# Miss Sophie: For entertaining, it's all in the menu

3. Every book and entertainment website always says "don't try a new recipe for a dinner party." I don't necessarily agree with this statement. I agree that you shouldn't try to learn a new technique like cooking a soufflé for the first time, but a recipe that has ingredients and instructions that you are familiar with is perfectly fine.

4. Don't be afraid to supplement your menu with a store-bought item or two. A nice loaf of bread or beautiful dessert from the bakery or a party tray from the deli for appetizers is nothing to be ashamed of. Put it in a pretty dish or on a silver tray and no one will even notice!

5. Don't forget to include hors d'oeuvres when planning your menu. We've all heard the phrase, "cocktail hour," but did you know that dinner party etiquette dictates that dinner should be planned for at least an hour later than the time on the invitation? Proper etiquette or not, cocktail hour is my favorite part of a dinner party - with or without cocktails. It sets the tone for the entire evening. It gives you the opportunity to greet your guests, make introductions and just catch up before the formality of the meal time. It also can keep your guests entertained while you slip into the kitchen to put the final touches on dinner.

Once the menu is decided, the next step is critical to making the evening a success - the shopping list. You should have all your ingredients on hand a minimum of two days prior to the party. There is nothing more frustrating than being in the middle of preparing a dish and realizing you don't have something you need. To make your list, gather all your recipes for the party together and put them in a folder or a binder. If your recipe is from a cookbook, make a copy of it and put it in the folder. Write down every ingredient in a recipe and any condiments you need with it - like butter for the bread. You can go to your pantry later and mark off the things you have on hand.

I divide my shopping list in departments that coordinate with my grocery store aisles by making columns for meats, produce, dairy and so forth. Everything I need in that area of the store is in that column. As I write down the ingredients in my recipe, I categorize it into the proper department. This probably sounds a little strange to many of you, but you'll thank me when you have everything you need in your basket on the first walk through the store.

Happy planning!!

Teri Bell is co-owner of Miss Sophie's Marketplace at the Mighty Eighth in Pooler. Go to www.sophiesmarketplace.com.

Neapolitan Beef Ragu

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Braising is possibly my favorite way of cooking. It allows use of less expensive cuts of meats and infuses many levels of flavor into one delish dish. This recipe is adapted from one of my cookbooks on braising "All About Braising" by Molly Stevens. Serves 6-8 people.

1 (3- to 4-pound) boneless beef chuck roast cut into ½ inch cubes

Salt and pepper

2 tablespoons olive oil

3 ounces diced pancetta or thickly sliced bacon

1 large yellow onion, diced

1 carrot, diced

1 celery stick, diced

8 ounces sliced mushrooms

1/3 cup tomato paste

1 cup red wine

3 garlic cloves, coarsely chopped

1 (28-ounce) can whole, peeled tomatoes with their juice

1½ pounds dried tube-shaped pasta, cooked according to directions

Parmesan Cheese, grated

Preheat oven to 300 degrees.

Heat the oil in a Dutch oven or a heavy-lidded braising pot (7-quart) over medium-low heat. Season the cubed roast with salt and pepper and brown on all sides in oil. Transfer browned meat to a large plate. Add the pancetta or bacon to the pot. Sauté over medium heat until it has rendered some of the fat. Add the onion, carrot, celery, and mushrooms. Sauté until vegetables are soft and slightly browned. Add tomato paste and stir to coat vegetables. Add red wine and garlic and bring to a boil, stirring with a wooden spoon to release the browned bits from the bottom of the pan. Allow to boil until wine is reduced by half. Add the tomatoes, pouring in the juices first and then, holding your hand over the pot, crush the tomatoes to release the juices then toss the tomato into the pan. Let the sauce come to a simmer. Return the meat to the pot along with any juices that have accumulated on the plate. Cover pot with parchment paper and place lid on top of parchment paper. (This creates a better seal.) Cook for 2½ hours or until meat is tender. Remove from oven and spoon off any fat floating on top of the sauce. Serve over hot pasta and top with grated parmesan cheese. Finish the meal with a salad, green beans or asparagus, and a crusty bread

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Make it ahead: Prepare and cook the Ragu up to 2 days in advance. Allow to cool and refrigerate. To reheat, bake in a 350 degree oven for 1 hour. Cook your pasta earlier in the day. Just cut 3 minutes off the cooking time. Drain and rinse immediately in cold water to stop the pasta from cooking. Toss in a teaspoon of olive oil and refrigerate. While the Ragu is warming, bring a pot of water to a boil. Drop pasta into boiling water for 3 minutes to reheat.

Parmesan Cheddar Basil Crackers with Strawberry Preserves

For best results, grate your own cheese. The pre-grated cheeses in the store have a powder coating to keep them from clumping that also impedes proper melting when cooked.

2½ cups freshly shredded cheddar cheese

½ cup butter, softened

5 tablespoons milk

1 teaspoon salt

1½ cups all-purpose flour

1½ cups freshly grated parmesan cheese

4 tablespoons finely chopped fresh basil

Strawberry preserves

Preheat oven 350 degrees. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.

Beat cheddar cheese, butter, milk and salt until well blended. Gradually add the flour parmesan and basil and mix well. Turn dough on to a well-floured surface. Roll to 1/8 inch thickness. Cut with a small round or square cookie cutter. Place on cookie sheet. Bake for 11-14 minutes. Allow to cool a minimum of 15 minutes before removing from baking sheet. Serve with strawberry preserves on the side.

Make it ahead: Cooked crackers can be stored in an airtight bag for up to 2 days or frozen for up to 3 months.

Brown Sugar Bacon Wrapped Pineapple with Sweet Sriracha Sauce

Adapted from "The Café Sucre Farine." Makes approximately 20 appetizers.

10 strips of bacon

1 large can of pineapple chunks, well drained

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¾ cup packed brown sugar

Honey-Sriracha Dipping Sauce

¼ cup honey

2 teaspoons Worcester sauce

4 teaspoons lime juice

1 teaspoon fresh cilantro stems, chopped (optional)

Preheat oven to 400˚F. Spay pan lightly with cooking spray.

Cut bacon strips in half width-wise. Wrap each pineapple chunk with bacon. Roll each bacon wrapped pineapple in brown sugar until bacon is completely covered in brown sugar. Place rolls, seam side down, on prepared pan. Bake for 20-30 minutes or until deep golden brown. Transfer to a plate lined with paper towels and allow to drain for 5 minutes. Skewer and serve with Honey-Sriracha.

Honey-Sriracha Dipping Sauce: Mix all ingredients together well.

Make it ahead: The bacon wraps can be assembled the day before and refrigerated. The Sriracha Sauce can be made a week in advance and refrigerated. The day of the party, bake as directed up to an hour before the party and served at room temperature.

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