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Feeling Overwhelmed Planning Holiday Parties? UNH Hospitality Management Professor Says Using Operations Management Will Simplify Efforts

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DURHAM, N.H. – The refrigerator may not even be empty of Thanksgiving leftovers, yet the holiday party season already is in full swing. For many the stress of party planning, combined with tackling shopping, can take away every ounce of Christmas cheer. However, holiday meals and parties can be simplified by taking an operations management approach as taught in the Department of Hospitality Management in the Whittemore School of Business and Economics at the University of New Hampshire.

“In a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, some of the top consulting firms made suggestions like disinviting difficult guests, cutting out green beans almandine because it causes problems with the flow of the meal and similar recommendations, which fail to address the real solution. If you plan the meal and develop a schedule for putting a meal together, whether you have 10 or 100 guests, it actually is quite simple,” says Joe Durocher, associate professor of hospitality management.

The first step in any party operations management plan is to create the menu. Durocher says hosts and hostesses should write down every dish that will be included, with a brief description of the steps that must be taken to prepare each dish. Decide which dishes will be made from scratch or purchased already made. Then develop a shopping list. “For experienced cooks this can be done off the tops of their heads, but for some it makes sense to consult a cookbook,” he says.

Next, develop a production schedule. This should include a schedule for doing local shopping, since in many cases, going to two or more food stores is necessary to find the standard and specialty items needed. The schedule also should include ordering specialty items in advance to ensure that they arrive before the big event. “If you order a Yule log online, order early as sometimes vendors run out. If you plan on serving a spiral cut ham from an online site, order weeks in advance and specify a deliver date just a day or so before you want it. And if you plan to serve a locally raised free-range turkey, put your order in three to four weeks in advance, just to make sure they have one for you,” Durocher says.

Pre-preparation is the next critical step in the operations management of a holiday party or meal. If done properly, all that’s left to do on the day of the event is to assemble and cook foods with little or no dicing and chopping.

“Make sure you have a supply of heavy-duty closable plastic bags to store each ingredient as you ‘prep’ them. Use a magic marker to write which dish the ingredients will be used for. If you need onions for several dishes, divide up the onions into individual bags for each dish — that minimizes the chances that you’ll put all of the onions into the stuffing only to discover on the day of your dinner that you need onions for some other dish,” Durocher says.

Those who can’t set the table the day before the dinner should at least assemble all of the tableware needed. Creating a list of items days before the event will help determine if there is anything needed before it’s too late. “Don’t wait until the last minute to set the table. The visual impact of a well-laid tabletop will inspire guests as they arrive,” he says.

“Finally, check the oven frequently to ensure that it is still at temperature. Murphy’s Law applies to holiday preparations so if the oven breaks down, quickly pull the bird out, carve off some thick slabs of breast meat into cutlets and sauté them on your stovetop,” Durocher says. “Stay cool and enjoy the holidays.”

Editors: Joe Durocher, associate professor of hospitality management, is available for comment at 603-862-3387 or jdj@cisunix.unh.edu. Students in Durocher’s Meeting and Conventions class are using operations management to plan the UNH Holiday Party. If you would like to see operations management in action, please join us for the UNH Holiday Party Wednesday, Dec. 14 from 3:30 to 6:30 p.m. at the Whittemore Center Arena.