



Chow Time! 8 Brilliant Tips for Setting Up an Extra-Efficient Holiday Buffet

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With holiday feasts looming, you're probably gearing up to jam the dining table with both guests *and* food. But savvy hosts know to resist that urge, and instead create a separate, organized buffet line.

The result: Folks can serve themselves rather than struggle to pass hot, heavy casserole dishes to one another (which means more space for wine).

But setting up a buffet involves more than cramming as many dishes of food onto the biggest flat surface you have. To keep things orderly and efficient, you have to be smart about it—and that starts with looking at your home a little differently.

Here are eight clever tricks for setting up your holiday buffet in a way that will keep things moving—and save your sanity.

1. Separate the bar





[Photo by Karin Payson architecture + design](#)

The first step is to move the booze away from the food. This allows your brother-in-law who fancies himself a mixologist the space he needs to slowly craft his cocktail and not block the rest of the crowd from grabbing appetizers. When dinner is over, the same spot can be used to display dessert and coffee.

Have a butler's pantry? This tucked-away spot would be ideal.

2. Move the buffet out of the kitchen

To keep the hordes from dipping their fingers in the cranberry sauce while you're cooking it, arrange the buffet on one side of your dining room, far from the kitchen, and cover the food until you're ready to serve. Depending on your home's layout, you may prefer to appropriate part of the living room, or perhaps even the foyer, with a long folding table.

"People tend to congregate in awkward areas like doorways and near the sink, so move essentials like napkins and appetizers away from these hot spots," says organizing pro **Darla DeMorrow**, at HeartWork Organizing in Wayne, PA.

If you're moving foods out of the kitchen, consider picking up a warming tray (or two) and/or a portable burner. Keep casseroles from cooling by putting them in heatproof dishes on the tray, and then place another pot to simmer on the burner.

3. Create a clear starting point

Friends and family need obvious cues, so help your crowd—and discourage them from jumping into the middle of the buffet—by placing a stack of plates at the head of the table.

"People usually pick up a plate with their left hand and serve with their right, so arrange your buffet accordingly," suggests **Alexa Lemley**, executive chef at Artisan Foodworks, a catering company in Columbus, IN.

End the buffet with flatware rolled up inside a dinner napkin. This way, guests don't have to hold a plate *and* cutlery as they serve themselves.

And don't feel pressured to break out your great grandmother's china, reminds **Andrea Correale**, CEO of Elegant Affairs, a catering company in New York City.

"Save time and skip the cleanup—there are so many disposable designs such as bamboo and stylish paper prints," she says.

4. Elevate some of the dishes



[Photo by Rikki Snyder](#)

Running out of room already? Use the space *above* your buffet table by interspersing elevated platforms, like cake plates and three-tiered servers. Tiered displays take up less room, and they're appealing to the eye. If you don't own any, try this clever hack: Place small platters on upturned bowls or pots covered with dish towels.

Make use of narrow openings between casseroles by inserting slender bread baskets, small dishes of cranberry sauce, and gravy boats.

5. Create stations in different rooms



[Photo by Haven](#)

Instead of cramming everything onto one table, consider food stations—they're a great way to keep people moving, Lemley explains.

Many of her customers allow her to even set up food in different parts of their homes; she might put canapés in the living room, a meat station in the dining room, and a seafood station in a butler's pantry.

6. Protect your surfaces

Spills happen, so spread a waterproof covering under your runner or tablecloth. Use heavy rattan mats and trivets to keep hot dishes from marking the buffet's surface. And add a saucer or two next to condiments so people won't be tempted lay down used spoons on your clean fabric.

7. Play it safe





[Photo by Amy Lau Design](#)

Tall tapers are elegant on a buffet, but stash them toward the back of your table lest they topple when people reach to serve food. Low votives can work well, but arrange them behind dishes to prevent burns as guests dig in. And be sure the tablecloth you're using isn't so long that it puddles on the floor, where it could trip someone.

8. Make sure you've got seating covered

You'll have to think strategically about where to seat guests if you're serving the buffet meal on the only table you own. Consider borrowing or renting another table for seating, or cobble together some options so people don't have to balance their plates on their knees (though for a casual party, this is usually fine).

Have a set of TV trays? Guests can put plates and glasses on them (unfold one between a couple of people so they can share), or you might push two coffee tables together to create one longer spot to rest plates.