The holidays are here with their obligatory get-togethers with friends and family. Though you might enjoy that six-course meal with wines matched to each course, this kind of entertaining is time-consuming and hard on the budget. Getting together doesn't have to be this complicated. Today let’s talk about ways to entertain and feed your friends and family without breaking the holiday budget.

We often think of a whole meal when entertaining. However, how about serving only desserts? Invite people to come after regular meal times and indulge in an assortment of cakes, pies or other goodies. It doesn't have to be complicated — try for good cookies and ice cream as well as favorite pies, cobblers and cakes. Serve coffee, hot tea or a hot, spiced juice. If you are short of time, purchase some of the desserts.

In the same manner, how about serving only appetizers? Fresh fruit and vegetable trays can be easily assembled and served along with some hot appetizers. Add some cheese and crackers and you are set to go.

Who says you have do it all yourself? Organize a potluck and ask your guests to contribute. Tell everyone what you are providing and let it go. Guests love to share their family favorites so tell them to bring them along. Too many desserts and no side dishes? I can think of worse problems.

Think of non-traditional times to entertain. Host a brunch. Breakfast foods are often less expensive than other foods. In addition, much of the preparation can be done early and refrigerated until time to serve.

Have you ever heard of lupper? Like brunch, this is another combination meal, which is served between lunch and supper. Consider serving soups from a slow
cooker and sandwiches or crackers and cheese. This is another great opportunity to have people in without breaking the budget.

Consider having an open house. Have a few desserts and some finger foods that will hold up for several hours. This is a much more casual get-together and easier to prepare. Because the arrival of guests will be staggered, you don’t have to have chairs and tables for everyone to sit down at once. Again, it is much less preparation and costs considerably less.

How about holding a celebration along with an activity? Go sledding, skiing or trim the tree and follow up with a few appetizers or a light meal.

Many years ago, we had a get-together where each guest brought a Christmas ornament. Then we had a gift exchange with lots of unwrapping, stealing others’ ornaments and a little bit of eating. The party doesn’t have to be a big production. The only requirement is that people have the opportunity to have fun and visit with everyone. Keep your party plans simple and you’ll enjoy it as well.

Regardless of how you choose to entertain, be sure to include the costs of entertainment in your overall Christmas budget. Keeping track of the money spent will keep you from having buyer’s remorse when the credit card bills hit in January.

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