

- If it CAN be done in advance, do it in advance.
 - Oddly enough, this seems obvious to me, but multiple people on the food channels I'm on mentioned it, because it rarely occurs to novice cooks.
 - If I'm having you over my house, and I'm planning an elaborate meal, I will make as much as possible in advance. Then, on the day of, reheat stuff, and look like a star, while you leisurely sip some wine.
- Set aside Prep, Staging, and Completed Goods areas
 - Prep areas: If you have a small space, and your kitchen has one counter that's the size of a small cutting board, expand your work space to whatever else will help you get this done.
 - Even if you have a large kitchen, this isn't a week night meal, it's a major holiday meal. Clear the counters of random shit that isn't going to help you right now. The cute decorative stuff can get put away right now. The random fruit bowl can go elsewhere. The other random crap that doesn't need to be here *right now* needs to go away right now, because you're about to get into serious cooking. Clear the decks!
 - Staging areas are places where you can take something that's completed, and put it together (arranging cooked food on a platter, tossing salad, doing any sort of transfer from cookware to serving ware). Especially if you're working with meat, you want it to be clearly separated from your raw food prep areas. Aside from cross-contamination issues, it's also not helpful to have your prep area, where you're working with knives and other dangerous things, to be cluttered.
 - Completed goods are things that are finished cooking, are in their serving containers, and are ready to roll. If it's cold or room temp food, it can go directly on the table. If it's food that needs to stay chilled, shove it in the fridge. If it's stuff that needs to stay hot, don't plate it until it's ready. Either way, if you have a clearly delineated area for putting stuff that's ready for the table, anyone who's helping out can know what they can take out, and what needs some more work.
- Get/use the biggest cutting board you can afford. Kitchen accidents happen when you're cramped on space. Small cutting boards that slide around your counter (please use a wet towel underneath the cutting board so that it stays put) where you don't have space to actually cut can and will cause slippage, and you can cut yourself.
- Tried and true recipes only, please.
 - Experimenting is great, but when you have a definite deadline to hit, you want things that are predictable and that you have mastered.
 - Store bought is fine if you suck at making _____. Much as we may mock Sandra Lee, you see people like Ina Garten or Martha Stewart using shop bought things, adding a few herbs or spices, and passing it off as their own.
 - Bread is good for this.
 - Assortments of olives, artichoke hearts, various pickles, nuts, crackers, and other nibbly things to keep your spirits up.
 - Salad dressing. Yes it's relatively quick to make your own, but if you have a brand that you like and trust, just buy the damn thing.
- If it can park on simmer or the oven, and hang out for a long time while it finishes doing what it do, knock up those dishes first.

- Prep-wise, go in the order that the food is going into the pot.
 - Chop onions/garlic first
 - Other aromatics
 - While the aromatics cook (because onions take a million years to brown), chop up any other veggies that are long cooking (potato, turnip, root veg)
 - Prep any quick cooking veggies (broccoli, leafy greens)
 - Chop up fresh soft herbs (parsley, cilantro, basil) dead last, because long cooking kind of kills off the taste
- I love the concept of getting started on those long cooking dishes, letting them hang out, and then making all the quick cooking sides as needed
- RTFM
 - If you do need to make something for the first time (because you found out that a friend/family member has a dietary restriction, and you're trying to be a good host), read the recipe all the way though at least once.
 - If you try to make the recipe without reading it first, you're bound to have surprises.
 - Recipe writers aren't infallible. You can generally spot egregious errors on the first read-through.
 - If it's a family recipe, you can get clarification
 - If it's a recipe from a book or website, you can find a different recipe that makes more sense for your needs
 - Even if the recipe is perfect, and works, there may be steps involved, such as letting the thing chill overnight in the fridge, that you need to be prepared for, so that you can figure out how to make that magic happen.
 - This is also a good time to jot down any notes. For example, if the recipe says "sautee together onions, carrots, bell peppers, celery, rosemary, thyme, and sage", what I'll do is put a circle around that set of ingredients in the ingredients list, and make a note that says "sautee together". It makes it a lot faster to read through the recipe when I'm in the kitchen.
 - This is also a good time to go through and cross off any optional ingredients you won't be using, or to jot down notes on what you'll substitute them with. In the heat of the moment, you don't want to forget that the recipe you're making is for your best friend who has that weird cilantro gene situation, and now you've defeated the purpose of making something special. Ask me how I know.
- Have a plan B.
 - Much as we love our foods that we enjoy traditionally, things happen. If you have literally no other plan B, the mistake is a lot more catastrophic for no reason.
 - Calling for pizza is indeed a plan B.
- Can I help?
 - Is that person a decent cook? Cool. Ask them to pull up a cutting board, and get stuck in.
 - Do they suck at cooking?
 - "Yes, please get some ice from the store. Here's a \$20."

- “Yes, can you give the table a quick wipe down, and get the place settings sorted?”
 - “Yes, I really need to clear off some space on the counter, and I could really use some help loading/unloading the dishwasher.”
- Baking gets sorted the day before anyone comes over. Decorating can be done on the day of.
 - If you have kids who want to help out, but you don’t necessarily want them faffing about in a kitchen with hot things that can hurt them, decorating baked goods is an excellent thing for them to do! This also goes for friends who aren’t too terribly confident with the cooking, but still want to help out. A chilled cake that’s ready for frosting is a really fun way for people to help out, and feel like they’ve contributed.
 - Cakes/cookies/pastries need stupid amounts of time to cool down before you can do anything with them.
 - You don’t want to pull a cake from the oven, and then try to ice it. Everything will melt and make a mess. Better to have the thing chilled in the fridge, and everything goes on super easy.
 - To be honest, cake mix is a perfectly cromulent way to get a cake on the table.
 - So is store bought frosting.
- If you have that one friend who’s really passionate about cooking, ask them if they’re willing to be your “phone a friend” option for the day of. I have provided this for my close friends, so I know to keep my phone on and near me when I’m making any major holiday meals. I know that someone’s gonna text with a question.
- Try to avoid the shopping madness, and consider getting the shopping for the food itself like the Monday before the day of.
 - If it’s a non-perishable (tinned food, dry goods, pantry staples), just get it like two or three weeks in advance. It’s not goin’ anywhere.
 - If it’s perishable food, it’s probably not gonna go off on you in like 3 - 5 days.
 - For Thanksgiving, I’ll usually get any food shopping done on the Monday of Thanksgiving week. Anything that I didn’t get sorted either I’ll have delivered or ask someone else to grab me on the way in. It’s inevitable that I’ll forget at least one thing, because I’m crap at making shopping lists.
- Give yourself some grace. People are here to see you. If the food isn’t perfect, it’s not as important as you think it is. Make sure it’s edible, you’re cooking safely so that you don’t poison anyone, and have plenty of carbs that everyone loves to eat (potatoes, bread, sweets), and you’ll be fine even if the main dishes don’t turn out to your full expectation.