Less Stress Holiday Hosting

A chat with chef and QVC food stylist Jason Brown

There are two types of people in this world: those who can host family and friends for a holiday meal without breaking a sweat, and... the rest of us. With so much to think about—guest list, menu, beverages, timing, separating people who should not be seated next to one another—feeding folks over the holidays can be an undertaking.

We went to an expert for advice on staying sane while planning and executing a holiday get-together. Whether it's as a New Year's Day open house grazing situation, or a formal sit-down Christmas dinner, we're confident you'll find a lightbulb idea (or a life preserver) in our chat with QVC food stylist Chef Jason Brown. This guy's life is a story, from addiction recovery to rubbing elbows with Martha Stewart.

Chef Jason has a combination of formal training and baptism by fire on the job. After stints around West Chester starting with a high school job bussing tables at the old Courtyard Inn, to Capriotti's Sandwiches to Spence, with catering and personal chef gigs over the years, Jason has some serious culinary chops. "At my first job, I had that moment Anthony Bourdain talked about in *Kitchen Confidential*, like 'Whoa—these guys are rock stars,' but instead of drums and guitars they were using knives and fire. Some had rap sheets and ankle monitors; they were just so badass. I knew I wanted to be a part of it."

At Capriotti's, "I started thinking about things like profit margins and food costs, and I really fell in love with the business end." Another aspect that clicked was interaction with customers. "I'd make something for someone, they'd come back and get it again, and I'd chat with them. There was almost an entertainment aspect. I thought, 'Hey—I'm good at this.'"

He attended Johnson and Wales University, but the partying he started there eventually spiraled into alcoholism, addiction, and brushes with the law. "I came back and got myself into an intensive outpatient (IOP) rehab program." Given that the restaurant industry lends itself to partying, his recovery was touch and go. But by the time he learned he had a son on the way in 2009, it was time to get real.

In 2017, a neighbor tapped him for a catering gig, and he decided to give the personal chef business a shot. His buddy Luke O'Brien helped Jason create a "visual resume" by filming him cooking. Eventually, due to a series of very fortunate events, he landed a job at QVC—and nearly collided with Emeril Lagasse in the hallway on his very first day.

But enough about his background, what about those promised tips for successful holiday hosting? "The biggest thing is to pick the people around you and designate according to skill set. When you have one person trying to operate the crazy holiday ship, it doesn't work. There are too many variables: schedules, menu, shopping, timing. You need to almost treat it like a restaurant and break it down into a brigade: your *garde manger*, your grill, your sauté, your pastry or dessert. Each person has a job, and when they focus on that one thing, it all comes together."



Quite the Spread

QVC's Jason Brown, aka @chef_jdish, offers up his hard-earned advice and a few chef's secrets for holiday hosting

Unless you're a culinary professional, trying to do everything yourself is going to "trash your timing," which is critical when you're feeding a group. "Some people think solving that is as simple as doing things ahead," Jason said. "But that doesn't work for everything. Once I found my mom sauteing spinach at 9am on Thanksgiving. I asked why and she said, 'well at least it's done.' I pointed out that sauteed spinach takes almost no time and should be eaten right away, not something to make ahead and heat up later."

An obvious basic: start things that take longer earlier, and things that don't take long later.

Preparation and time management are key, starting with shopping. "Thinking even a couple of days ahead and getting what you need is better than running out to grab

something at the last minute—especially a specialty item," Jason suggested. "In my family, my mom does the stuffing, my dad smokes the turkey on the Weber, and I make sure no one is cooking everything at 7am."

Take advantage of supermarket shortcuts. "For something like cornbread stuffing," Jason said. "You can make your own cornbread from scratch, let it cool, cut it up...OR! You could just go to Wegman's, buy their honey cornbread, and use that. Eliminating even one step helps."

But enhance those shortcuts. "Jazz up canned cranberry sauce by adding blood orange juice or sundried cranberries. Take something that's already done and add to it, rather than making it from the ground up. Enhance goat cheese with something sweet (honey), savory (bacon), or spicey (chili powder). Braise collard greens and bacon then add something offbeat, like coriander, curry powder, or turmeric."

Go off script from your traditional turkey, ham, or pasta holiday meal. "Put out a side of salmon. My dad takes a center cut of salmon, smears mayo, herbs, and panko breadcrumbs on it and pops it into the oven. It's amazing."

For Jason, a dark meat fan, it's turkey legs. "I take them off and confit them. Put them in the oven at 185 overnight with rosemary, garlic, sage, thyme, and peppercorns with butter and oil. They just melt. Then you shred; it's velvety."

Take store bought pie and make your own whipped cream, a simple task: whipping cream, powdered sugar to taste, a splash of vanilla. Don't like vanilla? Try almond extract. Add cinnamon if you want. There are no whipped cream police.

Augment global flavors into traditional American standards. "Add a twist with desserts from a different cuisine. Swap out your Parker House rolls for a baguette, or brush the tops with olive oil and add everything bagel seasoning."

Enhance your butter. "Cut a softened stick of butter into thirds, and give each a different flavor infusion," Jason suggested. "You could have roasted garlic butter, honey cinnamon butter, and rosemary-cranberry butter."

These baby step enhancements are easier than trying to reinvent the wheel (or meal). "You don't want intimidation and



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anxiety to take over. That's like a mission for me. I know it's easy for me to say, but if I can cook, anybody can."

Another thought: "Unless you're baking," Jason says, "a recipe is just a guide. People feel like they must follow a recipe to the letter, but trust me: you can put a little chili powder in that if you want to."

"I'm a big fan of the rimmed glass for beverages," Jason added. "Try simple syrup and crushed gingerbread cookies for mulled cider. If you're doing a Christmas espresso martini, rim the glass with crushed candy canes."

Jason rims hot chocolate mugs with vanilla or chocolate icing, then dips in crushed Oreos or Heath Bars. "Go as crazy as you want. If you choose to indulge, enhance hot chocolate with a liqueur, or add a flavor dimension with caramel sauce. Decorating that glass sets it off; we eat and drink with our eyes first."

Finally, we asked on behalf of the culinarily challenged (right here) if there's a fail-safe side for those of us who still want to contribute. Jason didn't hesitate.

"Be the sweet potato guy. For one thing, you can make them in advance. They're foolproof. Potatoes like russets or Yukon can be gummy when they're over mashed. Sweet potatoes don't get enough credit as a fry, or as a side, or even as a dessert. They're culinary superheroes; they play every position. Sweet potatoes are our friends. They don't cause trouble, they don't argue politics at the table, they just stay in their lane. They play nicely with everybody."

And isn't that what a holiday meal is all about?

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