

Work Smarter NOT HARDER

PART 3: THE MAIN COURSE



By Becky McKinley
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As I begin the third column in my **Work Smarter, Not Harder** series, it's time to talk about the main course—the part of the meal that seems to make many home cooks the most nervous, even though it is often the simplest part of

the dinner to pull off.

When I think back to my mom's dinner parties, I still smile. She made entertaining look effortless. Looking back, I think I finally understand her secret.

She never changed the menu. Not ever.

Mom had beautiful oval wooden trays topped with polished metal platters that made every dinner feel special. Each guest had their own tray, and she would warm the metal portion before placing it on the wooden tray at your designated spot.

She also had a baked-potato rack with long metal rods that looked like something from a science laboratory. She would spear each potato, generously rub it with Crisco, sprinkle it with salt, and bake it until the skin was crisp and the inside was fluffy as a cloud. I have never had a better baked potato.

The entrée was always steak. Of course, in the home of a cattleman, what else would you expect?

The salad was a wedge of iceberg lettuce with Mom's homemade Thousand Island dressing. Clifford's grocery store always had iceberg lettuce on hand. There wasn't exactly a wide variety of produce to choose from in a small town!

Dessert was angel food cake with homemade banana ice cream.

I remember with great glee going to the icehouse to purchase a large sack filled with crushed ice. We would all take turns sitting on top of the ice cream freezer while Dad hand-cranked the ice cream. The real fight came when he removed the dasher. We each wanted it



for ourselves, of course.

And every single time, Mom served this exact menu.

I will not go into the later years when she added her ham loaf with warm raisin sauce—a recipe you will never see me replicate!

And no one complained about Mom's repetition. In fact, people looked forward to coming to the Deyhle house.

My dad could talk to anyone and make them feel like the most interesting person in the room. My mom made everyone feel welcome. She never seemed rushed, and somehow dinner was always ready at exactly the right moment.

As a child, I thought it was magic. As an adult, I see it differently. *She simply worked smarter, not harder.*

She stuck with what she did well, perfected it, and



TEN WAYS TO WORK SMARTER

Here are a few of my favorite ways to make entertaining easier:

- 1 Read the recipe two days ahead. You may discover that something needs to marinate, chill or be prepared in advance.
- 2 Chop vegetables the day before. One less thing to do when your guests are arriving is a very good thing.
- 3 Set the table the night before—or even two or three days ahead. There is no prize for setting the table at the last minute!
- 4 Mix sauces and dressings in advance. Most are even better after the flavors have had time to mingle.
- 5 Choose a make-ahead dessert. Your dessert should not be the reason you miss dinner with your guests.
- 6 Use fresh herbs at the end. A little fresh parsley, basil, chives or dill can make food taste—and look—freshly prepared.
- 7 Warm your serving platters. It's a small touch that keeps food warm longer and makes dinner feel special.
- 8 Clean as you prep, not after dinner. Future Becky will thank you.
- 9 Accept help when it's offered. This is one I am still learning!
- 10 Sit down and enjoy your own meal. Your guests came to spend time with you—not watch you work.

BECKY'S SECRET SHORTCUTS: THE MAGIC FREEZER

My food friend **Susan Esler** refers to my freezer as *the Magic Freezer*. I prefer to call it the freezer of a somewhat lazy woman!

The truth is, I always have something I can pull out of the freezer, refrigerator or pantry and turn into something delicious. Being prepared doesn't mean you have to work harder. It simply means you have a few good tricks up your sleeve. Here are the things I like to keep on hand:

In My Freezer

- Good-quality frozen puff pastry
- A container of homemade pesto sauce, frozen in portions
- A good-quality demi-glace
- A frozen pound cake or homemade almond cake
- A package of frozen fruit
- A container of Cool Whip

In My Refrigerator

- Cream cheese
- Manchego cheese
- Tomatoes—regular or cherry
- A good bottle of wine

In My Pantry

- Dried fruit
- Some type of chutney—usually mango
- A spicy jam, such as pepper jelly or a spicy fruit jam
- Pistachios
- Marcona almonds
- Ginger Snaps from World Market
- Water crackers

As you can see, I am almost always ready for a party at my house. With those few ingredients, I can put together an instant appetizer, a quick dessert—or, at the very least, pour a glass of wine and look like I had a plan!

stopped worrying about impressing guests with complicated menus. Instead, she concentrated on what really mattered: making people feel welcome and comfortable around her table.

There is a lesson in that.

The best dinner parties aren't necessarily about the most elaborate menu. *They are about simple, confident food and genuine hospitality shared with people you enjoy.*

And perhaps the greatest entertaining trick of all is to serve a menu you know so well that you can actually enjoy your own party.

TIPS FROM MY KITCHEN

When I entertain, I always try to have as much as possible finished the day before.

I recently had a dinner party **and made** Salmon Wellington. It is delicious, looks impressive and, best of all, can be assembled and frozen weeks ahead of time.

I serve it with a hollandaise sauce with one little secret: *I add three ounces of cream cheese.* The cream cheese stabilizes the sauce so it can be made a day ahead and stored in the refrigerator. When you gently reheat it, the sauce stays beautifully together instead of breaking. It is amazing—and it is exactly the kind of trick that makes entertaining so much easier.

I baked the Salmon Wellington bundles just before dinner and served them with asparagus roasted in the oven at the very last minute. It was such an easy menu, but it was absolutely delicious.

And, for once, I even took my own advice and accepted help. Julianne Gaut and Shirley Walker offered to wash the dishes, and I let them. I usually say no. And I quickly regret it! It was amazing how much faster three sets of hands could make the work go. Sometimes working smarter simply means letting someone else pick up a dish towel. That may be the hardest lesson of all!

SALMON WELLINGTON

2 sheets puff pastry - thawed overnight in the fridge

1 pound salmon fillet, skin off, cut into 4 equal pieces

Salt and pepper to taste

Spinach Filling

10 ounce frozen spinach, thawed and drained. Make sure all the moisture is removed. Squeeze with a paper towel.

1 package cream cheese, softened

½ C. grated Parmesan cheese

2 T. butter

Salt to taste

Egg wash

1 egg

1 T. milk or half-and-half

Thaw puff pastry overnight in the fridge. Then place on the counter 10 minutes before rolling.

Make the Filling: Melt butter in a saucepan. Add the spinach, cream cheese and Parmesan cheese to the melted butter. Stir in salt and let cool. Cook just long enough to melt the cream cheese and heat the spinach.

Make the Egg Wash: In a small bowl, whisk one egg with a splash of milk or half-and-half, and whisk well, set aside.

On a floured board or parchment paper, gently unfold the puff pastry. Flour the top of it and roll it out just a little, to fit the salmon- you don't want it too thin.

Season the salmon generously with salt and pepper on both sides. Place the salmon in the middle of your puff pastry.

Spoon the spinach filling over the salmon. Smooth it out as best you can. Brush the egg wash on all exposed puff pastry, then carefully fold it over the salmon, pressing out any air bubbles, before sealing.

Place a sheet pan in the oven and preheat the oven to 400°F (375°F convection). When ready to bake, place the salmon onto the hot sheet pan, and bake in the middle of oven until beautifully golden, about 30-35 minutes. Turn halfway through if need be.



Salmon Wellington

Notes: Baking this on a HOT, preheated sheet pan will help the bottom crisp and cook through.

Assemble ahead: The whole salmon packet can be assembled a day ahead and refrigerated, or prepared earlier and frozen. Remove the salmon from the freezer about one hour before baking. If baking from the fridge, remove 20 minutes before baking. Before baking, brush the salmon packet with egg wash.

Serve with hollandaise sauce for a delicious meal.

BLENDER HOLLANDAISE SAUCE

3 egg yolks
1 (3 oz.) pkg. cream cheese
3 T. lemon juice
Dash cayenne (optional)
½ C. melted butter

Place egg yolks, softened and cubed cream cheese and cayenne in a blender. Cover. Blend at low speed just until cream cheese is nearly smooth, about 5 seconds. Add lemon juice and blend for 5 seconds. Melt the butter until boiling. Turn the blender on high. Slowly pour in the butter. Blend until it is thick and fluffy, about 30 seconds.

This is great Hollandaise sauce, you can make it early and keep it in the cooler with your other hot items or in the fridge. Place chilled hollandaise in a heavy saucepan and slowly warm. I often add a bit more lemon juice while warming the sauce. You can also heat it in the microwave in 10 second intervals.

ROASTED BEEF TENDERLOIN

Serves 10-12

5-7 pound beef tenderloin, cleaned and trimmed
About 3 T. olive oil
About 3 T. Claude's or Red Creek Brisket Marinade
Montreal Steak Seasoning, enough to generously coat the tenderloin

Preheat oven to 425°F on convection.

Clean and trim the tenderloin, removing any excess fat and silverskin. Place the tenderloin in a roasting pan or baking pan long enough to accommodate the beef.

Rub the tenderloin all over with olive oil. Drizzle the brisket marinade over the beef and rub it in lightly. Generously coat the entire tenderloin with Montreal Steak Seasoning. I am not shy with the seasoning!

Place the uncovered tenderloin in the oven. For a 5-7 pound tenderloin, roast for approximately 27 minutes for rare to medium-rare. Because ovens and tenderloins



vary, I strongly recommend using an instant-read thermometer rather than relying solely on time. Remove the tenderloin when it reaches approximately 125-130°F for rare to medium-rare, remembering that the internal temperature will continue to rise as it rests.

If you do not have a convection oven, roast at 425°F for approximately 35 minutes, again checking the internal temperature for doneness.

Remove the tenderloin from the oven and let it rest, uncovered, for at least 10-15 minutes before slicing. There is no need to cover it with foil; covering it will trap heat and encourage additional cooking.

Work smarter: The tenderloin can be roasted shortly before guests arrive and allowed to rest while you finish the rest of the meal. Slice just before serving.

ROASTED ASPARAGUS WITH LEMON, PARMESAN & MARCONA ALMONDS

Serves 10-12

3 pounds asparagus, trimmed
3 T. extra-virgin olive oil
1½ tsp. kosher salt
½ tsp. freshly ground
black pepper
Zest of 1 lemon

2 T. fresh lemon juice
¾ C. Marcona almonds,
roughly chopped
¾ C. shaved Parmesan
2 T. finely chopped fresh parsley

| Continued on next page

FANS WIN IN THE Corona LIME ZONE



Preheat oven to 425°F.

Toss asparagus with olive oil, salt and pepper. Divide between two sheet pans and spread in a single layer.

Roast for 8–12 minutes, depending on the thickness of the asparagus, until tender-crisp and lightly browned.

Transfer asparagus to a serving platter and drizzle with lemon juice. Scatter the Marcona almonds, Parmesan, lemon zest and parsley over the top.

Work smarter: Trim the asparagus and chop the almonds the day before. Keep them refrigerated separately. Roast the asparagus just before dinner and finish with the toppings immediately before serving.

CRISPY POTATO PAVÉ

Serves 10–12

This is the showstopper. It looks like something from a fine-dining restaurant, but the clever part is that the potatoes are prepared completely ahead and simply crisped before serving.

4 pounds Yukon Gold potatoes

2 C. heavy cream

3 garlic cloves, smashed

2 tsp. kosher salt

1 tsp. freshly ground black pepper

2 T. melted butter

2 T. chopped fresh thyme

Flaky sea salt

Preheat oven to 350°F.

Line a 9-by-13-inch baking pan with parchment paper, leaving enough overhang to lift the potatoes out later.

Slice the potatoes paper-thin. A mandoline makes quick work of this job.

Warm the cream with the garlic, salt and pepper over low heat. Allow the garlic to infuse the cream for about 10 minutes, but do not let the cream boil. Remove the garlic.

Arrange the potato slices in tightly packed, even layers in the prepared pan, lightly brushing each layer with cream as you go. Pour any remaining cream over the top.

Cover with parchment paper and then tightly with foil. Bake for 60–75 minutes, or until the potatoes are completely



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tender when pierced with a knife.

Remove the foil. Place another baking pan on top of the potatoes and weigh it down with a few cans or other heavy, heat-safe objects. Refrigerate overnight.

The next day, lift the chilled potato block from the pan and cut it into neat rectangles or squares.

To serve, brush each portion lightly with melted butter.
Sear in a skillet or roast at 425°F until deeply golden and crisp
on the outside and hot throughout.

Finish with fresh thyme and flaky sea salt.

Work smarter: The entire potato portion can be prepared the day before. On the day of the dinner, simply cut, crisp and serve. The potatoes can also be served at room temperature after searing, making them an especially forgiving side dish for entertaining.

WILD MUSHROOM & SHALLOT RAGOUT

Serves 10-12

If you're serving beef tenderloin with a red wine sauce, this ragout provides a gorgeous earthy flavor that makes the beef taste even better.

2½ pounds assorted mushrooms,
such as cremini, shiitake,
oyster or chanterelle
4 T. butter, divided
2 T. olive oil
4 large shallots, thinly sliced
3 garlic cloves, minced

½ C. dry white wine
1 C. beef or chicken stock
1 T. Dijon mustard
1 tsp. fresh thyme leaves
2 T. chopped fresh parsley
Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste

Clean the mushrooms and slice or tear larger ones into bite-size pieces.

Heat half of the butter and the olive oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Cook the mushrooms in batches, making sure not to overcrowd the pan. This allows them to brown rather than steam.

Transfer the browned mushrooms to a bowl and add the remaining butter to the skillet.

Add the shallots and cook until softened and lightly golden. Add the garlic and thyme and cook for about 30 seconds.

Pour in the wine and scrape up all the flavorful browned bits from the bottom of the skillet. Let the wine simmer for 1–2 minutes.

Add the stock and Dijon mustard and simmer until slightly reduced. Return the mushrooms to the pan and cook for another 3–4 minutes, allowing the flavors to come together and the sauce to thicken slightly.

Finish with parsley, salt and freshly ground black pepper.

Work smarter: Make the ragout completely the day before. Refrigerate, then reheat gently just before serving. If it seems a little dry when reheating, add a splash of stock.

I hope you enjoy these recipes and find a few shortcuts that make your own entertaining easier. And please email me if you have questions or need ideas about what to serve with these menus. I love helping put a meal together.

Next month, we'll talk about the best part of the meal:

DESSERT! *AW*



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Sad Monkey Mercantile, 9800 TX-217, Canyon, TX 79015, 806-488-2658. Just 15 minutes from Canyon and 25 from Amarillo, Sad Monkey Mercantile is the perfect stop for a relaxing break on your way to or from Palo Duro Canyon. This unique spot offers everything from hot sandwiches and fresh local coffee to craft beer from area breweries like Pondaseta Brewing Co., plus wine flights and mimosas at the Monkey Bar. The food trailer, open on weekends, serves delicious meals, while the pet-friendly patio with cornhole and occasional live music sets a laid-back vibe for all ages. Check out their Instagram for the latest on live music events. You'll also find camping gear, homewares, and "Panhandle Proud" merchandise to take home as souvenirs. With scenic views, a small dog park, and Texas longhorns nearby, Sad Monkey Mercantile offers a peaceful, family-friendly space to relax, grab a drink, and explore the best of the Texas Panhandle. Whether you're hiking, biking, or just looking to unwind, it's the perfect place to recharge. Open Sun – Thurs, 9 AM – 8 PM and Fri/ Sat, 9 AM – 9 PM. Moderate.

Cask and Cork, 5471 McKenna Square, Unit 101, 806-410-1113. You could go for brunch: the Blackberry, Ham & Goat Cheese pizza with a glass of prosecco is just about perfect. Then there's lunch: the Cask Burger with 10 oz. black Angus beef, Dijon mustard, smoked Gouda and all the etceteras will tide you over. But for a great date night: Cajun Crab Cakes for a starter,

followed by the 12 oz. NY Strip with roasted fingerlings, fresh vegetables and herbed compound butter WITH a glass of fabulous Napa Valley cabernet sauvignon. And, of course, crème brulee for dessert. Yes. Open Mon (4-10 p.m.), Tues-Thurs (11 a.m. – 10 p.m.), Fri (11 a.m. – 11 p.m.), Sat (10:30 a.m. – 11 p.m.), Sun (10:30 a.m. – 10 p.m.); Sat/ Sun Brunch (10:30 a.m. – 3 p.m.). Moderate to moderately expensive.

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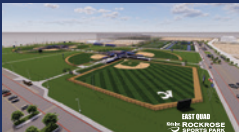
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