

Big party, but small budget? Think small plates

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Are your big dinner party plans clashing with your small budget? Consider keeping your plates small, too.

Spanish-style tapas are by definition budget-friendly, since they are small plates of food traditionally served at bars. Most can be prepared quickly and using inexpensive ingredients, allowing you to serve a varied and flavorful menu while keeping costs down.

And you don't need to be limited to Spanish cuisine. Most Mediterranean cultures have their own versions of tapas, such as Italian bruschetta and crostini and Greek meze.

SPANISH TAPAS

Seasonal fruits and vegetables are key to Jose Andres' budget tapas menu. The Washington chef, cookbook author and owner of several award-winning tapas restaurants says produce keeps flavors fresh and costs down.

He suggests skewers of tomato-topped watermelon drizzled with dressing, as well as a fruity summer sangria. He also says budget cooking can be a state of mind. You don't have to leave the table full every time, as is common in this country, he believes.

"It's OK to leave hungry," he says.

STEAK FOR LESS

Small plates also are a good way to stretch pricier proteins, such as steak, pork tenderloin, salmon or crab cakes, says Tina Ujlaki, executive food editor of Food & Wine magazine.

"Even if you are on a budget, it's a great way to still be able to offer a bit of luxury," she says.

You can even serve meatballs or small meat medallions as "sliders." Try:

- Seared pork tenderloin with a mustard-fruit glaze, thinly sliced and accompanied by a cooked plum puree.
- Slices of smoked salmon with a salsa made of finely diced cucumbers, pickled onions and capers.
- Three-bite crab cakes with a four-vegetable slaw, using your favorite seasonal vegetables finely shredded or chopped. Ujlaki suggests broccoli stems, red and green cabbage, and carrots, for example, for a mix of colors.

BUFFET OF BRUSCHETTA

Using bread, potatoes or pasta as the base ingredients for your menu is another good way to offer plenty of food without spending a lot, says Lucinda Scala Quinn, executive food director at Martha

She suggests a bruschetta menu, served on platters or boards lined with parchment paper. These are easily prepared beforehand — or guests can prepare their own — so the host or hostess can enjoy the party.

She suggests toasting or grilling slices of a rustic bread, rubbing them with garlic and topping them with a variety of flavors and textures, such as:

- A basic homemade pesto and a seasonal vegetable, such as roasted red peppers, peeled and marinated in olive oil and garlic.
- Shredded zucchini with lemon, basil, a drizzle of olive oil and crumbled or grated cheese.
- Shredded kale that has been quickly sauteed in olive oil and sprinkled with toasted almonds.

MEXICAN SIMPLICITY

In her book "Fresh Mexico," Marcela Valladolid has several suggestions for simple foods that are crowd pleasers. "I would opt for cheaper selections of protein," she says of entertaining on a budget. She suggests:

- Chicken drumettes brushed with a glaze of honey, vinegar, butter, Worcestershire sauce, ground ancho chilies and garlic powder. Just brush the drumettes with the glaze and bake for 25 minutes.
- Deviled eggs "are the first thing that disappear off the table," Valladolid says. "Who doesn't have eggs in the refrigerator?" She says to "spike" them with chilies and cilantro or a spicy mustard.
- Fish tacos made with inexpensive tilapia, or use halibut if you can spend a bit more. Fry the fish with a beer and flour batter, and top with what's in your fridge — salsa, sour cream or other condiments. Valladolid also suggests a simple lemon cream for a taco.

WORLD INSPIRATION

Draw inspiration from ethnic cuisines to offer lots of flavor in small bites, says David Kamen, a professor at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y. Mezes from Greece or Turkey or dim sum from Asia can be easy to prepare, he says.

He also suggests gathering seasonal ingredients from your local farmer's market, then cooking them using methods that heighten flavor, such as roasting or grilling. Try:

- Simple grilled vegetables with dips and sauces inspired by different parts of the world, or a variety of ratatouilles.
- A gradual meal. Like Andres, Kamen suggests eating like Europeans do — smaller plates of food over a longer period of time. If the plates come out gradually, people eat less food and can linger over dinner, saving the host from serving too much food and treating the guests to an enjoyable meal. "We feel this compulsion to suck it down," Kamen says of Americans.

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