

The get-ahead guide to being a perfect host

To take the stress out of inviting guests to eat all you need is a bit of clever prep



XANTHE CLAY

The secret of getting ahead," wrote Mark Twain, "is getting started." Mr Twain might well have been talking about cooking. Leaving all the meal preparation until the last minute is a recipe for a stressed cook, especially when there are guests coming. But where exactly do we start? Recipes tend to be written as single activities, with no indication as to what can, and can't, be done before the doorbell rings. And equally, a casserole from the freezer won't always do.

Enter Jane Lovett, and her new book *The Get Ahead Cook*, with crowd-pleasing recipes and plenty that can be prepped early. Jane, who has years of experience teaching at Leith's Cookery School and at her home in Northumberland, is the perfect tutor.

"I wouldn't dream of doing more than one course that couldn't be prepared ahead," she counsels soothingly. "Supper at home is not the MasterChef final."

Recipes from *The Get Ahead Cook* by Jane Lovett (Apicium Publishing, £20)

THE GET-AHEAD COOK



JANE'S TOP TIPS

- A lot of food tastes better after a night or two in the fridge, allowing the flavours to meld. Take dishes out an hour before serving or reheating.
- Don't obsess about food being piping hot. Hot plates and hot gravy are important, but most food tastes best when warm.
- Most vegetables can be cooked earlier in the day, cooled under the tap, and drained. To serve, heat butter or oil in a pan, add a splash of water, and toss the veg until sizzling.
- When keeping food warm, make sure that steam can escape. Leave the oven door ajar or the food will go soggy and discoloured.
- Roast joints taste better if left to rest in a warm spot for at least half an hour. An hour is best - you can make gravy and wash up before guests arrive.



Rack of lamb, freekeh, nuts and tapenade crumbs

A lovely prepare-ahead platter. The lamb should be served hot or warm; the rest of the ingredients can be warm or at room temperature. Or, the uncooked racks can be cut into individual cutlets and barbecued for a few minutes on each side until charred on the outside and pink in the middle.

SERVES SIX

INGREDIENTS

- Olive oil
- Good handful of walnuts
- 1-2 tbsp runny honey
- 15g dried breadcrumbs
- 2 tsp tapenade
- 2 racks of lamb, chined and French trimmed (14-16 cutlets)
- Worcestershire sauce
- 200g dried freekeh
- 300g fine French beans, tops trimmed
- 100-125g bag of baby sprouts or watercress
- 1 small red onion, halved and finely sliced
- Handful of black olives, pitted or not
- 2 sprigs of mint, leaves roughly chopped
- 2-3 tbsp pomegranate seeds
- Baby cherry tomatoes on the vine, roasted

the prepared baking sheet. Leave to cool.

□ Preheat the oven to 220C/Gas 7. In a small bowl, mix together the breadcrumbs and tapenade. Heat a little olive oil in a pan, add the mixture and fry over a high heat for a few minutes until golden and crispy. Set aside in a small bowl.

□ Mix together the sauce ingredients. If very thick, thin with a little water (although it shouldn't be too runny). Set aside.

□ Rub the skin of the lamb with a little Worcestershire sauce, put into a small, lightly oiled roasting tin and cook at the top of the oven for 15-20 minutes for pink lamb (cooking time will depend on the size of the racks - very large racks will need 20-25 minutes). Transfer from the roasting tin to a plate and leave somewhere warm to rest for at least 20 minutes (but up to an hour or so is fine).

□ Meanwhile, cook the freekeh according to the pack instructions. Drain, season well, stir in a little olive oil and keep warm if using straight away, or leave to cool.

□ Cook the beans in boiling salted water until just tender, drain, refresh briefly under cold water and keep warm if using immediately, or cool them under cold water and wrap them in kitchen paper until they are needed.

□ Arrange the spinach, watercress and tomatoes around the edge of a large platter. Pile the freekeh into the middle, scatter over the beans and then the onion.

□ Slice the lamb into cutlets and arrange over the top with the bones standing up. Pour over any lamb juices. Trickle over a little of the yogurt sauce and scatter with the walnuts, olives, mint, pomegranate seeds and, finally, the tapenade crumbs and a swirl of olive oil. Serve the rest of the sauce separately in a bowl.

For the sauce

- 175g natural Greek yogurt
- 1 clove of garlic, crushed
- 2 tsp olive oil
- Juice of ½ a lemon
- 2 sprigs of mint, leaves chopped

METHOD

□ Oil a baking sheet, or line with silicone paper. Mix the walnuts with just enough honey to coat them all. Cook the nuts in a frying pan, stirring over a high heat for a few minutes until golden and caramelised. Tip out and spread immediately on to



Asparagus, pea, mint and goat's cheese frittata

Serve this with a green salad and a tomato and onion salad.

SERVES FOUR TO SIX

INGREDIENTS

- Splash of olive oil
- 1 onion, sliced
- 1 clove of garlic, crushed
- 170g peas, cooked
- Generous sprig of mint, leaves roughly snipped or chopped
- 8 eggs, lightly beaten with a fork
- Knob of butter
- 100g whole goat's cheese with skin
- 12 asparagus tips, cooked until just tender
- 1 tsp grated parmesan

METHOD

□ Preheat the oven to 200C/Gas 6.

□ Heat the oil in a deepish, preferably ovenproof, frying pan (ideally, 20cm x 4.5cm deep) and cook the onion until soft and beginning to colour a little. Add the garlic and cook for a further minute.

□ Add the peas, mint and some seasoning to the beaten eggs, followed by the cooked onion. Mix well. □ Wipe out the pan, melt the butter and add the egg mixture. Cook over a medium heat until the bottom is golden and the egg set around the edges and about halfway through its depth. This will take five or 10 minutes, based on the depth of the pan.

□ Slice the goat's cheese into four discs, then tear each in half and arrange on top of the unset egg mixture.

□ Arrange the asparagus tips over the top, sprinkle with parmesan and cook in the preheated oven for 10 to 15 minutes, or until barely set in the middle. Leave to stand for five or 10 minutes.

□ Serve from the pan, or loosen with a palette knife and slide on to a serving plate.

GET AHEAD

The peas and asparagus can be cooked up to two days ahead. Prepare the beaten egg mixture at any time on the day.



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