

Why are people drawn to potlucks?

When October comes around, I stock up on the essentials — chicken, rice, cake ingredients and candy.

It's an odd combination and doesn't seem like it goes together in one dish. That's because it doesn't. These ingredients are what I use for different dishes for events where lots of people will gather and eat.

That's right, it's potluck season.

Yes, season. There's something about the holidays that makes people plan them in droves. In fact, here at The Times, if my memory and math is correct, we'll have three before the year is out. I'm anticipating being invited to at least two more. That means five meals where I know I'll have to bring something to share for others to eat.

And it also means I'm about to be really busy. So, I began a quest for easy and fast potluck recipes, something different from what I normally make. My search took me to Houston, to Massachusetts, to Rhode Island (most of those trips were virtual) to find home cooks with great potluck ideas. I found three — an appetizer, a main dish and a showstopper.

Bringing the appetizer

This is what happened in October when I visited my friend Diana in Houston.

"Just so you know, we're going over my grandmother's house this weekend."

This sentence is code for everyone in my family will be squeezed into a small house on the North side and we're about to eat. A lot.

In my friend's family, October marks a birthday for at least four people. To celebrate, the family hosts an epic potluck. This is the menu: barbeque ribs, chicken, links and fajitas; Mexican rice; rancho beans made from scratch that have been cooking all day; a large bowl of pico de gallo; an even bigger bowl of potato salad; and if that isn't enough, a chocolate cake that's still making my mouth water.

Everyone brings something. Diana is always in charge of the appetizer — a stuffed baked potato dip.

"They love it when I make it," she said.

Appetizers are what get the party started, so to speak. It's the handshake to the meal, something to nosh on while the food is in the last stages of preparation. It's also a chance to fellowship with people. In the time it took to make the really quick dip and eat it, we were caught up with everyone's life and were cracking jokes. There was a closeness that everyone felt, even the non-family members like me. This all started with the appetizer.

The main dish

[Ann Macy](#), a home cook from Massachusetts, specializes in quick and easy two-serving recipes, something that has made her popular, earning her a monthly guest spot in a local television program. However, potlucks are their own animal, and planning one starts with the main dish, she said. It sets the tone of the meal.

"The thing that comes to my mind that if you have a main dish, it should have a protein in it, she said. "If everyone brings a salad or pasta dish then you don't have a main dish. You are just eating salads and pasta."

If the main dish isn't planned, chaos can happen.

"One of the things that I fear when I go to a potluck is whether I'm having a balanced meal. The main dish can also set the tone for the side dishes."

Macy said chicken makes a good dish, and her dish was inspired by wanting the flavor of Mexican food but without the heat. The combination of taco seasoning and a cream sauce allowed her to put her own spin on the flavor.

"I was inspired because I love cream sauces," she said. "And because I'm busy, I use cream of mushroom or celery sauce and just doctor it up," Macy said.

The showstopper

While the main dish is important, nothing says deliciousness like the desserts. I call this the showstopper because when all the food is displayed, it's usually the desserts that catch people's eyes.

In my research, [Meg O'Donnell's Candy Cake](#) caught my eye. If you love chocolate and candy, this is the recipe for you. It's chocolate cake, mousse and ganache with pieces of Snickers, Reese's and M&M's in the layer and a crown of Kit Kats surrounding it.

I stopped looking for my show stopper right there.

"This cake was inspired by trick-or-treating," O'Donnell said. "Wanted to make something that we could all share and be delicious and give away and we can enjoy without the candy being in a bowl and us being in the candy coma."

O'Donnell said she loves "to make people fat" and watch the faces of people who love one of her dishes. She loves to bake, and that's how she started to put her concoctions on YouTube.

Although the cake is Halloween themed, it's easy to translate it into a holiday theme, O'Donnell said.

"For Thanksgiving, use Reese's Pieces because those colors are more fall theme. For Christmas, you can use red and green M&M's. You can use peppermint candies if you want to."

The draw of potlucks

What is it about potlucks that make them the go-to event during the holidays more than any other time?

"It's an easy way to get people together without it being a burden on the hostess," [Macey](#), said.

Potlucks are great because everyone seems to be really good at one dish ... so it gives you an opportunity to try out things you don't usually eat," O'Donnell said.

But it goes a bit deeper than that. Potlucks speak to the part of us that makes us human, the need to share.

"Food is central to most social gatherings because it's a way to share, which is something that is inherent in human beings," said Clifford Collins, associate professor of sociology at Southern University-Shreveport.

"Food is so fundamental to human existence. They (human beings) share food as a way of connecting."

Collins said potlucks speak to so many things that are part of the human experience and sharing food is a way for people to be close.

He said, “It tends to be a bonding, a sense of intimacy and closeness with people. Sharing is part of what makes us human. It’s a big need. The most common thing to share is food. If you happen to like the food, they happen to feel closer to them.

“It’s a symbol of our humanity.”

Chicken Fiesta

8 boneless, skinless, chicken breasts

4 tsps. cornstarch

1 tsp. chili powder

4 tsp. dry taco seasoning mix

½ cup milk

2 cans condensed cream of chicken soup

1 cup shredded Cheddar cheese

1⅓ cups chopped tomato

1 to 2 Tbsps. chopped fresh cilantro or parsley for garnish, optional

Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Cut each chicken breast in half and lightly pound. Place chicken breasts into 9-by-13-inch baking dish sprayed with nonstick cooking spray. In a medium bowl, blend cornstarch, chili powder, taco seasoning and milk with a wire whisk. Add soup and cheese and whisk again. Pour soup mixture over chicken. Bake in 375-degree oven for 35-45 minutes or until chicken is no longer pink. Spoon chopped tomato evenly over chicken before serving and garnish with cilantro or parsley.

Note: I like to drain chopped tomato on a paper towel while chicken is baking.

Candy Cake

For the cake

2 cups sugar

2 cups flour

1 tsp. salt

2 tsps. instant espresso

2 tsps. baking powder

1½ baking soda

¾ cup cocoa powder

1 cup milk

2 tsps. vanilla

½ cup vegetable oil

2 large eggs

For the mousse

1 tsp. plain unflavored gelatin

2 Tbsps. cold water

1 Tbsp. boiling water

¼ cup cocoa powder

½ cup sugar

1 tsp. vanilla

1 cup whipping cream

For the ganache

Chocolate chips

Cream

For the topping

40 Kit Kat bars

Snickers

Reese's Peanut Butter Cups

M&M's

- **Cake:** Start by whisking together the sugar, flour, salt, espresso, baking powder, baking soda and cocoa powder. Then add in milk, vanilla, vegetable oil and eggs. Whisk again and finish with 1 cup boiling water.

Prepare your 8-inch round pans by spraying lightly with nonstick spray, then place a circle of parchment paper down and spray again. Place in a 350-degree oven for about 35-40 minutes. Once done, place on a cooling rack.

- **Mousse:** Place gelatin and cold water in a small bowl. Allow this to sit for a minute until all the water is absorbed into the gelatin, then add the boiling water.

In a separate bowl, combine cocoa powder and sugar then add vanilla and whipping cream. Whisk by hand to combine, then switch to an electric mixer. Beat this until the mixture starts to stiffen, then add the gelatin mixture and continue to beat for 2 minutes.

- **Ganache:** Microwave chocolate chips and cream until the mixture is smooth.

- **Assembly:** Place cooled cake onto the bottom of a springform pan. Next, pour ganache over the top and spread around the sides. Now you will need to put the springform portion of the pan back around the cake.

One at a time, place Kit Kats around the cake. Now you can get creative. I used some peanut butter cups and Snickers, but you can use anything you want. Just layer the candy and mousse until it is all used up. Finally, top with an exorbitant amount of M&M's.

Place in fridge or freezer to chill for at least an hour before releasing from the springform pan and serving.