

12 Baking Etiquette Rules to Follow Over the Holidays

Pastry chefs and etiquette pros share their top holiday baking dos and don'ts.

By **Colleen Sullivan** | Published on December 11, 2024

Baking and the holidays go hand-in-hand, but a successful recipe goes beyond combining ingredients and throwing the results in the oven. "Things like thoughtfulness and tradition come into play, now more so than ever," says lifestyle and etiquette expert Lisa Mirza Grotts. Ahead, pastry chefs and etiquette pros share their top dos and don'ts to guide your holiday baking during this special time of the year.

Do: Practice Personal Hygiene

Personal hygiene is essential for food safety and shows consideration towards your guests. "Tie your hair back, wash your hands before and after handling ingredients, avoid tasting directly from utensils, maintain clean surfaces to prevent contamination, and keep animals away," says Grotts.

"Never lose sight you're cooking for an audience," adds Akilah Siti Easter, an etiquette and culture coach. "Practicing good hygiene is the most important part of cooking and will make any baker feel confident in knowing what they're sharing is made with care."

Don't: Distract the Baker

Baking is a science and any unnecessary distractions can interfere with the process. "Especially when making something like a soufflé, which requires precise instructions," says Grotts. "If you need something from the host, wait for a pause in the process and only offer assistance if you sense he/she is open to it."

It's important to read the room. "You can tell whether the host wants to talk by their body language and how they reply to your questions," says Laura Windsor, founder of the Laura Windsor Etiquette Academy. "If they respond quickly with a simple yes or no, if they don't contribute to the conversation, if they avoid eye contact, it's clear they need to concentrate on the task at hand and are absorbed in what they are doing."

"There's nothing worse than realizing you forgot to add milk or butter to a recipe because you were sidetracked while baking," adds Lorna Gross, author of *Entertaining by Design: A Guide to Creating Meaningful Gatherings*.

Don't: Show Up with a Store-Bought Baked Good and Say You Baked It

There's no harm in bringing something you picked up at a bakery or grocery store, but claiming you baked it can come off as disingenuous. "Not everyone is a baker. Your thoughtfulness in choosing the dessert matters more than whether it's homemade," says Easter.

"In fact, sometimes hard-to-make baked goods are best sourced from a bakery," says Grotts. "For example, when it comes to Honoré or Princess cakes."

Susie Sarich, founder and CEO of SusieCakes Bakeries, suggests making it more of your own by adding a decorative element or sauce. “Then share you brought a ‘semi-homemade’ treat!” she says.

“You definitely don’t want to be in the position of having to follow up with more fibs about what ingredients are in the dish or sharing a non-existent recipe with others,” adds Gross.

Don’t: Bring a Dessert Other Than What Was Requested by the Host

Out of respect, it’s best to stick to the dessert you’ve been asked to bring. “The host has likely planned his or her menu carefully to create a cohesive experience for everyone and may have even surveyed guests for allergies or food issues,” says Easter. “Bringing something unplanned could inadvertently complicate things.”

“Many hosts coordinate dishes based on the menu so you don’t want to risk duplications or desserts that don’t match the palette of other items being served,” says Gross.

But if you’re in a time crunch and can’t manage to make or purchase the specific dessert, it’s okay to check in with the host. “Ask about suitable replacements,” advises Heather Dobson, pastry sous chef at Pendry Washington DC – The Wharf.

“Your job is to make the host’s life easier and not bringing the requested dessert complicates things for them,” adds Abney Harper, co-owner and creative lead at Sucre.

Do: Make Sure You Bake Enough

Always provide a generous number of baked goods to ensure everyone can enjoy their fair share, factoring in unexpected guests. “It’s better to overestimate rather than risk running out,” says Grotts. Harper takes the number of baked goods requested by the host and adds 20%.

If there are limitations on the number of desserts you can bring, communicate this in advance so the host can manage expectations. “For example, you may say, ‘I only had time to bake two dozen cupcakes’, allowing the host to plan accordingly,” says Easter.

Don’t: Disregard Food Allergies

“Your main responsibility when it comes to food allergies is to provide transparency,” says Grotts. “Ask people if they have any allergies or aversions in advance and label baked goods with a list of ingredients so everyone can make an informed choice.”

“It’s a must to include a card with your baked goods that notes things like milk, eggs, tree nuts, and peanuts,” notes Sarich.

Do: Respect Family Recipes

If you decide to make changes to a long-standing family recipe, be respectful of its history and what it represents. “Allow for creativity while preserving a connection to the past,” advises Grotts.

Easter agrees it’s fine to adapt recipes for dietary needs or personal preferences, “but be transparent about your changes and frame them as a creative variation rather than a replacement. And be sure to test out a modified recipe before serving to ensure it meets expectations.”

Harper believes recipes can be improved upon to include fresher or healthier ingredients, but suggests making an announcement if you're tweaking a familiar family staple. "Say something honoring the original like, 'Hard to top grandma's recipe, let me know what you think!'"

That being said, if you know attendees are expecting grandma's keystone recipe the way it's always been made, you might not want to risk disappointment. "The holidays are all about nostalgic tastes and feelings you may only get to experience once a year," says Dobson. "I love seeing family members get excited as they relive traditions and enjoy everything just the way they remember it."

To keep everyone happy, Windsor suggests baking two versions of the recipe—one that follows the family recipe and one where you put your spin on it.

Don't: Open the Oven Door

Temperature fluctuations can result in baked goods not rising or browning properly so it's best to trust the baker to manage the process. "Opening an oven door can ruin a recipe," says Grotts. "Unless you're the one baking, always ask the baker if and when it's appropriate to check on their handiwork."

"It's important to respect a person's kitchen as their personal workspace," agrees Easter. "Uninvited interference can disrupt flow and come across as impolite."

Don't: Forget to Inform the Host How to Store Your Baked Goods

It's a good idea to share best practices with the host when it comes to properly storing any baked goods you've brought. "The host will appreciate knowing whether the item needs to be kept frozen, refrigerated, or at room temperature," says Grotts.

"Try to bring baked goods that are easy to store so it's one less thing the host has to worry about," says Dobson. "Include written storage instructions on the packaging—when there's a lot going on, it may be hard for the host to remember everything. Having a little note as a backup is a thoughtful touch."

"Never assume the host has room to refrigerate your dessert," says Arlander Brown, the chief culinary officer at Somedays Bakery. "Always ask in advance."

Do: Provide the Proper Utensils

It's important to supply suitable utensils to ensure guests can enjoy the final course with ease. "Tailoring your approach to the occasion shows both thoughtfulness and practicality," says Grotts. "This includes dessert forks for cakes, tongs for finger foods, and appropriate plates and napkins. For more formal holiday events, fine China is always an elegant choice. If children are present, disposable options are perfectly acceptable for ease, clean-up, and convenience."

"Consider bringing your own serving tools to make life easier for the host and to ensure everything is served in a way that brings out the best in the dessert," adds Dobson.

Don't: Procrastinate When Returning Serving Plates and Platters

The etiquette rule for sending back serving plates and platters is simple—always return items promptly and in clean condition. "Try to wash and return your guests' items before they leave your house," says Dobson. "However, if the dish isn't empty or you don't have time to clean it, identify the item with a sticky

note and make sure to return it as soon as possible. You can add a thank you note or treat—little touches that show gratitude.”

“Remember the longer plates and platters sit around your house, the more likely they’ll get lost, damaged, or not returned at all,” says Gross.

Do: Hand Out Leftovers

“Offering leftover baked goods to guests is a really nice holiday gesture,” says Easter. Ensure you have proper to-go containers, boxes, or disposable Tupperware nearby. “If a guest particularly enjoys a certain dessert, pack them a little extra slice on the side to bring home,” says Dobson. “Try to pre-slice desserts to avoid messy cuts and allow for easier and more presentable leftover giftings.”

Remember, when you contribute a dessert to a dinner or party, it’s meant as a gift to the host and other guests—never assume it’s okay to help yourself and take something home, and avoid asking about taking home treats as well. “The host may feel obligated to say yes even if he or she had other plans for the leftovers,” says Gross. “Only take leftovers if the host explicitly offers, including what you may have brought to the party.”

“I encourage giving guests leftovers because as the host, you don’t want to be eating leftover desserts all week long!” says Claire Santos Lopes, the pastry chef at Royal Champagne Hotel & Spa.