

Work Smarter NOT HARDER



By Becky McKinley
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For as long as I can remember, I have lived by a simple rule: **Work Smarter, Not Harder**. It has served me well in the kitchen, in entertaining, and frankly, in life. As I sat down to write this month's column, I found myself wanting to shake things up a bit. After nearly three decades of sharing recipes, cooking tips, and culinary adventures with Accent West readers, I thought it might be fun to pull back the curtain and talk about something I am equally passionate about—**how to entertain with ease**.

For years, I've toyed with the idea of starting an Instagram page or a Substack devoted to effortless entertaining. I have pages of notes, countless ideas, and more than a few stories gathered from years of hosting dinner parties, fundraisers, cooking classes, and celebrations of every kind. Then it occurred to me: why start somewhere new when I already have the perfect place to begin?

For 29 years, Accent West has given me the opportunity to share my love of food and hospitality. Looking back, it has been fascinating to watch the culinary world evolve. I've seen chefs go from working quietly behind kitchen doors to becoming celebrities on par with movie stars. I've watched food trends, table-setting trends, cocktail trends, and even the introduction of cannabis into mainstream cooking. Every year seems to bring a new "must-have" ingredient, gadget, or dining experience.

One would think that after all these years, I would have seen it all. But if there is one thing I have learned, it's that the culinary world never stops surprising us. New trends will come and go, but one thing remains constant: people love gathering around a table.

And that's where this new journey begins. Over the coming months, I'd like to share some of my favorite shortcuts, entertaining secrets, make-ahead strategies, and practical tips that allow you to spend less time stressing and more time enjoying your guests. Because at the end of the day, the best hosts aren't the ones who worked the hardest—they're the ones who never miss their own party.

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THE HOME BAR AND ENTERTAINING WITH EASE

The best entertaining advice I was ever given came from a bartender I worked with years ago. She said, "You are the face of the event. If you look stressed, it sets the tone for the entire party."

I quickly realized she was absolutely right. It's much like a flight attendant who appears nervous during turbulence—it immediately affects everyone around them. As hosts, our guests often take their cues from us. If we're relaxed and enjoying ourselves, they will too.

With that in mind—and since the wisdom came from a bartender—let's talk about setting up a home bar.

Creating a Home Bar

Choose the Right Location. Your bar should be:

- Close to where guests naturally gather
- Away from kitchen traffic
- Near electrical outlets if you'll use a wine refrigerator or ice maker
- Large enough for storage, serving, and easy access

Stock the Essential Spirits

Start with a few versatile bottles rather than trying to recreate a liquor store.

- Vodka
- Gin
- Bourbon
- Silver Tequila
- Scotch

Years ago, I would have included light rum on this list. Today, I find that Scotch is requested far more often than rum.



Essential Mixers

Keep these basics on hand:

- Club Soda (Fever-Tree is currently my favorite)
- Tonic Water (regular and light)
- Ginger Beer
- Cola (regular and diet)
- Lemon-Lime Soda (Sprite, 7-UP) along those lines
- Cranberry Juice
- Orange Juice
- Simple Syrup

Fresh Garnishes

Fresh garnishes instantly elevate drinks.

- Lemons
- Limes
- Oranges
- Olives

Place them in small bowls and allow guests to garnish their own cocktails.

Glassware

Glassware isn't nearly as important as it once was. Entertaining has become much more casual over the years. If you have **wine glasses** and/or **highball glasses**, these choices can handle almost anything.

Bar Tools

A few good tools make life easier:

- Quality Wine Opener with Foil Cutter
- Jigger
- Cocktail Shaker
- Bar Spoon
- Bottle Opener
- Ice Bucket with Tongs
- And speaking of ice—good ice and plenty of it is absolutely essential.

Wine and Beer

I like to keep selections simple:

Wine

- One crisp white (Pinot Grigio)
- One fuller-bodied white (Chardonnay)
- One lighter red (Pinot Noir)
- One bold red (Cabernet Sauvignon)
- Sparkling Wine or Champagne

Beer I generally recommend:

- One light beer
- One traditional lager
- One darker option, such as Shiner Bock

The Signature Cocktail

Nothing makes a gathering feel more special than a signature cocktail.

Some favorites include:

- Texas Ranch Water
- Old Fashioned
- Classic Margarita
- French 75
- Seasonal Sangria

▼ My current favorite signature cocktail is a Grapefruit Margarita.

Home Bar Checklist

- Vodka
- Gin
- Bourbon
- Tequila
- Scotch
- Mixers
- Fresh Citrus
- Wine Selection
- Beer Selection
- Cocktail Tools
- Ice Bucket
- Glassware
- Cocktail Napkins
- Bottle Opener
- Cocktail Recipe Cards

An Entertaining Tip

One of the most valuable home-bar lessons I've learned is that guests don't need fifty liquor choices. They need a handful of quality options presented beautifully.

A well-organized bar featuring a great bottle of wine, a signature cocktail, and plenty of ice feels far more luxurious than an overcrowded bar that's difficult to navigate.

The goal is to spend time with your guests—not play bartender all evening.

GRAPEFRUIT MARGARITA

2 ounces grapefruit juice	⋮	½ ounce fresh lime juice
1 ounce Aperol	⋮	½ ounce agave syrupe
1 ounce tequila	⋮	

To Serve: Rim a glass with Tajin. Shake all ingredients with ice and pour over fresh ice. Garnish with a grapefruit slice.

One entertaining trick: pre-mix large batches whenever possible. The less time you spend bartending, the more time you spend with your guests.

And don't forget the cocktail napkins!



COOKING FOR A CROWD

After years of hosting cooking classes, fundraisers, weddings, and dinner parties, I've noticed that the hosts who make entertaining look effortless almost always follow a few simple principles.

This may sound crazy to some people, but I actually like to invite more guests than my table comfortably seats. I love a crowd. Something magical happens when a gathering becomes just a little too full. The mood shifts from formal and structured to warm, lively, and relaxed.

Our round dining table comfortably seats fourteen, but I often invite sixteen. Somehow it always works—and it is always more fun.

My Rule of Thumb

Up to 8 guests:

I prefer a seated, plated dinner. There is almost always one guest who enjoys helping me plate and serve.

12 to 16 guests:

I typically pre-set the salad and bread, then serve the main course buffet-style.

20 guests or more:

Always a buffet.
An elegant buffet, but a buffet nonetheless.

Serve Forgiving Foods

I prefer dishes that allow me to enjoy the evening rather than spend it hovering over the stove. Some favorites:

- Beef Bourguignon
- Braised Short Ribs
- Pulled Pork used in a variety of ways
- Paella
- Salmon
- Large Seasonal Salads

I generally avoid:

- Soufflés (although I do have a wonderful make-ahead version that's a story for another article)
- Fried Foods
- Made-to-order Risotto
- Hollandaise Sauce (unless you're using my foolproof recipe, which is also a topic for another day)

The Three-Thirds Rule is a great one to follow

One of my favorite entertaining shortcuts is what I call the Three-Thirds Rule.

- One-third homemade
- One-third enhanced convenience foods (bread, desserts, or a charcuterie board)
- One-third quality purchased items such as nuts, olives, and cheeses

Guests remember the experience far more than they remember which items were homemade.

RULES FOR ENTERTAINING FROM THE COOK

The most memorable hosts aren't necessarily the best cooks. They're the people who make their guests feel welcome.

The Day Before

Whenever possible, complete these tasks the day before:

- Set the table (I often do this two or three days ahead)
- Arrange flowers
- Set up the bar
- Organize serving pieces
- Review your timeline

Make the First Drink Automatic

The moment guests arrive, put something in their hand:

- A glass of sparkling wine
- Your signature cocktail
- Sparkling water
- Their beverage of choice

It immediately puts people at ease and allows the evening to begin naturally.

Never Miss Your Own Party!

I live by this motto. Too many hosts spend weeks planning a gathering only to be exhausted by the time guests arrive.

My goal with this series is to help you enjoy entertaining as much as your guests do. With a little planning, a well-stocked bar, and a few smart shortcuts, you can create memorable gatherings without spending the entire evening working.

After all, the best seat at the party should belong to the host.



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APPETIZERS

I am going to share a few easy appetizer recipes and a few pick up appetizers that work well.

CHEDDAR PECAN CHEESE MOLD WITH TABASCO JELLY

6 C. sharp cheddar cheese, grated
4 green onions, finely chopped (including some of the green tops)
1 C. chopped pecans, toasted
¾ C. good-quality mayonnaise (or enough to bind the mixture)
Tabasco jelly, for topping
Additional chopped pecans, for garnish (optional)

To Toast the Pecans

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Spread the pecans on a baking sheet and toast for about 8 minutes, or until fragrant. Allow them to cool completely before chopping and adding to the cheese mixture.

1. In a large bowl, combine the grated cheddar cheese, green onions, and toasted pecans.
2. Add the mayonnaise and mix until the ingredients are well combined and hold together. You may need slightly more or less mayonnaise, depending on the moisture content of the cheese.
3. Line an 8-inch round pan or similar dish with plastic wrap, leaving enough overhang to cover the top.
4. Spoon the cheese mixture into the prepared pan, pressing it firmly and evenly into the dish.
5. Cover and refrigerate for at least several hours or overnight to allow the mold to firm up.

To Serve

1. Remove the cheese mold from the refrigerator.
2. Invert it onto a serving platter and carefully remove the pan and plastic wrap.
3. Spread the top with Tabasco jelly and sprinkle with additional chopped pecans, if desired.
4. Serve with an assortment of crackers or ginger snaps.

Make-Ahead Tip

This cheese mold is an excellent make-ahead appetizer. It can be prepared up to 4 days in advance and will keep well in the refrigerator for up to 1 week.

A surprising favorite, the combination of sharp cheddar, toasted pecans, and sweet-spicy Tabasco jelly makes this a memorable addition to any party table. The ginger snaps are particularly delicious alongside it.

I love the following presentation but often opt for an easier version. The easy version is almost as good:

- Tostado chips
- Guacamole from United or TeJavan
- Purchased Mexican slaw from Taylor Brand
- Cooked Shrimp from the Butcher counter, toss in fajita seasoning, top with a tiny dollop of sour cream and sprinkle with Tajin

GRILLED SHRIMP TOSTADA BITES

with Guacamole and Mexican Slaw

Yield: 24 appetizer bites

For the Guacamole

2 ripe avocados
1 T. fresh lime juice
2 T. finely diced red onion
1 T. chopped cilantro
Salt to taste

For the Mexican Slaw

2 C finely shredded cabbage
¼ C. shredded carrots
2 T. chopped cilantro
1 T. lime juice
1 T. mayonnaise
½ tsp. chili powder
Salt and pepper to taste

For the Shrimp

24 medium shrimp, peeled and deveined, tails removed
1 T. olive oil
1 tsp. chili powder
½ tsp. cumin
½ tsp. garlic powder
Salt and pepper to taste

For Assembly

24 round tortilla chips
Cilantro leaves for garnish
Lime wedges for serving

Prepare the Guacamole

- Mash the avocados with lime juice.
- Fold in the red onion and cilantro.
- Season with salt and refrigerate until ready to use.

Make the Mexican Slaw

- Combine cabbage, carrots, and cilantro in a bowl.
- Whisk together lime juice, mayonnaise, chili powder, salt, and pepper.
- Toss with the vegetables and refrigerate.

Grill the Shrimp

- Toss shrimp with olive oil and seasonings.
- Grill over medium-high heat for 1–2 minutes per side until pink and lightly charred.
- Remove and cool slightly.



Assemble

- Place a teaspoon of guacamole on each tortilla chip.
- Top with a small mound of Mexican slaw.
- Add one grilled shrimp.
- Garnish with a small cilantro leaf.

Arrange the bites on a platter and finish with a light drizzle of chipotle crema or a sprinkle of cotija cheese for an elevated restaurant-style presentation.

WHIPPED FETA DIP

This is one of my favorite dips for entertaining because it looks elegant, takes only a few minutes to make, and pairs beautifully with fresh vegetables, pita chips, crostini, or crackers.

8 oz. feta cheese, crumbled	1 T. fresh lemon juice
4 oz. cream cheese, softened	1 clove garlic, minced (optional)
½ C. Greek yogurt	Freshly ground black pepper,
2 T. olive oil	to taste

1. Place the feta, cream cheese, Greek yogurt, olive oil, lemon juice, and garlic (if using) in a food processor.
2. Process until completely smooth and creamy, scraping down the sides as needed.
3. Taste and adjust with additional lemon juice or black pepper if desired.
4. Transfer to a serving bowl and chill for at least 30 minutes before serving.

Garnishes: Choose one or combine several.

- Hot honey drizzle
- Chopped pistachios
- Fresh dill or chives
- Lemon zest
- Chopped roasted red peppers
- Everything bagel seasoning

Spread the whipped feta onto a shallow serving plate.

Create a swirl with the back of a spoon, drizzle with good olive oil or hot honey, and sprinkle with pistachios and fresh herbs.

Vegetable Pairings:

- Cucumber slices
- Mini sweet peppers
- Carrot sticks or whole mini carrots
- Sugar snap peas
- Radishes
- Cauliflower
- Cherry tomatoes

Make-Ahead Tip

The dip can be prepared up to 3 days in advance and stored covered in the refrigerator. Let it sit at room temperature for about 20 minutes before serving for the creamiest texture.

For any party, I especially like topping it with hot honey, pistachios, and fresh dill—the sweet, salty, creamy combination is irresistible. I also like olives and peppers on top.

AHI TUNA TARTARE

on Crispy Wonton Triangles

Yield: 24 appetizers



This version is perfect for passed hors d'oeuvres. The wonton triangles are sturdy, easy to pick up, and provide the perfect crisp base for the fresh tuna tartare.

For the Wonton Triangles
12 wonton wrappers
Olive oil spray or vegetable oil

1 T. green onions,
finely sliced
1 tsp. sesame seeds
½ tsp. sriracha (optional)

For the Tuna Tartare
12 oz. sushi-grade ahi tuna,
finely diced
1 T. soy sauce
1 T. toasted sesame oil
1 T. fresh lime juice
1 tsp. grated fresh ginger

Garnishes:
Thin slices of avocado
Black and white sesame seeds
Microgreens
Chives, finely snipped
Lime zest

Make the Wonton Triangles

1. Preheat oven to 375°F.
2. Cut each wonton wrapper diagonally to form two triangles.
3. Lightly brush or spray both sides with oil.
4. Arrange on a baking sheet and bake for 4–6 minutes, until golden brown and crisp.
5. Remove and cool completely.

Prepare the Tuna Tartare

1. In a chilled bowl, gently combine the tuna, soy sauce, sesame oil, lime juice, ginger, green onions, sesame seeds, and sriracha.
2. Refrigerate until ready to assemble.

Assemble

1. Place a small slice of avocado on each wonton triangle.
2. Top with about 1 tablespoon of tuna tartare.
3. Garnish with sesame seeds, microgreens, and a touch of lime zest.
4. Serve immediately.

Optional Wasabi Cream

For an extra layer of flavor, pipe a small dot of wasabi cream onto each wonton before adding the avocado.

Wasabi Cream
¾ C. mayonnaise
1 tsp. prepared wasabi
½ tsp. lime juice

Mix until smooth. Arrange the wonton triangles in a fan pattern on a rectangular platter. Finish with a light drizzle of sweet soy glaze and a sprinkle of sesame seeds for a polished, presentation.

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Inexpensive – under \$7.00

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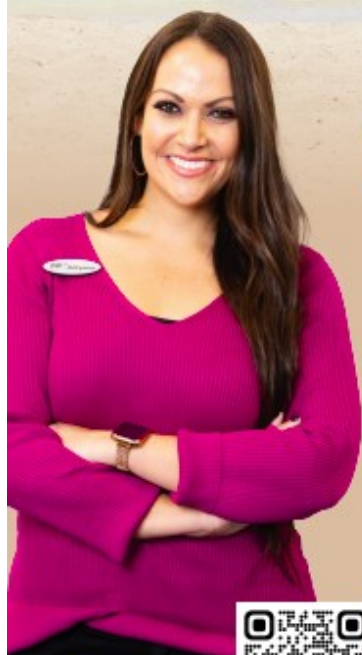
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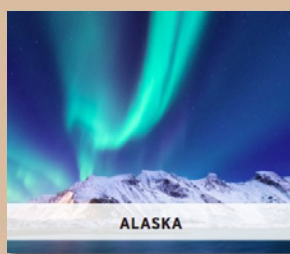
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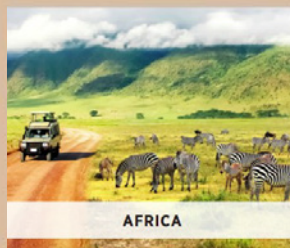
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