

the secret to an enjoyable family meal

Three words: Make your own. Forget the big sit-down dinner. "Make-your-own bars are great because everyone is happy, and you can do as much or as little as you want," says chef Peter Berley, author of *The Flexitarian Table*. "You can have family members make their own doughs and sauces from scratch—or you can buy everything and let guests assemble it." Also...

it's cheap With so many options for fixings, you can choose what's on sale.

guests make it themselves They get to pick what they want. Who can complain?

fast, easy prep Just lay out ingredients—no pots and pans to wash.

busy hands The more occupied people are, the less they can quibble.

5 MAKE-YOUR-OWN CREATIONS

Fish tacos "Make salsa and shred lettuce ahead of time, so all you have to do later is heat the fish on a skillet," says Berley.

Pizza "I'd get pizzeria or store-bought dough and do 6-inch pizzas, so you can cook six at a time," he says.

Wraps/sandwiches/melts Offer unusual breads—perhaps mini-buns for mini-sandwiches, plain or flavored tortillas for wraps.

Burritos "It's so easy," says Berley. "You can't mess it up."

Dessert Have a dessert bar; everyone loves them.

FAKE IT
"Hosts always try to do too much," says Linnea Johansson. "It's just one night, so use what you have. If you don't have enough serving trays, use a picture frame and put a cloth over it. And don't go crazy cleaning—just do the surfaces. Because you're really gonna have to clean after the party."

treat... them to unforgettable presents



the rule of 20

"Sit down and make a master list of everyone you need to give gifts to," says Cynthia Ewer, the founder of OrganizedChristmas.com. "This also gives you a chance to examine expectations. Maybe you've always given to your siblings, but now they have spouses and kids, and things have gotten out of hand. If you

do it early, you have a chance to discuss this with them." Our rule of thumb: You should buy no more than 20 gifts—this includes gifts for friends, family, teachers, neighbors, *everyone*. To cut down gifts by two-thirds, consider:

whole-family gifts "One way to save money is through one gift everyone can enjoy together," says Gillian Joseph, director of merchandising at Gifts.com. Examples include board games, *Wii Fit*, or a basket full of supplies for a cooking or art project.

friend brunch If you're gathering your busy friends for a holiday lunch date anyway, make it clear that this is their present. They'll appreciate not having to buy yet more gifts, we promise.

office goodies No one at the office will think less of you if you cook lunch or bake something and declare it your gift.

experiences "Children uniformly have too much stuff," says Ewer. "Everyone dreams of giving kids *the* present, but the truth is, a kid doesn't remember who the Transformer was from three days later." Ewer suggests a Christmas campout. "Invite kids to come visit overnight and camp out under the Christmas tree. You can talk about the tree and the holiday, and kids will always remember it."

gift exchange "One of the advantages of doing a list very early is that you can make deals," says Ewer. If your coworker list is out of control, be the one to suggest a Secret Santa. **rotation** Many large families make it one gift per person, total. One year you might give to a brother-in-law; the next, to a cousin.

what to give...

the friend with expensive tastes

"Think small, but deliver big," says Robyn Freedman Spizman, author of *The Giftnary*. If she likes designer duds, get a designer wallet or key chain.

the friend who's struggling

Parents appreciate knowing that their children can continue the activities they love. So spring for soccer lessons or the YMCA membership (check with parents first). Or offer to babysit.

the friend who has everything

"People love

gifts that offer them a better way of doing something," says Spizman. What does she do regularly? Does she stop for coffee every morning? Does she cut flowers with scissors? Try a travel mug or rose clippers.

the person who never likes anything

More of what you're sure she likes: a certain scent, etc.

mom and dad Hobby gifts. Ask someone with the same hobby what's the best gift he's ever gotten. A runner might tell you about a great wrist key holder; a knitter, extravagant yarn.

GIFTS WE'D LIKE TO BAN

Please, take 'em off your list!

● GIFT CERTIFICATES

A whopping 25 percent of people still haven't used them after a year, saying they don't have time. Unless it's from a place you know the person goes to all the time, skip it.

● **BATH PRODUCTS** There's a reason men don't give each other shaving cream: It's lame. Bath products are only allowed if the giftee particularly enjoys a lotion or spa treatment and can genuinely respond, "Oh, she knows me so well!"

● RANDOM DECORATIVE KNICKKNACKS

Face it: If you don't want it, neither do they. Everyone on your list already has too much stuff. Unless your knickknack is full of deep emotional meaning to the recipient, find another gift.

WRAP WITHOUT LOSING YOUR MIND

"Wrap presents as soon as they enter the house," says Ewer, "because nothing takes the joy out of the holiday like midnight wrapping on Christmas Eve." Her trick: Use numbered Post-it notes instead of gift tags, so kids aren't shaking boxes.

"Only you'll know who #6 is."

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