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Halloween is but a distant memory; Thanksgiving and Black Friday have come and gone. We are now in the long stretch to New Year's Day. Long stretch my eye; it is just a blink away. I always say that getting ready for Thanksgiving dinner (and eating it) is a marathon not a sprint. Well, getting through December isn't a sprint and it isn't a marathon; it's more like a triathlon. Change that, it's more like a pentathlon or an obstacle course or a three ring circus. Or maybe all of the above.

The holidays are a wonderful excuse for a party but pulling it off can be a challenge. As I a nurse a tryptophan hangover and sip a very strong caffè latte, I realize that now is as good a time as any to offer a few hints to help you survive kitchen craziness and enjoy your own party.

December is a great time to celebrate the spirit of the season. Enjoy some laughs, share old memories with family and friends and make some new ones. To cut down on party-induced stress, start with the knowledge and confidence that it is YOUR party and it is YOUR kitchen. There are no rules, no dos, no don'ts (unless you make them). You call the shots.

If your signature beef tenderloin or lobster pie isn't in the budget this year, don't despair, don't cancel the party or spend money you don't have. Change the menu. A beautiful seafood stew or braised beef is a comforting substitute and easier on the pocketbook. Make it with love, serve it with a smile and your guests will embrace the change.

The colorful and endearing Julia Child is frequently quoted and just as often misquoted. She was fun, funny and gave America the confidence to give classic French cooking a whirl. In spite of all that, you should feel free to ignore one of her more famous lines, "You're alone in the kitchen." When one of your guests offers to bring an appetizer or dessert, don't be a stoic. It is more than okay to breathe a sigh of relief and gratefully accept. It's also okay to invite friends into the kitchen to help stir a pot, toss a salad and open a bottle of wine. Or just keep you company and share a laugh while you bustle about with last minute preparations.

Most important, take a lesson from Santa, make a list and check it twice. If you are like me, you've had those times when you made too many trips to the store. First you realize that you forgot the olives. Then you run out of milk. Just when you think you've made your last trip, you discover you're out of cinnamon. With all you you've got to do and all you have on your mind, your life will be easier if you invest a little time in a plan. And write it down.

The shopping list is just the start. The devil is in the details and I am hopeless without my to-do list. The phone rings, I get distracted and forget to set the table or wash the lettuce. The party starts and it doesn't take long to get caught up in the frivolity and oops ... forget to put on the rice or chop the parsley. For years I covered my kitchen cupboards with post-it note reminders. Now I make one long list and take immeasurable satisfaction in crossing off each and every item.

And finally, I put several years of yoga classes to good use. (Thank you Cathy Zoeller!) If I start to feel frazzled or stressed, I simply take a couple of deep breaths. And then a couple more. It has almost become a ritual. In the last few minutes before the door bell starts to ring, I put my hand on my belly and breathe deep. And then smile ... ready to celebrate!

Enjoy the holiday season!

Bon appétit!



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Braised Beef with Red Wine & Vegetables

Fill the house with the warm and wonderful aroma of beef and vegetables braising in red wine. Comforting on a cold night, it is a great dish for a party. Enjoy your guests while dinner bubbles in the oven.

Serves 8

4 ounces slab or thick cut bacon, roughly chopped
3 – 3 1/2 pounds thick cut London broil
Flour for dusting the beef
1 medium onion, peeled and chopped
5-6 carrots, peeled and chopped
4-5 stalks celery, chopped
2 teaspoons dried herbs de Provence
1/2 teaspoon dried chili flakes or to taste
3 cloves garlic, minced
2 tablespoons cognac
3 cups dry red wine
2 cups homemade or low-sodium store-bought beef stock
2 cups crushed tomatoes
1 bay leaf
1 pound potatoes, halved or quartered
1/2 pound frozen pearl onions
Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper
Garnish: fresh chopped parsley

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
2. Cook the bacon in a heavy casserole over medium-low heat until crisp and brown. Remove the bacon and reserve. Pour off all but 1 tablespoon of bacon fat and reserve.
3. Meanwhile, combine a little flour with salt and pepper. Dust both sides of the beef evenly with the seasoned flour and shake off any excess. Brown over medium-high heat for 3-5 minutes per side. Remove the beef and add to the reserved bacon.
4. Reduce heat to medium. Add a little more bacon fat to the pot (if you run out of bacon fat, substitute with a little olive oil); add the onion, carrot, celery and garlic. Sprinkle with herbs de Provence and chili flakes and season with salt and pepper. Sauté, stirring frequently, until the onion is translucent. Add the cognac and cook 1-2 minutes more.
5. Put the beef and bacon back into the stew pot. Add the potatoes, pearl onions, wine, stock, tomatoes and bay leaf. Bring to a boil, cover the pot and transfer to the oven. Cook at 350 degrees for about 2 1/2 hours or until the beef and vegetables are tender. If the stew gets too dry, add more wine and/or stock. Remove the beef from the casserole and cut across the grain in thick slices. Garnish with parsley, serve with the vegetables and sauce.

This dish can be made 2 or 3 days ahead. To reheat, bring to a simmer on top of the stove and then transfer to a 350 degree oven and cook until the meat and vegetables are warmed through.