



Special Holiday Meals for Special Diets by Sara L. Ambarian

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With the holiday season approaching, many of us are turning our thoughts to our hosting duties for the upcoming celebrations. Since hosting can bring with it a generous share of both joys and stresses, good planning and good attitude are essential in producing both a hospitable result and a happy, relaxed host or hostess. Many of you may have noticed that there is a new consideration that many of us must factor into our holiday celebration plans-- special dietary needs or preferences. It seems that more and more people, young and old, are changing to diets which are gluten-free, lactose-free, vegetarian or vegan, low-calorie, low-sodium, low-sugar, and/or which avoid specific allergenic ingredients. Many of these people find significant health benefits in these changes; but there is no

question that the increase in these special dietary needs/preferences can make planning and hosting holiday meals somewhat more complicated.

The good news is that with a big and complex (often potluck) meal, it is actually usually much easier to provide "something for everyone" than it would be at a smaller meal or gathering. You don't need to make EVERY dish conform to any particular diet (or all of the possible special ones); that would be incredibly difficult, if not impossible. A realistic goal is to make your main dish/dishes as widely acceptable as possible, and then vary the ingredients of your appetizers, side dishes and desserts so that hopefully everyone can enjoy some of the meal (along with all of the fun!)

Here are some easy ways to avoid problems in general:

Make sure you know specifically what foods/ingredients you need to avoid. Are you hosting a lacto-ovo vegetarian, lacto vegetarian, or a vegan? Does the guest or family member avoid only wheat, or all glutinous grains? Can your best friend eat cranberries and blueberries but not raspberries? How low is "low-sodium", "low-sugar" or "low-fat" for your particular family member or guest? These can be important distinctions, and if you're going to go to the trouble to cook (or buy) food specially for them, you want to get it right (though hopefully the thought and effort would be appreciated, even if the guest was unable to eat a dish after all).

Encourage family or guests with special diets to bring a favorite dish they think everyone might enjoy. Many vegetarian, gluten-free, dairy-free, low-sugar, low-calorie and other "special diet" dishes/recipes are delicious. You may be surprised to find a new family favorite!

Home-made dishes easiest to be sure are free of unwanted ingredients. However, many gluten-free, lactose/dairy-free, vegetarian/vegan, and other special diet products are available at health food stores and some supermarkets. Do be aware, though, that some items will say things like "wheat-free", which doesn't mean they're free of all other glutinous grains. Many "wheat-free" products contain oats, for example. Read the labels carefully. At least it's helpful now that more and more labels do list main allergens like wheat, soy, tree nuts, milk products, etc.

Simply-seasoned roasted meats and vegetables are less likely to contain ingredients that may be hard to tolerate than those which are cooked in sauces or

heavily marinated. It's nice if all guests can eat the main dish, when practical. (Obviously, vegetarians will have different needs than most other special diets for traditional main dishes. For a dinner with lacto-vegetarians in attendance, you might adopt the southern tradition of fancy baked macaroni-and-cheese as a hearty side dish, for example; but you couldn't do that for a vegan.)

Consider using vegetable stock rather than chicken broth/stock to moisten stuffing/dressing and as the base for other non-meat dishes to make them vegetarian-friendly. You can also omit sausage, turkey/chicken, and other meat ingredients from all or half of your dressing.

Remember, gelatin is an animal product, too.

Omit peanuts and/or tree nuts (almonds, pecans, etc.) from stuffings, side dishes and desserts when practical to make them less likely to trigger allergies in sensitive family or guests. Also look for nut ingredients in package listings, and be careful with peanut oil and other possibly-allergenic ingredients which would be "hidden" in foods.

Consider serving gravy in a "boat" rather than dishing it on each plate, so each guest can decide if they want any, and if so, how much. Traditional gravy recipes can be problematic for gluten-intolerant, as well as calorie-conscious and vegetarian guests. The same goes for sauces on vegetables and dressings on salads. Cream sauces generally have both gluten (from flour) and dairy (milk or cream). Obviously, buttermilk dressings have dairy in them, but they may also contain starches or other ingredients containing gluten. Some types of vinegar and most brands of soy sauce which you might use in salad dressings are made from wheat. If creamed or cheese-sauced vegetables are a family favorite, either set aside some of the vegetables unsauced, or offer the warm sauce on the side. If they are not an important tradition, you could replace them with a steamed or roasted vegetable, perhaps seasoned nicely with onions, garlic, and/or herbs. For salads, you can offer it with more than one type of dressing available on the side, and serve it in bowls so each guest can toss their own.

Serving lightly-sweetened rather than very sweet desserts, or downplaying or avoiding dessert altogether may be a better option than buying a commercial "sugar-free" or "reduced-calorie" dessert for family or guests who are concerned with calories and/or sugar. Some people do not tolerate artificial sweeteners like aspartame, sucralose, acesulfame potassium, etc. An assortment of cheeses, whole grain crackers and low-glycemic-index fruits also makes a nice, healthy

dessert/snack after a big meal.

Because people on gluten-free diets often find holiday eating especially difficult, due to the heavy emphasis on gravy, sauces, baked goods and bread goods, here are a few extra ideas for dishes that are either naturally gluten-free or easily made gluten-free with simple substitutions. (A quick search on your favorite internet search engine with "recipe" and other phrases like "gluten-free", "vegetarian" or "low-sugar" will give you lots more ideas.)

cornbread (replace all-purpose flour cup-for-cup with brown or white rice, amaranth, or sorghum flour)

muffins (look for a well-reviewed recipe on-line because most of the best muffins contain multiple gluten-free ingredients to replace the all-purpose flour)

macaroons, coconut or almond (most recipes are gluten-free; recipes with flour can usually be made with a cup-for-cup replacement of gluten-free flour)

meringues (most recipes are gluten-free)

stuffing/dressing (cubed and dried gluten-free cornbread, muffins, quick bread or bread can easily be substituted for regular breadcrumbs/cubes)

meatballs for appetizers (replace bread crumbs or oatmeal with rice, puffed rice, gluten-free breadcrumbs, etc.; be careful of sauce ingredients)

cheese balls/cheese spreads (many recipes are gluten-free; most of those are also fine for lacto-vegetarians; roll in herbs and/or paprika rather than nuts to avoid problems for allergic guests)

tortilla chips, rice chips or gluten-free crackers along with traditional crackers for appetizers

gravy (make clear cornstarch gravy or use a mixture of gluten-free flours for a more traditional gravy)

piecrust, such as Emeril Legasse's found at <http://planetgreen.discovery.com/food-health/emiril-pecan-pie.html> (watch for glutinous ingredients in pie filling recipes and canned filling products; cornstarch or tapioca starch is a good replacement for flour for many fruit fillings)

baked custard (most recipes are gluten-free; also a fairly low-sugar, low-sodium dessert)

rice pudding (most recipes are gluten-free; also a fairly low-sugar, low-sodium dessert)

polenta cake (most recipes are gluten-free; many recipes are also good as a low-sugar dessert)

almond meal cake (most recipes are gluten-free)

As you can see, I hope-- whether it's a member of your immediate family with special dietary needs, or a guest who you'd like to accommodate-- with a little planning and forethought, it's not all that difficult to make at least some portions of your holiday meal appropriate for everyone to enjoy together.

I would like to end with a few comments and tips for those who have special dietary needs, whether preference-based or medically-indicated.

I know that it is difficult to get to a special occasion and find that most (if not all) of the food is not appropriate for your dietary needs and/or preferences. With close family, it could possibly be a sign of insensitivity if your needs/preferences are not considered. However, at most events (even many family events), usually your hosts either do not know about your needs or perhaps do not fully understand the foods/ingredients that are problematic to you.

You have a responsibility to both be a good guest and take care of your own nutritional needs/ preferences, if necessary. Eating a little something before you arrive (especially if you have low blood sugar problems) is a good idea to make sure you stay happy and healthy even if you aren't able to eat many of the dishes offered. Packing a little extra food in a small ice chest or lunch box out in the car can also be a good back-up plan if you find there really is not much you can/will eat.

At a larger and/or non-family event, where it is not appropriate to go into the details of your special dietary needs, a polite "no, thank you" and a smile is usually all you need to say when offered a dish you need/wish to avoid. Eating heartily from other dishes and complimenting the host(ess) on those you enjoy diffuses most potential for hurt feelings.

Remember, too, that you're the "expert" on your own dietary needs/preferences. Bringing along a favorite appetizer, side dish or dessert to share which conforms to your dietary needs/preferences can be a nice way to make sure you have a treat to look forward to, and at the same time do something nice for your hosts. As stated above, many dishes/recipes which are appropriate for special diets are delicious and very "mainstream" and traditional (commercial processing has complicated the recipes of many well-loved dishes and made them much more allergenic and less nutritious.) Try to think of other guest's tastes, of course, and remember that you have a unique opportunity to introduce (or re-introduce) other guests to healthy and delicious dishes they'll really enjoy. You may even find that it never occurs to many who try your dish that it's a "special diet" dish at all!

Most important, be gracious and appreciative of ANY effort made to meet your needs/preferences (even if it does not work out quite right). Most people mean well, and it IS awkward for hosts to take into account special dietary needs they don't normally have to accommodate on top of all their other hosting considerations. Anyone who makes an effort to enhance your enjoyment of their gathering deserves your gratitude.

Here's to very happy holidays and many happy celebrations to all of you!

About Sara L. Ambarian

Sara L. Ambarian is a wife, homeschooling mother, custom wedding gown and accessory designer, author and illustrator. She is one multi-talented lady. **Visit <http://www.condortales.com/bridestouch.html> today for additional information.**