out of holiday baking. Preparing recipes you recall preparing in the past is much easier than trying something new. If you'd like, add sparkle to old standards, such as decorating oatmeal or chocolate chip cookies with colored sprinkles.

Cookies are fast-baking

Did you know that cook-

ies were originally made to test oven temperatures? Culinary historians say that cookies were first made to test if an oven was hot enough to bake other goods. Today, cookies can be whipped up in mere minutes. Make a batch of dough and then freeze or refrigerate it, thawing it when the time comes to bake. Also, think about baking one day and decorating the next if pressed for time.

Embrace colored candy melts

Icing can be tricky to master. Simply heating colored candy melts and pouring over cakes or painting onto cookies can add festive appeal to desserts. Candy melts even come in many different colors and can be combined to achieve the tint desired.

Keep ingredients in top form

Don't let poorly performing ingredients or a lack of supplies be your undoing. Butter

can be softened quickly in the microwave when needed for recipes. Eggs can be brought to room temperature by allowing them to sit in a bowl of warm water. Ensure that brown sugar stays soft by putting a piece of sliced bread in the container. Don't forget to stock up on other baking staples, such as vanilla and almond extracts, baking powder/soda, molasses, and confectioner's sugar.

Don't bake from scratch

Not all recipes need to be made from scratch. Boxed cake mixes can be embellished and turned into delicious desserts without much fuss. Substitute melted butter for oil, buttermilk for water, and add an extra egg for a rich cake. Mix in chocolate chips or nuts or experiment with garnishes for a festive look.

Parchment paper is key

Line cookie sheets or cake pans with parchment paper for easy dessert release and quick cleanup. Parchment paper and even foil can help lift cakes or cookie bars out of pans so they look neat and do not stick.

Holiday baking can be made much easier by employing a few tricks of the trade.

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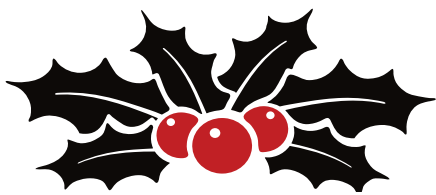
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Set your sing-a-long party apart

Christmas carols became part of holiday celebrations roughly 200 years ago. Initially gaining popularity in England before becoming holiday traditions in the Americas, carols are part and parcel of modern holiday celebrations.

One popular holiday party theme is a sing-a-long. Although door-to-door caroling has long been a holiday staple, celebrants can enjoy staying in and singing as well. To make your sing-a-long party unique, include some of these ideas in the celebration.

Rent or borrow karaoke equipment

Increase the performance factor by securing a karaoke machine. Many are pre-programmed with holiday standards. Various karaoke services exist online as well. For a small fee you can sign up for an account and access lyrics and music that can be streamed over

a computer or any device with an internet connection.

Pair picture-drawing with singing

Combine singing sessions with a game of "guess the picture." Guests select a holiday title out of a basket and then have to draw their interpretation so others can guess what song is being drawn. Afterward, everyone joins in to sing the tune.

Provide bound carol books

Give each guest a custom-designed book of Christmas carols, complete with sheet music or just lyrics that they can use to follow along while joining in singing. Afterwards, this book can be a take-home present and memento.

Book live accompaniment

Singing along to live music can be a treat. Find someone who is proficient on the piano, guitar or another musical instru-

ment who will come and guide the musical interludes. Guests will gather around and offer their own voices. If the goal is to hire an accompanist, note that the holiday season can be a busy time for performers, so book early.

Highlight a singing virtuoso

Chances are there is someone in your group of friends or family who is adept at singing. Ask this person if he or she would be willing to perform a special solo.

Set the mood

Dim overhead lights and sing by candlelight or by the twinkling lights of a Christmas tree. Guests may feel less inhibited if they aren't on full display.

Holiday songs are intertwined with the magic of Christmastime. A sing-a-long party can be the ideal way to gather friends and family.

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