

Chapter 1

A Crowd by Any Other Name

In This Chapter

- ▶ Dealing with the initial shock when you're enlisted as crowd cook
 - ▶ Thinking ahead for a successful day
 - ▶ Enjoying the process
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A crowd by any other name is . . . well, still a crowd! And when you cook for a crowd, you're entering a new dimension of cooking. No doubt, you've picked up this book because some kind of crowd-cooking event is looming in your future. Maybe the reception for Aunt Betty's wedding has become your responsibility. Maybe all your in-laws (and we do mean *all*) are coming to your home for Thanksgiving. Maybe you want to throw the best backyard summer party the world has ever seen, or maybe you love cooking for a crowd but want to do it better.

When you break it all down, a crowd is simply a group of people. Yet, cooking for that group of people can be bit nerve-racking and challenging. But it should also be fun! In this chapter, you get your feet wet with crowd cooking. We give you an overview of the process, tell you some things to start thinking about, and, in upcoming chapters, explore the details of what makes a crowd-cooking event a success. Armed with this book and a strong desire to achieve greatness, you can rest assured that your crowd event will be a smashing success (and as an added bonus, you'll get to keep your sanity).

How Did I Get in This Predicament?

It usually happens slowly and gains momentum, sort of like an avalanche. A family member mentions that everyone needs to get together for Thanksgiving. You offer to help. Someone compliments you on how good a cook you are. Someone else suggests that you be in charge of the event. Still

another person thinks your house is the perfect gathering place. Within moments, you find yourself agreeing to host Thanksgiving dinner for a group of 30, and in a seemingly out-of-body experience, you hear yourself saying, “Don’t bring a thing. I would love to cook the whole meal for the family.”

Sound familiar? This scenario happens to many people, ourselves included. It usually happens because you have some cooking talent and others perceive you as a go-getter. People trust you. People think you’re talented. And for those reasons, you’re suddenly in charge of the baby shower or backyard swim party. You got into this mess because you have the capacity for success and those around you know it. After all, crowds don’t gather around people who can’t cook and can’t follow through on promises.



Give yourself a break. You’re in this predicament because others trust you, and that’s a good thing.

However, you may be cooking for a crowd because you volunteered. Maybe you’re someone who really likes having company in your home or organizing events. Maybe you really love to cook, and seeing other people enjoying the food you make warms your heart. That’s no crime. In fact, the world should have more people like you!

Regardless of how you arrived in this predicament, let us give you some encouragement: You wouldn’t be here if you didn’t have the capacity for success, and our purpose in writing this book is to help you make your upcoming crowd event a success. Just envision friends and loved ones enjoying your food, laughing, and having a good time. Think of the pats on the back as people leave and tell you thanks for a great day and a great meal. Imagine the thank-you notes in the mail from friends and family telling you how much fun they had and how they wish you’d do it again soon.

Understanding what it takes

Step back in time for a moment and picture this scenario: It’s Christmas day, and you’re 8 years old. You, your family, and all your extended family have gathered at Grandma’s house for Christmas dinner, something you do every year.

When you first walk into Grandma’s house, you can feel the chaos. People are running around everywhere trying to set the table. The kitchen looks like a nuclear explosion of food and dirty dishes. Grandma has resorted to chain smoking, and when everyone finally sits down for dinner, you face a smorgasbord of mismatched, random food items (not to mention three different potato casserole dishes).

Sound familiar? Even if you didn't grow up going to Grandma's house for Christmas, you've probably been to a crowd event where the air was filled with panic and the food dishes seemed disconnected and unplanned at best. In fact, this scenario may describe most of the crowd events you've attended. And there's a very good reason why.



Most people who attempt crowd cooking don't take into account the *crowd factor* — simply put, the issues that accompany cooking for a crowd. Without considering the crowd factor, you're sure to experience a number of difficulties. Although the crowd factor includes several different aspects, it generally involves issues such as

- ✔ **Planning:** Cooking for a crowd requires additional planning. You can't just cook more than what you normally would for your immediate family; you need to make some specific plans that will help you accomplish your goals. We explore the planning process in Chapters 2 and 13.
- ✔ **Organizing:** Sure, you know that organization is important, but crowd events require an extra measure of organization. Even if you're typically organized, you'll find that crowd cooking takes more organizing than you may think. We show you how to get organized in Chapters 3, 13, and 15.
- ✔ **Picking appropriate foods:** Some foods work great for an intimate dinner party, and some foods work great for a casual family affair — when you cook for a crowd, you need to be careful about what food items you choose to prepare. Don't worry, we give you our best tried-and-true crowd recipes in this book, and you'll find them in Chapters 4 through 12.
- ✔ **Finding space:** Crowds take up a lot of room. As such, an important factor is space. You need to figure out how many people will show up and where you'll put them all. We help you plan that in Chapter 13.
- ✔ **Keeping time:** One of the single greatest mistakes that cooks make is underestimating the time they need. Have you ever been to an event where dinner was an hour late? We thought so; failure to accurately plan timing is the culprit. Don't worry — we help you stay on track.
- ✔ **Following a systematic approach for success:** A crowd event is really a long list of processes that you need to complete. Throughout this book, we show you how to accomplish them effectively, efficiently, and without a migraine headache.

The truth is, crowd cooking isn't a talent you can inherit from Aunt Sue. Successful crowd cooks are as such because they're able to understand and manage the crowd factor. They know how to organize and plan, what foods to choose, what foods to avoid, and how to anticipate problems. The good news is that you can learn how to tackle these issues with poise and grace, and giving you control over the crowd factor is the main focus of this book.

Determining the purpose of your event

The purpose of your crowd event may seem apparent. Maybe you're cooking for a holiday or a specific type of event, such as a wedding shower. Regardless, you should stop and ask yourself a few questions that will help you organize your thoughts and define your goals:

- ✔ What is the overall purpose of the event? In other words, why is everyone getting together?
- ✔ What are three things you'd really like people to say about the event when it's over?
- ✔ Is there anything particularly special about this event that you need to consider?

If you stop for a moment and really think about these three questions, you'll help yourself form an overriding purpose. Again, the purpose of the event may seem apparent, but knowing what you want the event to look and feel like and what you want people to think about it when all is said and done is important. After you have this purpose firmly planted in your mind, you can bring it to fruition.

Taking a breather and mustering confidence

We, your authors, know all about that panicky feeling that wells up in your throat, making you feel like you're suffocating. It usually happens after you've agreed to cook for a crowd, when the thought, "I'm really going to do this," comes to your mind.

Before you go into panic mode, stop. Have a seat. Take a deep breath. You have no reason to panic, because you can pull off this event. We know; we've done it ourselves and have helped other people do it. We'll help you, too — after all, that's why we wrote this book.

The truth is simple: If you have some cooking skills under your belt, you can cook for a crowd. You just need some help pulling everything together and knowing what to do. In the coming pages, we help you plan, get organized, cook your food, and pay attention to the details you may forget.

So take it easy. Exchange that worried face for a smile. We're here to help you, and your event is going to be great!

Planning for a Crowd

We say it here and we say it time and again throughout this book: Planning is the key to crowd cooking. Planning is the key to conquering the crowd factor, to organizing and getting everything ready on time, and to creating a great event.

As such, we help you plan from A to Z throughout this book, but for starters, it's a good idea to think carefully about some initial planning issues so you can get off to a good start.

Exploring your needs

As you think about cooking for a crowd, step back for a moment and consider some basics. You'll most likely need things in your kitchen that you don't currently have. This includes not only some basic ingredients but also such things as cookware, serving pieces, coffee and tea makers, and much more.

Because you often need more things when you cook for a crowd than when you cook for your immediate family, it's important to think about what you're lacking from the very start. We help you plan throughout this book, pointing out needs that may not have come to mind.

One of the great needs that you should consider is your need for help. Depending on your crowd, you may not be able to do the job alone. Sure, you can be the primary cook if you want, but you may need other people to handle all the tasks that come into play, especially if your crowd is greater than 20 people. The point is simple: Far too often, crowd cooks try to handle everything on their own and end up stressed and exhausted beyond measure. Don't try to be a hero. Think about what you can physically handle, and don't hesitate to get extra help. After all, you want to enjoy the day, too. You can find out more about these planning issues in Chapters 13 and 14.

Logistically speaking

As you think about your crowd, you need to consider logistics, which means space, among other things. The size of your home and its layout will determine how many people you can handle. Naturally, if you know from the start that your home isn't large enough for your crowd event, you'll need to turn to other locations, such as community centers, churches, and other types of meeting halls.

Thinking about food

In this book, we talk a lot about planning your menu (especially in Chapter 2) and provide you with a bunch of recipes that are just right for a crowd (see Chapters 4 through 12). However, you need to remember one word as you get ready to cook for a crowd: balance. Wanting to pull out all the stops when you cook for a crowd is natural. Of course you want everyone to be happy with the food you've prepared and to "ooh" and "aah" over what you've made. But that desire often leads to the Overcomplicated Recipe Syndrome.

When this syndrome strikes, you end up choosing only recipes that are complicated and outside the norm. You want every dish to be spectacular, as if a five-star chef has camped out in your home for a month. That thought is noble, but it isn't realistic.

As such, when you cook for a crowd, you need to find a balance in what you're doing. Sure, you can serve some complicated dishes, and you probably should, but you need to balance those dishes with ones that you can prepare quickly and easily. Too much of a good thing will only lead to a bunch of problems on your end.

In this book, you only find recipes that work well for crowd events, and we tend to err on the side of making things look and taste great with minimal work. After all, you have a lot to do and can easily overcommit yourself with the food preparation. We help you avoid that situation.

Finding Joy in the Moment

We don't mean to sound like cheerleaders, and we certainly won't tell you that cooking for a crowd is a simple process (if it were, you wouldn't need a book to help you). But we do want you to enjoy your event and be able to feel as if things are under control. And you can — with a lot of planning and organization (and all the tips in this book, of course).

After all, crowd events typically involve people you know and love. You're not a professional caterer, and you don't want to be one. But you do want to cook for a large group of people that you know and love and want the meal to be outstanding. We concur. We want you to have fun and be successful.

With that said, you're not perfect, and everything may not go perfectly. You can expect some problems and pitfalls along the way. You can expect that some dishes may not be as great as you want them to be. Congratulations! You're a real human being.

As you prepare to cook for a crowd, you can find joy during this time by keeping an overall perspective on what you're doing. Deal with the details, but keep the big picture in mind. Be flexible; you may have to adapt along the way. Flexibility will help you adjust to changes easily and keep a healthy perspective.

