



Record-Eagle/Douglas Tesner

Patty Stearns, food writer for the Record-Eagle, arranges food on a table during a potluck-style meal at her house. Stearns and several of her friends made the food.



Potluck panache

Share the work, the flavors and the memories with a holiday potluck **BY PATTY LANOUE STEARNS**

My advice for anyone planning a holiday party this year: Make it a potluck.

In this frenzied season of nonstop get-togethers, it's the cheeriest way to preserve your sanity and pull off a celebration that will be memorable for you and your guests. The fact that everyone is involved takes the pressure off and makes for a far more diverse menu.

I've totally lucked out since moving north six years ago. Many of the new friends I've made are transplants whose families are scattered. We've become family, which we all agree makes holidays far less dysfunctional and a whole lot more fun. My pals also are fabulous cooks and creative types, so whenever any of us hosts a potluck, the food not only looks good, it's five-star fare.

A potluck host has certain responsibilities. You have to do the inviting, provide the main course, a few interesting side dishes, and appetizers (cheeses, flatbread and other crackers, a nice loaf of crusty French or Italian bread all work well). Add a few bottles of champagne, red and white wine, sparkling water and soft drinks and let your guests bring the rest. Tell them to bring a side dish, salad or dessert — perhaps something that has been a family tradition for their holidays — and a beverage of choice.

Now, set the stage. Fresh flowers

are a must. Assemble your best table décor — fine china, flatware, stemware (one of my pals recently shamed me out plasticware, especially for wine, so plan to do some dishes later), candlesticks, runners and linens.

I kicked off the season with this menu: Oven-roasted sweet Italian sausages, roasted vegetables sprinkled with olive oil and balsamic vinegar, black-bean corn salad (see recipes below), and put out some purchased hummus, crackers and bread. I asked my friend Richard Guindon, a retired Detroit Free Press cartoonist, to bring some lemony stuffed grape leaves from Silver Swan in Traverse City.

Artist Nancy Nash offered to roast an Amish chicken rubbed with savory herbs from her garden and made a splendid orange-scented thyme sauce to pour over it.

Pam Yee Gianola, another artist friend (who often pitches in washing dishes after a blowout at my house), made a tasty boiled shrimp salad with fresh greens and balsamic vinaigrette dressing along with some of her delicious cellophane wonton wraps filled with shrimp and crunchy vegetables. Artist Flora Ricca Hoffman brought a beautifully composed crisp apple salad studded with Gorgonzola cheese and walnuts. Paul Gomes, a chef who trained at

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