

Savvy Holiday Entertaining



A Guide to Quick Tips, Easy Ideas, and Festive Recipes

Shanna Hatfield

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Easy Ideas,
and Festive Recipes

by
Shanna Hatfield

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by Shanna Hatfield

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Entertaining Roots

Growing up on a working farm in the country, we often hosted large gatherings of family and friends during the holidays. It was during these festive gatherings that I learned many lessons about feeding a crowd, preparing in advance, and making food stretch from my Mom.

What I know about being a gracious host came from my Dad. I don't think he's ever met anyone he wouldn't invite to stay for dinner. He is a master at making people feel welcome.

I've witnessed, watched, participated in, and attended more gatherings over the years than I can count. Not only did my parents set a good entertaining example, but that theme of making guests feel welcome carried over to the homes of my aunt and uncles and grandparents, who also took turns hosting.

In the following pages, I'm sharing tips I've gathered that I hope help you relax and enjoy the entertaining process. It can be a lot of fun when you let go of perfect perceptions and embrace the moment.

For more ideas, tips, party themes and recipes, visit my blog at savvyentertaining.com

Wishing you and your family the happiest of holiday seasons! May every gathering in your home be one filled with lovely moments and warm memories.

Happy Entertaining!

Entertaining at Home Defined

So many people have a preconceived idea about entertaining at home. Some think it is an involved and much-to-be-avoided process. If you are one of those, I want to help you change the way you view entertaining.

In the most basic form, entertaining at home can be defined as opening your doors and making others feel welcome. It isn't about your cooking or decorating talents, if your manners would make Emily Post proud or if you have the swankiest house on the block.

Entertaining at home *is* all about the way your guests feel when they head out your door.

Did you create some fun or warm memories? Did you focus on enjoying the time spent together? Were you present in the moment, interacting with your guests?

That is successful entertaining.

We use outdated standards to measure our entertaining abilities, creating a lack of confidence in our role as hosts. Changing times have brought new ideas and relaxed rules.

Think about what “entertaining” means to you.

If you view it as something that consumes your time and money while creating much stress, we need to get you looking through a different entertaining lens. People won't notice if the kids have toys out, the hallway could use a coat of paint or your “good” silver isn't the type that requires silver polish.

Concerns like this are not important to entertaining at home and having nothing to do with true hospitality. Adjust your attitude, do some planning, and implement simple tips to find yourself in the position as the host with whom everyone wants to spend their time!

To be a successful host, turn the focus from material things like your house, serving pieces, and food to your guests.

A warm and gracious host is the one who views entertaining at home as an opportunity to share, to welcome guests and make them feel like they are the most important people in the world right at that moment. When guests feel truly welcomed and appreciated the fact that the bathroom rugs don't match the hand towels are of absolutely no importance at all.

Give yourself a measure of grace, find a new entertaining standard and have some fun. Put your guests at ease, make them feel special and see how much easier entertaining becomes.

Seven Secrets to Successful Entertaining

When you are planning on having more than just a few guests in attendance, these seven secrets to entertaining will give you the basic information you need to entertain with ease and look like a pro.

1. Deciding What, When and Who
2. Pick a Theme
3. Choosing the Menu
4. Get Organized
5. Perfect Party Foods
6. Adding Special Touches
7. Helpful Hints

Bonus – Fun Holiday Recipes!

Deciding What, When, Where and Who

The very first step is to decide what kind of event or party you want to have, when and where you will have it and who you want to invite. Think of it as the four W's:

What: Do you want a sit-down dinner for six or a buffet for 12? Formal or casual? Indoors or outdoors?

When: Next, figure out at date that works well for you. If you work weekdays, a weekend event might be a better option and provide you with plenty of time for preparation. If you are a morning person and can do a brunch, go for that. A night owl should focus on a late evening party. Try to hold the party when your energy level is at its highest.

Where: Location helps to define the mood and spirit of a party. Think beyond the traditional dining room event. Try the den for a night of family games or the sun room for a morning brunch. The center island of your kitchen is a great spot for informal dining. Build a buffet on top and have fun. Break the old rules of entertaining and surprise your guests. Be creative and think outside the box.

Who: Who do you want to attend your party? Is it a family affair? All adults or kids invited? A girls' night out? A gathering of friends? Neighbors? People from work? Think about creating a good mix of people who will mingle and enjoy one another.

Quick Tip: Women hate to not be invited! They'd much rather decline an invitation because of a prior obligation than to be left out. So don't assume your friend is too busy to come. Extend the invitation and let her make the decision.

Pick A Theme for Party Success

If you would like to do some entertaining during the holiday season but aren't sure where to begin, try choosing a theme for a party.

It truly simplifies the process for you and creates a higher level of excitement for your guests. Anytime you can incorporate a theme it narrows your menu selections, gives you decorating ideas and color schemes and makes it so much more fun to entertain.

Christmas is a great theme all by itself, but you can play off that in many different ways. Traditional, whimsical, and modern are just a few of the twists you can put on the Christmas theme.

The only limitation to themed entertaining is your imagination. If you can dream it, you can make it happen!

Here are some fun ideas for holiday themed parties:

An Ornament Exchange – Invite everyone to bring one gift-wrapped ornament. Specify a price range. As guests arrive put a number on each package and a corresponding number in a bowl or hat. After dessert, have everyone draw a number and open the corresponding gift.

After Sledding or Skating Party – You don't have to be a child to enjoy an afternoon of sledding or skating with friends. When the fun is over, troop back inside to thaw out with a spread of light appetizers and sweets, served buffet style. Don't forget to have plenty of warm beverages to sip!

Cookie or Candy Exchange – If you don't have time to bake a dozen different types of treats, make one huge batch and invite your friends to do the same. Invite them over for an afternoon of swapping treats, making sure they bring enough for others attending the party to take home a dozen. Serve a few sweets, something salty and, of course, something to sip!

Card-Writing Party – Mix holiday business with pleasure by hosting an evening gathering with a few close friends to write Christmas cards. Tell your guests to bring their cards, envelopes, address books, pens and stamps. You'll provide background music, space at a table and an outstanding dessert or two for motivation. Part of the excitement of receiving cards is the tidbit of newsy info inside. Suggests your guests write out a sample news paragraph to get them started or come prepared with copies of a holiday newsletter.

Trimming the Tree Party - You can completely change the look of your tree from past years when you invite others to help you deck the halls. Invite a few friends over and let creativity be their guide. Play your favorite Christmas music and offer some hearty soup, sandwiches and sweet treats as the reward for their efforts.

Quick Tip: If you really want your Christmas tree to shine, instead of wrapping strings of lights around the tree, string along individual branches, starting at the base and working your way out. Plan on a strand of 100 lights for every foot your tree is tall.

Choose the Menu

Choosing what your guests will eat and drink is one of the most important party decisions.

If people will be standing and talking, choose a variety of simple finger foods. If you are planning a buffet, serve one or two entrées with four to six side dishes plus a dramatic dessert.

When selecting what beverages to serve, remember to offer a selection. Stock up on ice a few days before the event. Coffee is also a welcome addition to most any type of gathering. Always offer water.

Whenever you entertain, remember to keep it simple! That is the secret every savvy host knows. A harried hostess isn't fun at all. So if you are pressed for time or on a tight budget think about serving one single main dish and a few sides. Round out the meal with a big fresh green salad and a dessert (no one will care if you ran by the bakery!).

Find your signature dish and stick to it! Do you make magical lasagna? Are you the queen of chicken casserole? Whatever you can pull off with your eyes closed should be the one thing you rely on again and again.

Quick Tip: Offer bread with the meal. Even picky eaters will eat a piece of warm bread. You could serve hot rolls, biscuits, crusty French bread, crostini, bread sticks, gourmet crackers, pop overs, etc.

Get Organized for the Holidays

The best way to get through the holidays is to get organized.

Here is an easy game plan designed to help keep you on track, cut down on stress and get you through the holidays with a little more order and a little less fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants.

Start by looking at your calendar, organizer or day planner. Pull out all those post-it notes with dates and appointments scribbled on them and start entering them into your calendar. The idea is to get everything into one calendar so you can see at a glance what days you have appointments and commitments and what days you have open.

Think about everything coming up in the next month like church programs, rehearsals, the kids' school concerts, any parties or gatherings you will be attending, any doctor appointments, hair appointments, manicures and pedicures (if you are so lucky!), and so on. Get all those dates entered into your calendar.

Now, make a list of all the things you want to accomplish before Christmas. Are you planning to send out holiday cards? Will you be doing holiday baking? Hosting a party? Making ornaments? Having the best outdoor light display on your block?

Write down everything you would like to do this holiday season.

Once your list is complete, compare it to your calendar. What dates are open? You will probably find that your want-to-do list is far longer than the dates you have available.

Be realistic.

This is a very important step to maintaining your sanity and some level of fun through the holidays. Set realistic expectations and stick to them. The holiday season, no matter how hard you wish for it, will not magically bestow you with super-hero powers that enable you to accomplish the impossible or miraculously stretch time so you can add an extra three hours of activities into each day.

What can you cut out or cut down? Instead of baking yourself silly for two days straight, why not invite over a few friends for an afternoon, bake together, share the spoils, and be happy with your accomplishments. Do you really need to make 14 different kinds of Christmas cookies?

What can you delegate? Your spouse and kids can certainly put up outdoor lights. The kids can make ornaments. Your spouse can handle a few extra responsibilities. Don't be afraid to spread around the chores. You don't have to do it all yourself. Really!

Take another look at that want-to-do list. Circle the top five things you absolutely want to happen and choose dates to enter them on your calendar. Look at the rest of your list and decide what other things could be delegated or could be optional. And when I say optional, I mean that if they happen, that is great, but if they don't you will not allow yourself to stress or fuss because they didn't. That is why they are *optional*. Get it? Great!

And please remember, at the center of all the holiday hub-bub, no one cares if your house is perfectly decorated, if your cookies came from the store or your holiday greetings weren't the first out this year. You'll find what your family and friends really care about is the relationships, spending time enjoying one another and sharing from the heart.

If you focus on that, I guarantee you'll have a very Happy Holiday season.

Quick Tip: Choose one day on your calendar between now and Christmas that is just for you. That's right! A day just for you. Whether you spend it getting a massage, reading a good book by the fire, or at the spa with a friend (oh, sign me up for that one!), carve out one day for you to rest and recharge. You'll be glad you did and so will your family. You'll feel refreshed and ready to tackle all the jolly holiday fun you can handle.

Perfect Party Foods

As you begin preparations for your event, think about the stability of the food you are serving. Will it need to be kept cold or hot? What does it look and taste like at room temperature?

Present your food festively and with a creative flair. If you plan to serve something new, do a test run of the recipe well in advance so you know if it will work with the rest of your menu.

If you are planning on serving fish, remember to purchase it as fresh as possible, whether from a fish store or the fish department of the grocery store. Most fish wholesalers are only open Monday through Friday, so if you were to buy your fish on Saturday for a Sunday event, it was probably caught no later than Thursday and would be far from fresh!

Many chefs spend the bulk of their time on fancy main dishes, but your guests will be just as impressed with someone who can apply creativity to side dishes without losing the integrity of the produce.

Do your guests a favor and use produce that is both in season and at the peak of flavor and freshness. This can be somewhat challenging in the winter months, but do your best. Produce has about the same shelf life as seafood, so buy just what you need on the day or day before you need it, whenever possible. Don't plan dishes that require out-of-season ingredients. This will be expensive, stressful, and will not add to your holiday cheer.

Don't underestimate the value of soups and salads. They're lifesavers to every over-worked host, since soups can usually be made well ahead and salads nearly always go together quickly.

Give your guests one final flavorful presentation with dessert. This is the taste that will linger in their taste buds and their minds since it is the last thing they will eat before going home. Make it something spectacular and memorable!

Quick Tip: Remember to keep it simple - don't plan three main dishes, half a dozen side dishes and an array of spectacular desserts. While it is impressive, it is also expensive, time consuming, and a lot of work. Pick one main dish, a couple of side dishes, and one fantastic dessert. You can still "Wow" your guests without working yourself to death!

Adding Special Touches

Use a variety of decorating techniques to make your event special. Just by changing the linens, dishes and centerpiece, you can transform your dining room from casual to formal in a snap. Spend a little time on the extras that give your party a “Wow” factor!

The sense of smell is very important and one of the first things a guest notices when they walk into your home. Create a comforting aroma. Just as colors and sounds trigger emotional responses, smells have wonderful – or not so wonderful – effects on our mood. A guest’s first impression of a party may not be what first hits their eyes and ears, but their noses!

Choose one scent and stick with it throughout your entertaining area. If you are burning candles with spicy scents, for example, at the front door, carry that theme throughout the house. This is actually a great scent to use during the holiday season as it blends well with the delicious smells from the kitchen.

Make sure to include a candle in the bathroom. Not only does it add a nice ambience, but it creates a pleasant fragrance.

Perfect party lighting is also very important. Parties are a good time to let the shadows fall where they may. Rely on lights from decorations, a few strategically placed candles and a few soft lights. You don’t want your home to be dark, but softly and warmly lit. If you have a fireplace, make sure it is going because the light is inviting and wonderful.

Substitute pink bulbs for white during your parties. It makes an amazing difference to the ambience. The next rule is to lower the wattage. Either hit the dimmer switches or replace the bulbs with lower watts.

Quick Tip: If you are hesitant to burn candles due to an open flame, think about getting a few battery-operated candles. They come in all shapes and sizes and I’ve even found a few that are scented. I especially like to “burn” these in unattended areas like the bathroom.

Begin Your Welcome at the Front Door

Have you ever gone up to front door and while you were waiting for someone to answer, had a feeling of not being welcomed? You don't know what it was, exactly, but you just had a sense of that front door space not being inviting.

One of the most important things we can do when we are having guests over is to make sure the front door area is pleasant and inviting. The front entry to your home is really a reflection of you, so make it as warm and welcoming as possible.

Even if you don't have much time or money to invest, you can still create a feeling of welcome by keeping the space neat and clean.

- Unless it is a spooky Halloween party (which isn't a great idea in December), make sure all cobwebs are brushed down. Sweep away any leaves and dirt. Wash the windows and any glass in the entry area. Make it sparkle!

- Shake or brush off the welcome mat – and yes you should have one! The mat should reflect your interior decorating style. For example, if you have a country décor theme, try a heart-shaped welcome mat.

- Add seasonal decorations. Even if you hang a simple grape-vine wreath on your door, you can dress it up by season with sunflowers or seashells for summer, leaves or pumpkins for fall, greenery and berries for the holidays.

- Accessorize with seasonal plants and greenery whenever possible. Add decorative pots or urns leading to your door and fill them with colorful fir branches, berry sprigs and finish off with a red bow.

- If it is time for some updating, think about repainting the door in a fresh on-trend color (if you live in an area warm enough to paint the door this time of year). Add a new door handle and be prepared for the amazing transformation! If your screen door is hanging by a thread, take it down. Nothing is more awkward than the greeting of a screen door about to fall on you while trying to get in the front door.

- Make sure your doorbell functions. If you don't have one, then install a door knocker. It is uncomfortable to pound on someone's door with your knuckles, hoping they'll hear you knocking.

- Keep your front door light fixture clean and updated. You may want to consider lighting along the walkway to the door. Solar lights are a fun way to add spots of light. During the holidays, luminaries can quickly be made using brown or white lunch sacks and battery-operated votives. A well-lit path to the door definitely conveys a sense of welcome.

- If there is room, have a bench, chair or garden seat close to the door. This is handy, especially for those wanting to leave a holiday surprise when you aren't home.

You don't have to invest a lot of money or time. Just some quick basic cleaning can make all the difference and offer the message of "Welcome to my home!"

Quick Tip: If you live in a wintery part of the country, make sure you have plenty of deicer on hand and keep the front walk shoveled, ice-free and ready for guests.

Helpful Hints

Like most of us, you probably have the best of intentions of having your entire house sparkling clean by the day of your party. But if it is the night before the big event and things are looking more like a war-zone, focus on some very specific areas.

Entry

Make sure the outside of your door is clutter and dirt free. Check the interior entry area and repeat the decluttering process. Have a candle and some flowers in your entry to create a welcoming atmosphere and scent as guests enter your home. Put down a mat both inside and outside the front door to help keep floors clean.

Kitchen

The kitchen truly is the heart of the home and where most people gather to chat. Clean the floors, clear off the counters and then wipe down. Give the fridge a quick wipe-down inside and out and polish the sink. Set out some decorations and have something for early arrivers to do while they wait for the party to get started. Involved guests are more likely to mingle, which adds to the fun. You could have them roll silverware in napkins, chop up salad ingredients, arrange serving platters - anything they are comfortable doing.

Bathroom

Of all the rooms to clean fanatically, this is the one. Scrub everything, take out the garbage make sure faucets and mirrors are shiny. Add some flowers and a lit candle in this area. If the bathroom is clean and sparkling, it is likely no one will notice anything amiss in the rest of the house. Make absolutely sure there are extra hand towels, plenty of soap and toilet paper available. Although you hate to think of it, also have a plunger tucked away for a guest to find if necessary.

Gathering Room

In whatever room you are planning to set your buffet or eat the meal, spend a bit of time dusting, polishing, cleaning floors and creating a warm atmosphere with lighting, candles and music. It doesn't have to be perfect and remember candlelight or dimmed lights hide a multitude of dust bunnies and smudges!

Coat Closet

If you have a coat closet, clean it out completely before the party. Make sure it is stocked with plenty of sturdy hangers. Enlist an older child or neighborhood teen to serve as a coat checker. Make sure they understand their duties before the guests arrive.

Quick Tip: If you look out your window and spot the arrival of unexpected guests, do a quick run through the front room and kitchen with a few squirts of air freshener to give your home a pleasant scent. Then answer the door with a warm smile!

Successful Entertaining

Everyone can entertain successfully and simply if they plan ahead and stay focused on the reason for entertaining – connecting with family and friends. Entertaining, particularly during the holiday season, should be as stress-free as possible and that is why keeping things simple and organized is a must.

Create a Timeline

Take a few minutes to create a timeline. It will save time and frustration as well as help the host look organized and savvy.

Start by writing down the menu in detail. What foods can be purchased and made ahead of time? What needs to be purchased and made the day before? The day of the party?

What decorations will be needed? Will you be making any decorations or will you be shopping for them? When will you do this? Where will the centerpieces come from? What cleaning tasks need to be accomplished?

Get it all down on paper and then divide the menu, cleaning and decorating tasks into specific steps for at least the seven days leading up to your party. When you break it into set tasks, entertaining can be very simple.

Cleaning Tips

If you avoid entertaining because you hate to clean, get over it! Focus on cleaning just four areas: the entry, the living room, the kitchen and the guest bathroom.

Atmosphere

Light a few holiday scented candles or put a pan on low on the stove with a couple of cups of water, some cinnamon sticks and whole cloves. The house will have a warm, welcoming aroma as guests come in the door.

Use candles anywhere you can. They create a wonderful, inviting atmosphere and candlelight is flattering on everyone. If you are concerned about open flame, use battery-operated candles. One rule of thumb is to use one scent or scent family at a time otherwise your home smells like a batch of potpourri gone bad. Also, try to steer away from scented candles around your food. It can overwhelm not only the smell of your meal but also the taste.

Have some festive music in the background but make sure it isn't so loud guests are shouting to be heard over it.

Decorations

Keep your focus on a few simple things that can bring a festive atmosphere to your home.

Fill a basket or bowl with gold, silver, red or green Christmas balls and use as a centerpiece. Purchase a few inexpensive poinsettias and place around your home.

Pinecones and greenery are inexpensive (or free, depending on what is growing in your yard) and can quickly and easily be whipped into festive decorations. Just pile into a glass bowl, add some red ribbon and you are set!

Serving

Set a buffet and keep your life simple. It keeps the hostess from being so tied to the kitchen, creates a relaxed atmosphere for guests to mingle and is easy to maintain.

Quick Tip: Don't forget to delegate help for the after-party chores like dishes, trash, etc.

Entertain Buffet Style

One of my favorite things about entertaining is presentation– making things look pretty. There is something so fun about deciding what serving pieces to use, what looks good where and then having the whole thing come together just before the doorbell rings.

When you are planning to entertain, think about serving the food buffet style. This method of serving does two wonderful things:

- It keeps the host from being so tied to the food and the kitchen
- It creates a casual atmosphere where guests feel more at ease and are much more likely to mingle.

Don't you love it when guests are all just hanging out and chatting? Bringing people together is the whole point of entertaining!

Another thing I love about buffet entertaining is that it allows the host to get the buffet set up in advance.

Whether you are doing a single or double-sided buffet, make sure all food is within easy reaching distance. You don't want someone dragging their sleeve or shirt-tail through a dish of red sauce.

Most importantly, have fun with it! You are the artist and the buffet is your canvas. Get creative and let your personal style shine through.

Just remember to incorporate height, color and texture into your buffet for the most sizzle.

Quick Tip: In need of a cake stand but don't have one? Use a sturdy bowl turned upside down as your base and set a serving platter on top.

How to Create a Holiday Buffet



So, you've got a houseful of guests arriving and are starting to go into panic mode because you want everything to be beautiful and wonderful and perfect!

Take a deep breath and relax! Remember, the most important thing about your upcoming gathering is building relationships, not worrying about dust bunnies.

There are some simple things you can do in advance to help ease your stress load the day of your party.

If you will be serving your meal buffet style, here is an easy step-by-step guide to setting up a buffet table. And you can set it up well in advance. There is no need to wait until the last-minute.

Start with a blank table. Get it positioned where you'd like to have your buffet. If you want the buffet to run down both sides of a table, make sure there is plenty of room for guests to get completely around it. I like to push my table against the wall because it gives me the opportunity to be a bit more creative with how I design the buffet.

Drape your table with a neutral cloth. You can use white or cream, but I like black best. It makes the colors on the table pop and come to life. It also hides spills and stains so your guests won't worry because they can't see it! I use flat sheets all the time as table coverings because they are inexpensive, easy care, and come in a variety of sizes.

Next, you want to add height to your table. Focus the tallest point off-center. I like to put it off to one side and create a bit of a "waterfall" effect. By that, I mean that your height is at the

back and on one side of the table. The height decreases as you come toward the other side and the front. You want the highest point to be where you will place your centerpiece. Think about what serving pieces you want to use and place height accordingly. The height can come from a variety of items like sturdy boxes, stacks of books, even cooking pots turned upside down. Just be mindful of what you are setting where. You wouldn't place a huge platter on a small box, for example. If you have serving stands, these are also awesome to use to give both height and texture to your table.

You are going to cover up your height elements (boxes) with another cloth that matches your base cloth. Hello beautiful black drape! Don't worry about making it perfectly smooth. It won't be. Embrace the lumps and wrinkles and give them a bit of a fluff to look artistic.

Here is where your colors are going to start to pop. Choose a third cloth that goes with your theme, scheme or matches your serving pieces. If your serving pieces are red, for example, choose a traditional holiday plaid covering. You want to drape this casually over the table.

Go ahead and position all your serving pieces, tweak them to just how you like them and leave them there until you are ready to fill them with food. If there is a possibility you will forget what food goes in which serving dish, label them with sticky notes. You can get this table set up a few days ahead of time and save yourself oodles of time the day your company is arriving. Just drape the entire table with another sheet to keep any dust (or kiddie fingers) from landing on the dishes.

Quick Tip: To keep hot foods hot, purchase a few long, flat bricks and warm them in the oven. Place heavy pot holders beneath them, so they don't damage your table, then add your drapings over the top of them. Guests will never know there are bricks on the table, but they will appreciate their food being hot.

Be Prepared for Holiday Guests

There is nothing that can send a host into a tailspin faster than running out of some basic necessities right before or during a party. Make a list of what you need well before hand, stock up and then relax.

Preparation makes entertaining so much more simple and enjoyable!

Some things to be sure you are well stocked on:

Napkins

Paper Towels

Toilet Paper

Facial Tissues

Aluminum Foil

Plastic Wrap

Garbage Bags

Baking Soda (works well for so many things from neutralizing odors to shining the stainless faucets)

Bleach Wipes (you know someone is going to show up sick and these are a quick and handy way to keep things wiped down and as clean as possible)

Milk and Eggs

Ice

Club Soda (mix it with any type of juice for automatic punch! It is also great for removing stains, polishing jewelry and glass, and settling upset stomachs!)

Munchies (people arrive hungry and get hungrier with all the great smells coming from the kitchen. Have an ample supply of munchies like veggie trays, crackers and cheese on hand.)

Games (if children are in the mix, have a few easy to play games ready. Coloring books and crayons are also a great diversion.)

Last-minute Gifts (keep a few generic gifts on hand wrapped and ready for giving. You never know when you are going to need one. It can be something simple like candles or lotion sets for women and candy, a book or a car-related item – think furry mitt with ice scraper attached – for the guys.)

Welcoming Overnight Guests

Making an overnight guest feel warmly welcomed is a simple art that anyone can master. While you most certainly cannot be expected to entertain an overnight guest non-stop, you do need to make the stay a pleasant one. Your duties as host begin and end with their comfort.

Step into your role as host as soon as plans are made for the overnight stay. Start by finding out some important information from your guests such as:

- How many nights will they be staying?
- Do they have any allergies – food, pet, etc? This is very important to know!
- What are their favorite foods, beverages, magazines, books?
- What activities interest them?

Give your guest room a test run by spending some time in the room. You may even want to spend a night sleeping there to make sure the shades or drapes are adequate, the heating vent is open, and the pillows are comfortable. You'll get a much different perspective by spending the night in the room than you would just walking in to make sure everything looks clean and inviting.

Once your guests arrive, encourage them to feel at home by showing them where the necessities can be found. Stock some of their favorite snacks and beverages.

In the guest room, provide a few of their favorite magazines or a book by their favorite author. You may also want to have a tray with a note of welcome, some bottled water, mints or chocolates, and a few pieces of whole fruit. Fresh flowers are also a welcome touch.

Show them where to find extra pillows and blankets.

The guest bath should be stocked with plenty of fluffy towels. It is a nice touch to put out a tray or basket with sample sized toothpaste, cotton swabs, new toothbrushes, shampoo and conditioner for any of those items your guest may have forgotten.

Provide adequate lighting at night in hallways with nightlights.

Make sure you are available to your guests without smothering them. With a little pre-planning, you can relax and enjoy your time together!

Quick Tip: Keep a list of area attractions, restaurants and other local items of interest available for your guests. If they are staying more than a few days, they might like a dinner on their own or some time to explore.

Creating a Coffee Station

As you plan to host guest in your home, think about setting up a coffee or beverage station where they can self-serve. This is especially nice when offering an assortment of rich desserts.

Here are some easy tips for setting up a coffee station:

- For guests to dress up individual cups of coffee, set out bowls of cream, sugar cubes, red-hot candies, cinnamon sticks, purchased chocolate stirrers, vanilla and almond extracts, and ground spices such as cinnamon, nutmeg and ginger.

- Other stir-in ideas include grated chocolate, whipped cream, cocoa powder, chocolate syrup and orange or peppermint extracts.

- To flavor an entire pot of coffee, sprinkle coffee grounds with orange or lemon peel or ground cinnamon, nutmeg or ginger before brewing.

- The flavor of coffee begins to diminish within an hour after it's made and leaving coffee on the heating element accelerates the problem. To keep coffee fresh and hot, transfer it to a carafe or thermos that has been preheated with hot water.

- Only make as much coffee as needed and avoid reheating coffee, which can make it bitter.

For 12 people, you need about 1/4 pound of coffee and three quarts of water. For 25 people, you need about 1/2 pound of coffee and one and a half gallons of water. For best flavor start with cold, fresh tap water.

For those who aren't coffee drinkers, have a carafe of hot water with a selection of cider and chocolate packets or tea bags available.

Hot Chocolate Station

Baby, it's cold outside... and one of the tastiest ways to warm up is with hot chocolate. If you are hosting a gathering, think about setting up a self-serve hot chocolate station. This allows your guests to get a cup of hot chocolate created the way they want it and adds a bit of fun to your party.

Start by setting up an area dedicated to your hot chocolate station. Make sure you have plenty of mugs available and within easy reach.

You can either mix chocolate and put in carafes or beverage servers to keep warm or simply have hot water and let your guests mix their own chocolate.

If you are mixing the chocolate, it is easy to do with a can of chocolate mix. If you plan to let them make their own, hot chocolate packets keep things neat and simple.

Have a tray full of goodies they can add into their drinks like marshmallows, whipping cream, peppermint and cinnamon sticks, mini chocolate chips, and sprinkles. You can also have flavorful extracts or liqueurs to add in. Let your imagination run wild!

Make sure you have plenty of spoons and napkins handy.

One really fun thing to do is to put marshmallows on peppermint sticks, dip in yummy chocolate and top with sprinkles to stir into warm mugs of liquid deliciousness.

Gift Wrapping Basics

Tis the season for gift-giving which means a flurry of wrapping presents. Whether you hate to wrap gifts, love to wrap gifts or fall somewhere in between, you can make the process simpler by following a few basic steps.

Gift Wrapping Area

Have a dedicated gift-wrapping area that you can leave and not worry about cleaning up the mess every time you wrap a gift. It makes is so much simpler and you can wrap a gift here and a gift there instead of having one marathon evening of gift-wrapping. Set up a card-table in a corner of your home office or an unused bedroom.

Basic Supplies

Stock up on the basics before you start wrapping. Have plenty of tape, wrapping paper, tissue paper, gift tags, ribbon, and boxes. Also make sure there is a garbage can, sharp scissors and a pen to write names on the gift tags. If you are shipping packages, make sure you also have bubble wrap or Styrofoam “popcorn” to pack in the box, as well as packing tape.

Wrapping Paper

When you are stocking up on wrapping paper – get the good stuff! Anyone who knows me well knows I am a complete wrapping paper snob. The reason is simple: quality paper holds up better, is easier to work with and makes wrapping so much faster. Have you ever purchased a cheap roll of gift wrap only to have the gift you are wrapping poke through the paper at the corners? Trying to pull a piece of cheap wrapping paper nice and tight before you tape it is nearly impossible without ripping the paper. Save yourself some frustration and invest in some quality paper. Two of my favorites are Hallmark (which comes with wonderful cutting lines on the backside so you know the edge is even!) and Costco’s house brand. They are both heavy, fabulous papers that are so nice to use. You don’t have to spend a fortune on wrapping paper. You can find good sales before the holidays, and think about stocking up on paper after the holidays when it is really inexpensive.

Tape

Use good tape. My preferred tape of choice is a satin tape that you can’t see once you put it on the package. Or if you want to get really “fancy” you can use double-sided sticky tape sandwiched between your top and bottom layers of paper so there is no visible tape line at all.

Boxes

Make sure you are stocked up on boxes. I usually save boxes for a month or two before the holidays. Then I know I have plenty of sizes and shapes to choose from. This is an important step in your gift-wrapping success. No one likes to receive an odd-shaped bundle wrapped in a garbage bag sealed with duct tape. Find a box, for goodness sake! Remember to recycle the cardboard from boxes after the holidays.

Ribbons

Ribbons can make or break the look of your package. Star bows and curling ribbon are great for the beginning wrapper to use. For seasoned veterans, step it up a notch and find some fun ways to dress up your packages. Inexpensive rolls of ribbon are easy to find this time of year. Purchase one or two in colors that match your gift-wrap. Think outside the box for unique items you could use to tie up your gift like organza, fabric you may already have on hand, twine, raffia, bandanas, etc.

Finishing Touches

If you really want to make your gifts look professional, think about the finishing touches. If you are planning to add these, you may want to add a hot glue gun or all-purpose glue to your basic supply list. When you anchor a cluster of mini-pinecones, a dried rosebud, or sprigs of greens to the top of your package, it really makes the present look finished. Think of fun little elements you can add like a button, a tiny glass ball, a jingle bell, a mini bird nest, a sparkling snowflake or a silk flower. You can also tie on a tree ornament that becomes part of the gift. I watch for 50 or 60 percent off sales and stock up on generic pieces like snowflakes, shiny tear drop shapes, bells, etc.

Gift Bags

Gift bags work just fine. If you don't have time to invest in making "picture perfect" packages, pick up some gift bags, tissue and ribbon. Use plenty of tissue so the bags don't look like you threw them together at the last second (even if you do!). First, line the bag with white tissue, wrap your item in tissue, place it in the bag then fill the top with tissue. Mix white with a sheet or two of colored tissue paper to get the most bang for your buck. When filling the top, hold out a sheet of tissue paper, pinch it in the center and then, while still holding the center, give it a gentle shake. It should be full at the top and remain pinched at the bottom. Stuff it in the bag, full side up and see how beautiful your bag looks!

Trade out services

If you can't stand to wrap gifts and can't afford to pay to have them wrapped, think about trading services with someone who loves to wrap. Maybe you could perform a holiday chore for them they dislike like hanging their lights, shoveling their sidewalks, watching their kids for one evening or afternoon, running a few errands, or some other household task. I would gladly wrap gifts for someone who was willing to trade services for ... (insert any number of household chores here like ironing, cleaning, dusting, etc.!).)

Quick Tip: If you truly hate to wrap gifts and don't have time, many service organizations offer gift wrapping services as a way to make money during the holidays. Look for one of them and for a small donation, you can have all your wrapping done!

Hostess Gift Ideas

Having been a hostess more times than I can count, I for one am here to tell you any time someone brings me a hostess gift, it nearly melts me in a puddle. It means so much to know that person appreciated the invitation into our home enough to bring a token of gratitude to share with us.

A lot of people avoid giving hostess gifts because they don't have any idea what to give. Here are a few "safe" bets that are sure to be welcomed by most any hostess.

Monogrammed Napkins

Most hostesses would be thrilled to receive monogrammed napkins. Did you know monograms are widely popular right now? I found some really cute napkins at *Tuesday Morning* a few weeks ago and gave as hostess gifts. The three hostesses all seemed to enjoy them immensely!

Good Chocolate

Make sure the hostess has the opportunity to hide the candy away from the pack of ravenous wolves gathered in her home. You want her to be able to enjoy it all she wants! Select a few decadent truffles or, if you know her favorite, a small box. It need not be a huge box, just a small thank you will do.

An Apron

A funny one for a host, or a pretty one for a hostess. I seem to never have enough aprons when we host a big gathering. There are multiple places you can find these both online and in stores.

Coasters

Who couldn't use a few extra coasters? If you know something your host is fond of or collects, see if you can find a few coasters that fit that theme. Otherwise, look for something unique and memorable. If you are feeling a bit crafty, you could make your own coasters using tile. You can find small tile squares at home-supply stores like Home Depot. Just add a bit of felt to the bottom to keep the tiles from scratching surfaces (if you have five minutes and a glue gun, you can do this!).

Tea or Dish Towels

What host or hostess wouldn't appreciate a few new towels for their kitchen? Most department stores carry a nice assortment of seasonal selections.

Hand Soap

A bottle of nice, fragrant hand soap is a great gift. If you don't know what scents the hostess likes, go for something simple. One of my favorites for gift-giving is Kitchen Spice from Bath & Body Works.

Recipe Journal

If your host or hostess likes to cook, a recipe journal would be a great gift and give them somewhere to tuck all those loose recipes floating around their kitchen. You can find these at most any kitchen supply stores and often at bookstores.

Bottle of Beverage

See, you thought I was going to say wine. If you aren't sure if your host drinks wine, purchase a higher end bottle of sparkling cider. I kid you not, it tastes a whole lot different than the \$3 variety. If your host is a wine lover, then by all means, pick up a bottle as a gift.

Potted Plant

A beautiful potted plant is always a lovely gift. Now would be a great time to gift your hostess with a poinsettia. Not only is it seasonally appropriate, but every time she sees it through the holidays, she'll be reminded of your thoughtfulness.

These are all easy to find gifts that can fit into most any budget. So when you knock on that door, think about having a little something special to say thank you to your host.

Quick Tip: If you always mean well and have every intention of taking a hostess gift but get busy and forget, make it a point to go shopping for some generic host gifts. Buy three or four things you can keep on hand (like hand soap or dish towels), put them in nice gift bags or boxes and store them somewhere you can find quickly. Then the next time you are racing out the door to a party, you can easily grab a gift that is all ready to go.

Christmas Tablesettings

Setting your table beautifully can be done quite simply.

If you are entertaining on a budget and don't have enough matching dishes to accommodate your guests, no worries! Use what you have and make it festive.

Just promise you will not go purchase paper plates. Promise!

If you don't have enough plates and are going to have to purchase some, invest in real plates that you'll use time and time again. Go to the dollar store and pick up some plain white or even clear glass plates. You can also find some great buys in thrift stores. Purchase a plain pattern that can mix and match with pieces you may already have. Go all white or all cream and no one will notice the pieces aren't exactly the same.

For inexpensive table coverings that are easy care and fuss-free, use flat sheets. You can find them in all sizes and colors and they are very inexpensive. If someone spills all over them, you won't be hyperventilating worrying about getting the stain out. You can also make very affordable place mats out of felt. Purchase pre-cut pieces at craft stores for less than a dollar each.

Think about what type of look and feeling you are trying to convey. Is it fun, elegant, traditional or whimsical?

If you are new to home entertaining and on limited funds, stick to a water glass, a dinner plate and your basic fork, knife and spoon. As I mentioned above, don't go spending money on matching dinner ware, just make do with what you've got or see what treasure you can find at thrift stores. Use card stock to create fun place cards and place an individually wrapped surprise at each place setting. It could be something as simple as an individual piece of candy wrapped in cellophane and tied with a ribbon.

Add candles and an eye-catching centerpiece and your table is complete!

If you have a set of china languishing in the back cupboard, dig them out and use them! Find a table covering that complements the color of your china, add some candles and a festive centerpiece, and you've got one beautifully set table.

Gift Giving on a Budget

If you have limited, or no funds, to spend on the holidays but still want to give gifts, you can make it work! You will have to get creative and do a bit of thinking outside the box, but isn't that half the fun?

Photos

An easy gift to give is a family photo or photos of your kids. You can find some great picture frames at the dollar store. I know this gift is particularly loved by grandparents as well as aunts and uncles. You don't have to have a formal photo taken. Snap some shots of the family doing something fun.

Kids Handiwork

One thing that is sure to be appreciated, especially by grandparents and adoring aunties, is artwork created by your kids. Have them draw a picture specifically for the recipient. I promise the recipient will love it. It will be something they can keep for years to come as a loving reminder of your little ones. (Hint, hint to the mother of the three children who give me sticky kisses.)

Coupon Books

Make your own coupon books. You can give this to anyone. For an elder relative, you might give a coupon book with certificates good for a lawn mowing, a trip to run errands, or a day of housecleaning. You can give coupons for gardening help, baked goods, back rubs, all sorts of fun things. If you want to live on the edge, you can leave it blank and let the recipient fill it in (I would never be that brave. I'd get them redeemed for things like floss the dog's teeth or scrub grout. I know it would happen!).

Sew A Gift

If you have a sewing machine and know how to use it, then do! You probably have some fabric scraps languishing in a corner somewhere. Make a patchwork quilt or a wall hanging. Trace your kids' hands on blocks and have them write a message with a fabric marker, then fashion the blocks into a lap quilt. Sew pillows or aprons. These are all simple and easy to make and don't take a huge amount of time.

Potholders

As lame as it sounds, most of us could use some new potholders and you can make these quick and easy with a sewing machine or even a bottle of glue. Get two pieces of material cut to the same size, put some non-flammable fiber-fill inside and either sew the edges or glue and you are ready to wrap up a fun gift.

Crafty Items

If you have a hot glue gun and aren't afraid to use it, you can make any number of gifts with things you can gather outdoors. I live in an area where grapevines are abundant. With a little effort, you could fashion a grapevine wreath, attach some pinecones and a bow and you've got a great gift. A wreath can also be used to make a centerpiece. Take a walk outside and see what fun items Mother Nature can provide for you to make into a gift. My niece made bowls out of old rope one year by using a glass bowl as a form and wrapping the rope around it before gluing the coils together. It was pretty awesome.

Baked Goods

Most people appreciate homemade goodies. Especially those who are extra busy and have no time to create their own (or don't know how). You don't have to spend a bunch of money on fancy ingredients. You can search for recipes online using ingredients you may have or go for simple recipes that use few ingredients like shortbread or peanut butter cookies.

Just think about your gift recipient and the things they might enjoy and combine that with your talents. I know you'll come up with a uniquely wonderful gift that will be long-remembered!

Quick Tip: You've got the gifts, now you need to wrap them inexpensively. Buy a roll of freezer wrap or plain brown craft paper and let your kids draw holiday scenes on them. Or save the newspaper and comics for wrapping paper. Use plain lunch sacks, decorated with your kids' artwork, for gift bags.

BONUS SECRET - EASY RECIPES!

Christmas Breakfast Ideas

Christmas morning the last thing you want to do is be tied down to the kitchen making breakfast. Plan ahead now and you can have a fabulous breakfast on the table with a minimal amount of effort!

So here are a few ideas...

Quick Breads

You can purchase these pre-made at stores like Costco (their apple or pumpkin bread is so good), you can buy packaged mixes that are easy to whip together or make them from scratch. If you are planning to make them either from a mix of scratch, make these now and freeze so you don't have to mess with them Christmas morning.

Sweet Rolls

You can purchase pre-made sweet rolls or cinnamon rolls or whip together a batch. Just pop in the oven for a few minutes to warm and you've got a breakfast that everyone will enjoy.

Casseroles

A breakfast casserole you can assemble the night before then bake Christmas morning is ideal. They are warm and filling and will hopefully carry your starving crew through gift opening and morning festivities. Serve with fresh fruit and it is a wonderful meal.

Quick Tip: If you can handle the shock of it all, eat leftovers from Christmas Eve dinner for Christmas breakfast. Captain Cavedweller's family always does a big meal Christmas Eve while my family does a big meal Christmas Day. Between the two big meals, the last thing we want to do is make another big meal for breakfast Christmas morning. One year I fussed and slaved over the stove making a huge Christmas breakfast only to find our houseguests preferred to clean up the leftover berry cheesecake!

Banana Bread

Once in a blue moon, when I have a bunch of overripe bananas, I get inspired to bake banana bread.

Captain Cavedweller gets pretty excited when this happens and will eat half the loaf, still warm from the oven, slathered in butter – if I let him. (Have you ever tried stopping a hungry man from eating warm bread? Not an easy task, I assure you!) This recipe is easy to follow and turns out yummy every time.

Banana Bread

1 3/4 cup flour

2/3 cup sugar

2 tsp. baking powder

1/2 tsp. baking soda

1/4 tsp. salt

1 cup mashed ripe bananas

1/3 cup butter or shortening

2 tbsp. milk

1 tsp. vanilla extract

2 eggs

1/2 cup nuts

1 tbsp. cinnamon

Preheat oven to 350 degrees.

Mix 1 cup flour, sugar, baking powder, baking soda, and salt. Mash two to three ripe (or overripe bananas, the riper the banana the stronger the flavor) bananas to make 1 cup. Add banana, butter, vanilla and milk to dry ingredients. Mix on low until blended then beat on high for two minutes. Add eggs and remaining flour, beat until blended. Add cinnamon and nuts. Bake 55-60 minutes or until golden brown and starting to pull away from the edges of the pan.

Cinnamon Rolls

They are, to say the least, divine, especially warm from the oven. The recipe is simple to follow and the rolls are so yummy. The rolls also freeze well, so you can make them up in batches and freeze for yourself or for gift-giving. They can be reheated in the oven or nuked in the microwave for about 20 seconds to bring back that fresh from the oven warmth and gooey deliciousness.

Cinnamon Rolls

Dough

2 cups milk
1/2 cup vegetable oil
1/2 cup sugar
1 package active dry yeast
4 1/2 cups flour
1/2 tsp. baking powder
1/3 tsp. baking soda
1/2 tbsp. salt

Filling

1 cup melted butter
1/4 cup cinnamon
1 cup sugar

Icing

4 cups powdered sugar
1/4 cup milk
3 tbsp. melted butter
8 ounces cream cheese, softened
1 tsp. vanilla extract

Scald the milk, oil and sugar in a medium saucepan over medium heat (bring heat to nearly a boil, but don't let it boil!). Set aside and cool to lukewarm (think temperature of a baby's bottle). Sprinkle yeast on top of milk and let rest for one minute.

Add four cups of the flour and stir until just combined. It is going to be sticky. Cover with a tea towel and set in a warm place for an hour.

Remove the towel and add baking powder, baking soda, salt and final 1/2 cup of flour. Stir to combine.

On a floured surface, roll the dough into a large rectangle, somewhere in the proximity of 10 inches by 30 inches.

Pour melted butter over dough. Use your fingers or a knife to spread evenly. Sprinkle on cinnamon and sugar. You can also mix cinnamon and sugar into the butter before pouring over dough. Either way works fine.

Beginning at the long end farthest from you, roll the rectangle tightly toward you. Use both hands and work slowly, keeping the roll nice and tight. Some filling may ooze out and that is okay (it will give you something to snitch later).

When you have the roll finished, pinch the outside edge of the roll to create a seam. You should now have a long log. Transfer to a cutting board and cut into 1 1/2 inch slices. You should get about 25 rolls.

Spray a pan with non-stick cooking spray and place rolls in the pan. I like to use smaller pans and freeze them. If you want to give cinnamon rolls as a holiday gift, put them in disposable aluminum pans, then they are ready for gift giving!

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees. Cover the pans with a tea towel and set aside for about 20 minutes. Remove towel and bake for about 15 minutes or until rolls are golden brown. Do not overcook! While the rolls are baking, whip up the icing.

Mix the powdered sugar, butter, cream cheese, milk and vanilla in a bowl. Icing should be thick but pourable.

When the rolls come out of the oven, pour on the icing. Make sure you cover every last bit of roll. This step is vitally important for the overall happiness of your taste buds.

Put one on a plate, take a deep breath inhaling that decadent cinnamon aroma, and enjoy!

Ham and Hash Browns Breakfast Casserole

When Captain Cavedweller and I travel, I love to collect recipe ideas. Years ago, we had breakfast at a great little European-style cafe in Spokane, WA., where they served up a delicious breakfast casserole. After much experimenting and many taste tests, I think I finally came close to reproducing the dish. It is easy to make and while it bakes you can either put your feet up and eat bonbons or finish getting the rest of your breakfast ready.

Breakfast Casserole

1 bag of southern hash browns

6 eggs

2/3 cup of cream

2 cups of ham, cut into cubes or bite-sized pieces

dash of salt

1 tsp. all-purpose no-salt seasoning

1 1/2 cups shredded colby jack cheese

Preheat oven to 425 degrees. Grease a 9×13 baking pan and place hash browns into pan. Pop into the oven.

While the hash browns are heating up, beat the eggs, add cream, seasoning and salt. Cut the ham into bite-sized pieces or cubes. If you don't have left-over ham to use, a ham-steak provides just the right amount of ham for the casserole. Take the hash browns out of the oven, sprinkled the ham over the top then pour in egg and cream mixture.

Turn oven temperature down to 350 degrees, put the pan into the oven and bake for about 45-50 minutes, until a knife inserted in the center comes out clean. When the eggs are set, sprinkle the top of the casserole with cheese and continue baking a few minutes until cheese is melted.

Serve hot and enjoy!

Pomegranate Punch

If you are looking for a delicious and easy punch to serve to a festive crowd of revelers, this one will fit the bill. Not only is it beautiful, it is really, really tasty!

Pomegranate Punch

1 bottle cranberry-pomegranate juice

1/2 cup grenadine syrup

1 bottle raspberry pop

Pomegranate Rimmer Crystals (optional, you can find rimmer in some liquor stores or liquor sections of stores. I found this particular rimmer at *Cost Plus World Market*.)

1 pomegranate

To keep the punch from being watered down, I freeze the soda pop in seasonal silicone pans and add instead of ice. You could use ice cube trays to achieve the same thing. I thought the snowflake and tree shapes of the pans were fun. Just do this a day or two before your party.

Just before you are ready to serve, pour the Pomegranate Rimmer Crystals onto a very flat dish. Wet the rims of your glasses. You can do this with a lemon or lime wedge or plain ol' water. I dampened a paper towel and ran it around the rim. Dip the rims of the glasses into the crystals and set aside.

Cut the top off your pomegranate and then slice down through the sections. This is the easiest way to get the seeds and all the sweet-tart goodness out. Drop a scattering of seeds in each glass.

Place the ice in your punch bowl, pour in the pop, juice and grenadine syrup. Stir lightly to mix. Ladle into glasses and watch your guests turn into glass-licking goons as they try to get every last little speck of the rimmer off their glasses and dig the last little seed out of their glass. (Besides being tasty, the punch will provide you with unlimited entertainment!)

Christmas Salad

A few years ago, I was looking for a festive, fun salad to make for a holiday dinner. Coming across a recipe for a broccoli cauliflower salad it sounded good right up to the raisins.

I'm not so fond of raisins. Apparently the feeling is mutual. So we avoid each other at all costs. The last time I ate a raisin was when I was 8-years-old and my mom made me eat a bowl of Raisin Bran. I was so sick all day. And we happened to be in Disneyland. I've held a long and ardent grudge against raisins. So I substituted dried cranberries which makes this salad more festive anyway! Enjoy!

Christmas Salad

2 cups of fresh cauliflower, chopped into bite-sized pieces

2 cups of fresh broccoli, chopped into bite-sized pieces

1/2 cup toasted sunflower seeds

1 cup dried cranberries

1/2 cup buttermilk ranch dressing

Cut up broccoli and cauliflower florets, stir in cranberries, sunflower seeds and dressing (I just use the bottled dressing, but you could make your own if you are feeling the need to work extra hard). Sprinkle a few extra seeds and cranberries on top in the center and serve.

Quick Rice Bake

If you are in a hurry but want a filling and tasty side dish, this recipe is a snap. If you want to make it into a meal, just add pre-cooked chicken pieces and serve alongside a fresh green salad.

Quick Rice Bake

1 can cream of mushroom soup

1/4 cup thinly sliced celery pieces

2 cups rice, cooked

Mix rice with soup and celery pieces and bake in a greased 9×9 casserole dish at 350 degrees for about 15 minutes, until it is thoroughly heated. For some extra gooey goodness, sprinkle with 1/2 cup shredded colby-jack or cheddar cheese a few minutes before removing from oven.

Beef Stroganoff

You might find the ingredients and methods of this recipe a little different, but the results are quite tasty!

Beef Stroganoff

1 1/2 pounds lean stew meat

1 can cream of mushroom soup

1 tsp. onion flakes

1/2 tsp. parsley flakes

1 tsp. all-purpose seasoning

1 cup Dr. Pepper

2/3 cup sour cream

1/2 tsp. salt

1 package of cooked egg noodles (or make your own, recipe below)

Cut meat into bite-sized pieces. Season with onion flakes, seasoning, parsley and salt. Put in a terra cotta baker (or Dutch oven). Pour in Dr. Pepper and bake covered at 350 degrees for 1 1/2 to 2 hours, until meat is fork tender.

When done, mix in sour cream and mushroom soup. Serve over hot egg noodles.

Egg Noodles

My Mom used to make these for my birthday every year when I was growing up because I loved them so much. They are simple and so, so good!

You can eat them with butter, drench in sauce, cover with stroganoff or mix with chicken.

Egg Noodles

1 cup flour

1/2 tsp. baking powder

1 egg

1 eggshell of water

Crack egg into bowl with baking powder and flour. Fill eggshell with water and dump into bowl. Stir until you have a ball of dough. Roll out on a floured surface until very thin. Cut into strips and let dry for 2 to 3 hours. I like to turn them about an hour and a half into the drying process so both sides get dry.

When you are ready to cook, place noodles into a medium-saucepan of boiling water (you can salt water if you like) and cook until tender, or about 12 minutes.

This recipe will make about the same amount of noodles in a standard package. Just make sure you roll these nice and thin.

Pork Roast

A malfunctioning oven combined with dinner guests arriving forced me to take my slow cooker out of the box and actually use it. Although the recipe was unplanned, the results were quite tasty! This is a super easy way to put a delicious meal on the table. You can cook the roast with barbecue sauce, shred and serve on toasted hoagie rolls or simply slice and serve alongside the rest of your meal.

Pork Roast

2-3 pound pork roast

1 can chicken broth

all-purpose seasoning

salt

Depending on how many you are feeding, you may want a bigger or smaller roast. This recipe would serve approximately six.

As for the type of Pork Roast you purchase, you can use a variety of different cuts. I used a boneless rib-eye roast for this recipe. If you want, you can brown the roast in a heavy skillet before you cook it.

Put it in your slow cooker, sprinkle on the seasonings, pour in the broth and turn it on low, letting it cook for a good 8 hours. When it is fork tender, remove and serve.

To make the meal even easier, add potatoes and carrots to the roast when you put it on to cook. Serve with a salad and warm bread and your meal is complete.

Quick Tip: There is something about pork that calls for a side of apples. One quick recipe that is so good and fragrant is to simmer sliced apples in a pan with water, sugar, cinnamon and red hot candies. For two large apples, I add about 1 cup of water, ½ cup sugar, ¼ cup redhots, 1 tablespoon of cinnamon. Cover and simmer on medium heat until apples are tender. You can drain of the juice or pour it over apples in the serving bowl.

Easy Alfredo Lasagna

This lasagna recipe is so easy and simple not to mention quite tasty. For a lazy slug like me, it is the perfect dish to serve when I want it to look like I went to a lot of work but actually didn't.

Highly allergic to processed tomatoes, I make this lasagna with white sauce only. You can spread some red or meat sauce over the top for a pretty contrast if you like. You can also make this recipe in bread pans and eat one now and freeze the other for later. Or make a big batch and watch it be devoured at your next holiday gathering.

Easy Alfredo Lasagna

1 box of no-boil lasagna noodles

16 ounce container of ricotta cheese

1 1/2 cups shredded mozzarella

1/2 cup shredded Parmesan

2 eggs

1 pound ground beef

1 package of ground sausage

salt

seasonings

1 jar Alfredo sauce

Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

Combine ground beef and sausage with your choice of seasoning and cook over medium heat until brown. While the meat mixture is cooking, mix together ricotta and Parmesan with eggs. Stir until blended, set aside.

When the meat is browned, drain as much grease as possible from it before stirring into egg and cheese mixture.

Spray a bread pan (or casserole if you want to make one big pan instead of two smaller pans) with non-stick cooking spray. Pour in enough sauce to cover the bottom of the pan, layer in a noodle. In the bread pan, one noodle fills the bottom and makes layering a snap.

Next, layer on meat mixture and top with shredded mozzarella. Repeat layering process with sauce, noodle, meat and cheese. Pour a final layer of sauce and then top off with cheese. Cover with foil and bake about 35 minutes, until mixture is bubbly, then remove foil and bake another 10-15 minutes until cheese is melted and edges are brown.

Remove from oven, let cool a few minutes before plating. Serve with warm, crusty bread and a green salad for a lovely and simple meal!

[Sugar Cookies](#)

Most everyone has a favorite cookie recipe and this is one of mine. I make this for Christmas every year and have been seen I was about 17.

I loved to bake when I was a kid and received my first Easy Bake oven when I was 5. That was a great Christmas. I remember whipping up something to give to my grandma who had come to stay with us for the holiday.

Experimenting with recipes was something I did, and still do, enjoy. It was this love of experimenting that led me on a quest for the best sugar cookie when I was in my early teens. It had to be soft and moist, light and flavorful. After many, many trials and errors, I came up with this recipe that never fails to deliver soft, delicious cookies.

Even Captain Cavedweller, who is not a big sweet eater, loves these cookies. I have a hard time getting them frosted before he starts gobbling them up!

[Sugar Cookies](#)

1 cup butter

3/4 cup sugar

1/2 cup powdered sugar

2 eggs

1 tsp. vanilla

dash of lemon juice

1 tsp. baking powder

1 tsp. salt

2 1/2 cups flour

Frosting

Cream together butter and sugars. Add in eggs, vanilla and lemon juice. Mix dry ingredients together and gradually add into creamed mixture. Do not over stir. Just mix until combined. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for an hour (or overnight).

Preheat oven to 375 degrees.

Generously flour a flat surface and your rolling pin. Scoop out half the dough and roll until about 1/4 inch thick. You want to work fairly quickly at this point because the warmer the dough

gets the stickier it becomes and you don't want to add more flour. Cut into shapes and bake about 6-8 minutes or until cookies are just set. You do not want them to get brown at all. Cool in pan for one minute. Remove to wire rack to cool completely. Frost and decorate, then watch them disappear.

You can use a royal icing if you are of a mind to stir up a batch or, if you are a lazy slug like me, I whip out a can of pre-made vanilla frosting and frost away. I also like to use decorator gels, especially the sparkly variety, along with sprinkles!

Nut Goodie Bars

I remember the first time I tasted this delicious chocolate confection. My Aunt Robbie made these for a holiday gathering and being a chocolate devotee even way back in my early childhood, I was captivated by the flavors. Once I was old enough to make them myself, Auntie gladly shared the recipe. These are always a hit, so quick and easy to make, and so yummy.

Although some may refer to these as Rocky Road Bars, I call them by the name my Aunt Robbie gave them.

Nut Goodie Bars

1 bag semi-sweet chocolate chips

1 bag butterscotch chips

1 bag peanut butter chips

1 large bag mini marshmallows

1 small can (about 1 1/2 cups) cocktail peanuts

Grease a 9 x 13 casserole dish and set aside. In a large microwave safe bowl, mix chips. Microwave 45 seconds. Stir. Continue heating in 30 second intervals, stirring in between, until chips are melted. Stir well. Mix in peanuts and marshmallows then spread in casserole dish. Let cool and cut into bars.

Quick Tip: To speed up the process and cut down on mess, line your pan with foil before you spread in the mix. When it is cool, lift out the foil then cut into bars. So much easier than trying to cut bars and dig out of the pan.

Gingerbread Bars

Years ago, I tasted gingerbread cookies and fell in love! The spices, the molasses, the soft chewiness - absolutely delightful.

I embarked on an adventure of finding a recipe to make my own. What I ended up with was a recipe for cut-out gingerbread cookies that was delicious but very involved and not a lot of fun to make.

Then, a few weeks ago, I attended a cookie exchange party and my taste buds did a happy dance over some amazing gingerbread bars. I quickly abandoned plans to make my cut out gingerbread cookies and instead made the bars.

Captain Cavedweller, who generally turns up his nose at most sweets, was impressed and may have eaten more than his fair share.

Gingerbread Bars

Bars

2 3/4 cups flour

1 1/4 teaspoons baking soda

1 teaspoon salt

2 teaspoons cinnamon

1 teaspoon ginger

2 1/2 sticks butter

1 1/4 cups packed light-brown sugar

1/2 cup plus 2 tablespoons granulated sugar

3 eggs

1 1/4 teaspoons vanilla extract

1/3 cup unsulfured molasses

Glazed Pecans

Cream Cheese Frosting

1 box powdered sugar

8 ounces cream cheese, softened

1/2 cup butter, softened

1 tsp. vanilla

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Coat a 17 x 12 inch rimmed baking sheet with non-stick cooking spray. Line bottom with a piece of parchment, cut to fit. Coat parchment with spray.

Whisk together flour, baking soda, salt and spices.

Soften butter and then beat on medium-high speed with sugars until pale and fluffy. Add eggs, one at a time, beating well after each addition. Add in vanilla and molasses. Reduce speed to low and gradually add in flour mixture then beat just until combined.

Spread batter into prepared pan. It seems like you won't have enough batter to fill the pan, but you will, keep spreading. Bake until edges are set and golden, about 25 minutes. Let cool completely in pan.

Blend frosting ingredients together until smooth and creamy.

Remove from pan, frost with cream cheese frosting and cut into 2-inch squares. Top each square with a glazed pecan.

Enjoy!

Trifle

One of my favorite desserts to make is a trifle. It is fast, easy and for whatever reason, guests always assume you've gone to a lot of effort to prepare it.

It has an elegant presentation and the best thing about it is you can change it up to whatever flavors you are craving or fruits that are in season.

You can make a one large dessert in a trifle or pedestal bowl or you can make individual desserts that are quite eye-catching and appealing.

Trifle

Cake, cut into bite-sized cubes

Pudding

Whipping Cream, whipped and lightly sweetened (add a dash of Confectioner's Sugar)

Fruit

The wonderful thing about trifles is that you can use any combination and come up with something so tasty. You start with the cake cubes, then layer pudding, fruit and whipping cream and continue layering until your bowl or container is full. If you are in a really big hurry or have company drop by unexpectedly, you can use a pre-made cake, instant pudding, a can of pie filling and frozen dairy topping and have a show-stopping dessert ready in mere minutes.

My favorite combination is pound cake, chocolate pudding, raspberries and real whipping cream. Top with a layer of the whipping cream and then shave chocolate curls across the top and finish with one glorious berry.

You can use any type of cake but pound cakes, angel food cakes and sponge cakes work well.

In the winter, I like to use tropical fruits like pineapple and mandarin orange sections. You can use kiwi and bananas or any type of pie filling.

Use any flavor of pudding. Autumn is a perfect time to blend gingerbread with pumpkin pudding and candied nuts or cinnamon cake with apples and caramel sauce.

The combinations you can create are only limited by your imagination. Have fun with this and I guarantee your guests will not only be impressed, but delighted with the delicious blend of flavors.

Vanilla Panna Cotta with Raspberry Coulis

Panna Cotta is a silky custard made without eggs and is so very rich and delicious. Paired with a simple raspberry coulis (seedless sauce), it is positively scrumptious. This recipe looks hard to make, but it is really pretty simple. It does take a little bit of time. The perk is that you can make it a day or two ahead!



Vanilla Panna Cotta with Raspberry Coulis

Panna Cotta

1 3/4oz envelope unflavored gelatin

1 cup cold milk, divided

1 3/4 cups heavy cream

1/4 cup granulated sugar

1 1/2 tsp. vanilla extract

Sprinkle gelatin over 1/4 cup milk in a small bowl. Stir until moistened. Let stand five minutes (it will be lumpy).

Cook heavy cream, granulated sugar, and vanilla in a saucepan over medium-low heat, stirring occasionally for about four minutes or until sugar is dissolved. Remove from heat and add gelatin mixture, stirring until completely dissolved. Add in remaining 3/4 cup milk. Stir in then pour mixture into six 4-ounce dessert glasses or wineglasses. Cover with plastic wrap and chill eight hours. If you have some forms that are easy to get treats out of, you can pour panna cotta into them. I would recommend silicone or something that is easy to work with.

Top with Berry Coulis and a fresh raspberry or two for garnish. If you wanted to go wild, you could also shave some chocolate on top or drizzle a bit of chocolate sauce.

Berry Coulis

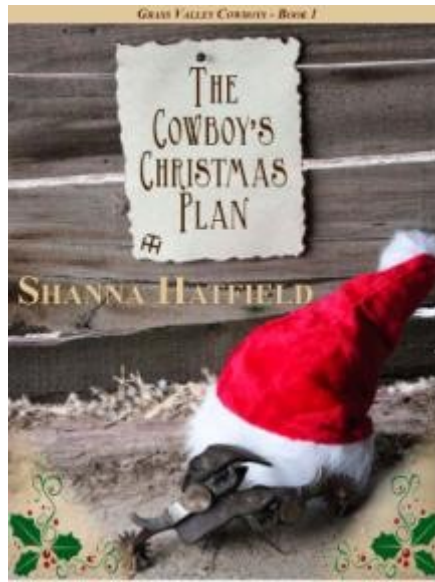
2 cups fresh raspberries

3/4 cup sugar

1/4 cup lemon juice

Rinse berries, then cook with sugar and lemon juice over medium heat in a heavy saucepan until sauce is thick, stirring occasionally. This is going to take about 10-15 minutes.

When the berries have cooked down and thickened, run through a strainer to remove the seeds and pulp. Press it through with a spoon. The end result is a magically wonderful sauce that you literally want to eat with a spoon.



Available November 2011

[The Cowboy's Christmas Plan](#) - Cadence Greer's plans for a happy-ever-after are quickly derailed when her fiancé runs off with his secretary a week before their wedding. Homeless, jobless and jilted, she escapes to Grass Valley, Oregon, where she finds herself employed as a housekeeper and cook to seven cowboys on a sprawling ranch. Trey Thompson is a well-respected pillar of the community, running a successful ranch with his brother. All he wanted was someone to cook his meals and keep the house clean. When he hires Cadence Greer for the job, he gets more than he ever planned on, including a sassy little red-headed orphan. Come spend Christmas in Grass Valley at the Triple T Ranch, where mistletoe hangs abundantly and holiday magic is in the air.



Coming Spring 2012!

The Cowboy's Spring Romance - Trent Thompson has carried a torch for the new schoolteacher since she moved to Grass Valley more than three years ago. Instead of asking her out, he's dated every single female in a 30-mile radius, giving her the impression he's not interested in her at all. Lindsay Pierce moved to Grass Valley to teach and quickly fell in love with the small community as well as the delightful people who live there. Everyone welcomes her warmly except for one obnoxious cowboy who goes out of his way to ignore her. Will Trent be able to maintain the pretense when he has to babysit his niece, who happens to be in Lindsay's class? Find out if romance will blossom along with the first flowers of spring.

THE COWBOY'S CHRISTMAS PLAN

By
Shanna Hatfield

An excerpt...

Available Nov. 2011
Where ebooks are sold

The Cowboy's Christmas Plan

Chapter One

Everyone has a plan 'till they get punched in the mouth.

Mike Tyson

"I don't think I heard you correctly, Neil. Would you please repeat that?" Cadence Vivian Greer asked, looking at her boss in disbelief.

He has to be wrong, her mind screamed, while her body morphed into a consistency quite similar to watery oatmeal.

Neil Dumont took her by the elbow and steered her into one of his plush leather office chairs. Ordering her to put her head down between her knees, he released a long sigh.

"Cadence, I know this is a surprise, but it really shouldn't come as a shock," Neil said, sitting down next to her as he expertly patted her shoulder. Cadence absently wondered if he had a lot of practice comforting hysterical young women, since his daughter was her age.

"I know, Neil, but I need you to tell me exactly what happened," she whispered, sitting up and dabbing at her eyes with her finger. She couldn't fully wrap her head around the notion that all her carefully crafted plans for the future were falling around her like a crop of bad apples knocked from the tree.

Neil, one of the founding partners of the prestigious law firm where she worked in Seattle, was well-respected. A family man with a wife of 32 years and two great kids, he was someone Cadence admired. Normally, she heeded his advice. When it came to Bill, however, she had blocked out his warnings and done as she pleased.

Nodding his head, Neil handed her his pristine white handkerchief and cleared his throat, just like he did before stepping before a judge in the courtroom. Cadence knew what that sound meant. After working as Neil's personal assistant for the past four years, she was familiar with all the sounds he made when he prepared to do verbal battle and win.

"Cadence, I warned you when you began working here to stay away from guys like Bill. I warned you when you two started dating that it wouldn't end well. I even warned you when you

announced your engagement to be careful. I know you, Cadence. You are a no-nonsense kind of girl, so don't make me sugarcoat this. Bill sent an email out last night to all the attorneys in the office stating he had called off his engagement to you and was eloping with Miss Roberts."

"But Bill said..." Cadence was cut off before she could finish her thought.

"I'm sure he said he loved you, that you were the best thing that ever happened to him, that he'd spend his life making you happy. What he failed to mention was that he has chased after every skirt in this office while you two were supposedly engaged and Miss Roberts didn't even try to make it hard to be caught. You really shouldn't be surprised that a guy like Bill would run off with his secretary."

"How did I not see this coming?" Cadence said, starting to move on the emotional scale from devastated to angry. "How could he do this a week before our wedding?"

Cadence couldn't help but be flattered when Bill Aimes continually sought her out on her breaks, walked her to her car after work and invited her out for coffee. The hot-shot attorney was tall, handsome, successful and charming.

With a sigh of disgust, she thought about where that charm had gotten her.

For the first time in her life, Cadence felt like an idiot and a failure. If Bill had punched her in the face, she couldn't feel any more abused, violated, and hurt than she did right at this moment.

She pushed aside the warning bells clanging in her head whenever Bill picked her up smelling like another woman's perfume, when she found blond hair on his suit coat, or noticed lipstick on his handkerchief.

"What am I going to do?" Cadence said, staring at Neil with a look of despair in her hazel eyes.

Although she had refused to move in with Bill until after the wedding, Cadence gave notice on her apartment and sold off all her furniture. Bill had a beautiful condo with posh furnishings and made it clear he didn't want her hand-me-downs or second-hand finds in his sleek and modern environment.

And now Cadence had nothing.

"Take a few days off, let your thoughts clear and give your heart time to mend, then come back to work with your head held high," Neil said in his commanding voice. "You didn't do a thing wrong, Cadence, except fall for a man who is completely undeserving of your love."

“Be that as it may, I can’t keep working here. Not with him and his new bride coming back. I just couldn’t do it, Neil.”

“Now, Cadence, don’t be hasty,” Neil said, growing more alarmed by the look of determination on Cadence’s face than by anything that had happened so far. “Once the dust settles, tongues will be wagging about another juicy bit of gossip and all will be forgotten.”

“Maybe by the others, but not by me,” Cadence said, getting up and pacing across Neil’s office. “I can’t keep working here knowing I’ll run into him every time I turn around. It would be like rubbing salt in a wound on a daily basis. I don’t have a choice, Neil. I have to leave.”

Rising from his chair, Neil studied Cadence. She was the best assistant he’d ever had. If she wanted, she could have made an excellent attorney. Her mind was sharp, her demeanor cool and professional, and she quickly picked up on even the most infinitesimal details, except when it came to Bill.

Releasing another sigh, Neil knew Cadence was correct. Having to work in the same office with her former fiancé would be a form of torture. He’d love to see Bill kicked to the curb, but the fact that Bill’s uncle was one of the firm’s partners insured good ol’ Bill would still have a place when he returned from his honeymoon.

“Cadence, maybe I can make a few calls and find you a position elsewhere,” Neil offered as he walked up behind her where she stared out the window into the gray, rain-laden sky.

Turning, Cadence gave him the barest hint of a smile.

“Thanks, Neil, for the offer. But no thank you,” she said, shaking her head. “I’ve made up my mind. I’m leaving. I’ll start over somewhere else.”

“But where will you go? What will you do?” Neil knew she grew up in a middle class home in the suburbs. Her parents had worked hard to help put her through college. As an only child, Cadence had been utterly alone since her parents announced a year ago they were moving to southern Mexico, where they could live inexpensively and enjoy an early retirement. They’d been saving their pennies for years to live out their dream. Still, Cadence never thought they would actually go and leave her behind. Alone.

Maybe that was part of the reason she had been in such a rush to marry Bill. She needed to fill the quiet left by the departure of her parents. Cadence talked to her parents once a month or so and she often spoke of an aunt who lived out in the sticks.

“What if you go spend some time with your aunt in Oregon? I bet she’d take you in until you can decide what your next step should be,” Neil suggested with fatherly concern.

“Aunt Viv?” Cadence instantly warmed to the idea. Of course! She could go spend some time with Aunt Vivian and Uncle Joe in Grass Valley before she made any further mistakes or decisions.

Cadence smiled at Neil. “That’s perfect, Neil. Thank you for the suggestion. I hate to leave you without an assistant, but I feel like the sooner I can cut my ties and leave town, the better off I’ll be. Besides, I only have my apartment for another three days. I was going to stay at the hotel with my parents until the wedding.”

“You know I hate losing you, Cadence. You’ve been a top-notch assistant and if there is ever anything I can do for you, you let me know.”

Sticking out her hand, Cadence offered Neil a handshake, but he pulled her into a warm hug. “You’ve become like a daughter to me and all I get is a handshake? I think not.”

Letting out a shaky laugh, Cadence hugged him back and again brushed at her tears.

“Now, I better go pack up my desk and get out of here.”

Before Cadence finished cleaning out her desk, Neil walked by and dropped an envelope with a wink and a smile into the box she was filling with her personal belongings.

“You be sure and keep in touch,” Neil said as he stood in his office door. “I want to know you landed on both feet and are doing just fine.”

“I will, Neil, and thanks again.”

Cadence picked up the box and her purse, hurrying out to her car. Waiting until she was back at the apartment, she opened the envelope to find her wages due plus a hefty bonus that would help her start fresh somewhere else. A note from Neil simply said, “You’ve more than earned it.”

Sagging onto her couch, Cadence let the tears flow. When they subsided, she straightened her shoulders, picked up the phone and began calling people to tell them the wedding was off, starting with her mom and dad.



Watching the city's skyline recede to a blur in her rearview mirror, Cadence let out another sigh. Things could not get any worse unless she suffered the same fate as Lot's wife for looking back and ended up as a pillar of salt. And with the sky pouring down a steady drizzle of rain, the salt would quickly wash away and leave no trace behind.

She wished once again that her white-knuckled grip around the steering wheel was instead around Bill's neck.

What kind of man runs off with his secretary days before his wedding?

The kind who isn't worth crying over, as Aunt Vivian had told her multiple times during the last two painful days.

At 27, she was homeless, jobless, and jilted.

In her worst nightmares, Cadence would never have pictured herself in her current predicament. She was too serious, too organized, too grounded to let something like this happen.

And yet it had.

At least the last two days had passed in a blur. By the time she notified all her family and friends of the situation, returned the gifts, and reclaimed what funds she could from the canceled wedding plans, she was ready to leave and forget she had ever heard the name Bill Aimes.

As she drove south on the freeway toward Portland, she contemplated her journey to the middle of nowhere to stay with her Aunt Vivian in a self-imposed exile until she could figure out what she wanted to do with her life.

Casting one more glance in the mirror, Cadence mentally waved goodbye to the only life she'd ever known, resolved to face an entirely new one with determination and courage.



Cadence stopped in Portland to do a little shopping before she finished the drive to Grass Valley. Her aunt assured her there were no malls, and suggested she might want to pick up a few things before heading east on the freeway.

When Cadence got back on I-84, she was the owner of six pairs of jeans, a handful of t-shirts, a dozen cotton blouses, a few sweatshirts, a warm waterproof coat and a pair of sturdy hiking shoes.

Growing up in the city and working at the law firm, Cadence's wardrobe consisted of power suits, silk blouses, cashmere sweaters, and high heels. Nothing that would be very useful in a country community as Aunt Viv had pointed out.

Pulling off the freeway a couple of hours later, Cadence turned south on Highway 97 and drove through the small towns of Biggs and Moro before she came to Grass Valley, population 170.

A sigh escaped as she stopped the car in front of her aunt's pride and joy, Viv's Café, and went inside.

Goodbye Seattle, Starbucks and Nordstrom.

Hello greasy spoon.



SHANNA HATFIELD spent 10 years as a newspaper journalist before moving into the field of marketing and public relations. She has a lifelong love of writing, reading and creativity. She and her husband, lovingly referred to as Captain Cavedweller, reside in the Pacific Northwest with their neurotic cat along with a menagerie of wandering wildlife and neighborhood pets.

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