

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Did you know that cookies were originally made to test oven temperatures?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.

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.

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.

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.



Tips for entertaining at home

Entertaining at home is a fun and convenient way to get together with friends and family. Entertaining at home is less expensive than renting out a venue or hitting the town, and party hosts know the amenities they have available to them.

Although convenient, home entertaining also requires more work on the part of the event host, including readying the house for company. But with some creative thinking and a little sweat equity, hosts can throw an enjoyable and memorable get-together from the comforts of their own homes.

Begin by going room-by-room and making note of what will need to be done. If you've entertained at home before, you may have a mental inventory of what worked and what didn't, so make changes accordingly this time around. Focus only on the spaces where guests will congregate, such as the living room, den, kitchen, and dining area.

Develop a decluttering plan to remove items from entertaining spaces and store them safely away. A little bit of clutter can make a space seem unruly and unclean.

Move delicate items, such as collectibles, to a storage location, returning them to their original spaces after the party has ended. If necessary, move some furniture or take away a piece or two to free up more space. Folding chairs may be more practical than a large sofa.

Expend the bulk of your cleaning efforts on the entryway, bathrooms and living areas of the home, as guests will spend a lot of their time in these areas. Enlist the help of the household to tidy the house and then tackle deep cleaning room by room. Remove anything you do not want your guests to see. One or two inquisitive guests may check behind the shower curtain or even open up the medicine cabinet, so remove personal or potentially sensitive items.

Recruit help to ready your home or even assist you on the day of the party. A cleaning service can make fast work of scouring the house, while a waitstaff can help serve food and keep drinks refilled, enabling you to mingle with guests. If the idea of cooking for all of your guests is overwhelming, hire a caterer to provide the food.



Stock up on stain removal products to tackle the inevitable spills. While you no doubt hope to keep your house as clean as possible, expect some dropped food or spilled drinks. Keep a cleaner at the ready so you can quickly combat stains and guests can

continue having a good time.

The more complicated the party is, the more time you will need to prepare your home. Afford yourself ample time to prepare so you are not feeling rushed come the day of the party.