Planning the Quantity Food Occasion: Menus and Recipes

One of the first steps in planning a food event is to select a menu and recipes. Keep in mind that cooking for 150 people is certainly different from cooking for a family of four. This fact sheet provides information on selecting a menu and recipes for a quantity food event.

Selecting a Menu
There are several points to consider when selecting what type of food to serve. Think about the equipment and space available, location of event, time and labor needed in preparation, type of food served, expected profit, occasion and group to be served, type of service and meal appeal. A closer look at each point may be helpful in making decisions.

Meal Variety
Plan for contrast in food color, texture, shape, temperature and flavor to provide variety in the group meal. Check with quantity cookbooks for examples of recipes and menus.

Recipes
Use standardized quantity recipes when preparing food for 25 or more people. Inaccuracies in small quantity recipes are exaggerated when multiplied, particularly in baked products and those containing a thickening agent. If a family-size recipe is selected, repeat the preparation several times rather than multiplying the recipe. Recipes in reliable quantity cookbooks are typically designed for 25, 50 or 100 portions. Do you have the right sized equipment for the amount of food you plan to prepare?

Recipe Yield
Quantity recipes show yield and serving size: “Yield 50 1-cup servings.” This means that 50 people can be served from that recipe if the servings are approximately 1 cup each, and if only one serving per person is planned. If additional servings are to be provided or the serving size is different than specified, adjust ingredient quantities. Plan to have enough food to serve without excessive leftovers.

Equipment and Space Available
What equipment is available for you to use? Is oven space limited? If so, roast meat, baked potatoes and hot apple pies are definitely out of the question. Limited refrigerator space may determine the type of salad to be served. Does the group have access to large pots and pans? If so, be sure to allow plenty of time for food to cook in large quantities, especially on top of the stove. It takes much longer for 10 quarts of water to boil than it does 2 quarts. If large pots and pans are not available, be sure to have enough smaller sizes on hand. If preparing the meal on-site, think through each step of the preparation. List equipment and space needed and check what is available.

Location
Will the meal be served in a meeting hall, at the fairgrounds or on the street at a festival? These different locations create the need for careful thought in menu selection, preparation and serving. Are there facilities available for proper washing and sanitizing of cooking utensils and dishes? Are separate hand-washing facilities available for volunteers?
Time and Labor Needed in Preparation
A few experienced people can manage a simple meal, but the more complex the menu, the more time and help will be needed in preparation, service and cleanup. Also, allow extra time if this is a first-time event or there are several new volunteers. It is always better to have some free time before an event, than be rushed into serving or having the food not done on time. If ice cream or refrigerated salads are on the menu, be sure there is enough storage space. Don’t wait until the last minute to try to solve a storage space problem. You may create a time management problem. Allow plenty of volunteers to get the job done right.

Type of Service
Consider the location, needs of the event and what the volunteers can handle when making a decision on type of service. A successful buffet meal calls for food that people can easily serve themselves; however, in this type of service, portion control is lost. Family-style service requires extra serving pieces and food that is easily passed. Portion control may also be a factor in this type of service. Another possibility is the plate meal, where dishes are served to each person at the event. Finger foods such as sandwiches, reduce the amount of tableware needed and eliminate expense.

Occasion and Group
Menus should be tailored to fit the group and the occasion – from a formal banquet to a family night supper. Keep in mind the taste and preferences of the group to be served and whether it is the main meal of the day for them. Another factor to consider is the need for special diets. How can the menu be arranged to accommodate people who are on a low-fat or salt restricted diet? Salad dressings, butter and sour cream for baked potatoes and gravy can be served on the side to allow the guests a choice.

Profit to Be Made
Many quantity food events are designed to make a profit. Profit can be increased by controlling the size and number of servings and minimizing the use of expensive ingredients or food items. Be sure to allow enough food per person; too many leftovers only cut into profit. Also, be sure to allow for complimentary meals for preparers and servers, if this is the custom.

Recommended Reference

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