How to Plan a Holiday Dinner (Step by Step)

Holidays and Traditions · about 19 minutes · 2026-11-11

A fully illustrated 28-step guide to planning a holiday dinner without the last-minute panic: set the scope, build a realistic menu and a countdown timeline, prep ahead, then cook, serve and store leftovers safely.

Phase 1 — Fix the Scope and the Menu

1. **Fix the date and a firm headcount**
   Fix the date and a firm headcount.
2. **Ask about allergies and diets now**
   Ask about allergies and diets now.
3. **Set a per-person budget**
   Set a per-person budget.
4. **Choose a seated or buffet style**
   Choose a seated or buffet style.
5. **Anchor the meal with one centrepiece**
   Anchor the meal with one centrepiece.
6. **Balance the courses and side dishes**
   Balance the courses and side dishes.
7. **Pick at least three dishes you can make ahead**
   Pick at least three dishes you can make ahead.

Phase 2 — Write the Timeline and Shop

8. **Count backwards from the moment you serve**
   Count backwards from the moment you serve.
9. **Check the oven and hob capacity**
   Check the oven and hob capacity.
10. **Schedule the centrepiece first**
    Schedule the centrepiece first.
11. **Decide the serving order**
    Decide the serving order.
12. **Turn the final menu into one shopping list**
    Turn the final menu into one shopping list.
13. **Order specialty items several days early**
    Order specialty items several days early.
14. **Check platters, serving spoons and equipment**
    Check platters, serving spoons and equipment.

Phase 3 — Prep in the Days Before

15. Buy shelf-stable items first

Buy shelf-stable items first.

16. Prep vegetables a day ahead

Prep vegetables a day ahead.

17. Make the sauces, dressings and dessert early

Make the sauces, dressings and dessert early.

18. Set the table the night before

Set the table the night before.

19. Clear a shelf for the centrepiece

Clear a shelf for the centrepiece.

20. Brine or dry-age the main

Brine or dry-age the main.

21. Label and date every prepared dish

Label and date every prepared dish.

Phase 4 — Cook, Serve and Wind Down

22. Start the main at its calculated time

Start the main at its calculated time.

23. Use a thermometer, not the clock

Use a thermometer, not the clock.

24. Rest the meat before carving

Rest the meat before carving.

25. Finish the sides while the main rests

Finish the sides while the main rests.

26. Warm the platters and plate the main

Warm the platters and plate the main.

27. Keep hot food hot and cold food cold

Keep hot food hot and cold food cold.

28. Clear and store leftovers promptly

Clear and store leftovers promptly.

Sources

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Written as a checklist from https://www.howcompass.com/how-to/How-to-Plan-a-Holiday-Dinner. Corrections: https://www.howcompass.com/co