



CHRISTMAS DINNER WITHOUT THE GUILT

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It's that time of the year again, get your tinsel out and decorate the tree. You have sent out the invites for the big Christmas lunch or dinner. But now you just remembered that granny is living with diabetes, your sister is on diet and that uncle you don't really know, may be hypertensive. How do you go about cooking a dinner that will be healthy and accommodate everyone? This article will help you cook a much healthier Christmas dinner.

CHOOSE YOUR PROTEINS WISELY

The roast is often the centre of any great Christmas meal, so it's only fitting we start with it. For a guilt free roast, start by choosing lean sources of meat. Lean meat just means that the meat is lower in fat and cholesterol. One way to avoid fat from protein is to have plant based proteins such as nuts and seeds or legumes, but let's leave those for the salad.

Here are some tips for picking out lean cuts of meat:

- Look for loin or round

Lean cuts of meat such as beef or pork will often have loin or round in the name. Choose the following cuts for lean options: top sirloin, top loin roast, pork tenderloin or eye round. The loin and round rule is usually also valid for other red meat such as lamb or veal³.

- Go for poultry

Chicken or turkey are low fat meat options as well. The trick with poultry is to avoid the skin. The fat hides itself in the skin, so try remove the skin as far as possible.

Fish is another great option. Apart from your fatty fish options like as salmon, which contains high amounts of good fats such as omega-3, other options are naturally lean.

- Cut off the fat



If you struggle to find lean cuts of meat you can always just go back to basics and cut off the excess fat on whatever meat you have purchased. Avoid processed meats such as hot dogs and sausages because they are usually high in fat, salt and preservatives.

- Cooking methods count

Certain cooking methods such as roasting, grilling, broiling or braising can help reduce the fat by helping to drain the fat out of the meat. Avoid deep frying or frying in general. Use marinades that are low in fat such as ones made with vinegar and herbs. Marinades tenderise, add flavour and make the meat more juicy^{1,2,3}

BASE YOUR MEAL AROUND HEALTHY CARBOHYDRATES

Carbohydrates provide granny with energy to play with the grandkids. But because carbohydrates provide the bulk of energy you have to put some thought into them. When serving traditional starches choose high fibre options such as brown rice and whole wheat pasta. Add some ancient grains such as quinoa, kamut or buckwheat for a little fibre and something different and unique. High fibre carbohydrates digest more slowly and are usually low GI so will keep you fuller for longer.

Remember that starchy vegetables such as potatoes, butternut and beetroot also provide carbohydrates, these can be delicious hot or in salads and can take the place of the less exciting, traditional starches^{1, 4, 5}.

VEGETABLES ADD COLOUR TO YOUR CHRISTMAS

The next dishes to catch people's attention is the array of salads and vegetables. According to the Healthy Plate Model, vegetables need to make up half the plate at any meal. So, the more vegetables the merrier (excuse the pun)⁶.

Choose low calorie vegetables. If you have chosen to use potato or sweet potato or any other starchy vegetable as your starch, avoid making these a salad or side dish. There are many other options out there which are often overlooked. Make fresh salads with as many raw ingredients as possible.

You can also add in plant based proteins such as beans and lentils to add some texture and a little extra protein^{5, 8}.

Avoid using rich sauces and dressings, made with high fat creams and oils, prepare them yourself avoiding store bought options. Use low fat milk instead of thick creams when you make sauces. A mixture of balsamic vinegar,



lemon, and herbs with a little olive oil can make for a great dressing². Finally, avoid adding extra sugar, fat and starches when preparing your vegetables.

THE SPICE OF LIFE

Flavour plays a big role in the final touches of any meal and can make or break your Christmas dinner. However, adding certain “prepared” spices can increase the salt content in your food. The best thing to do is ditch the spices that contain more than one ingredient and go natural. Think cumin, dried chilli, cayenne pepper, paprika, etc. You can also use acidic fluids such as lemon juice or vinegar to enhance the natural flavours in your food.

The endless list of herbs such as coriander, thyme, parsley, chives, dill, garlic, can add interesting flavours and aroma.

For sweetness avoid adding the extra sugar. If possible stay away from adding sugar altogether. If you want your pumpkin to have extra taste rather add cinnamon or vanilla pods / vanilla essence to make it interesting. And if you really want that glazed look on your roast, use honey instead of caramelised sugar².

SWEET, SWEET DESSERT

No meal is complete without a sweet treat at the end. It’s difficult to make a dessert without using lots of sugar, but not impossible. For great healthy dessert use lots of fruit. Fruit can be sweet from its own natural sugars and provide vitamins and minerals. A delicious mix of fruit in a fruit salad can be the perfect dessert.

But if you want to make a more complex dessert remember to use low fat milk for your custards and use low fat yogurt with lemon zest for a great desert dressing. You can also use a sugar free jelly as a base for some desserts. Again, add fruit for interesting colour variations and textures. Replace ice creams with fresh sorbets².

CONCLUSION

Problem solved, you now have all the tools to make that big fancy Christmas dinner without all the Day of Goodwill guilt. Don’t be shy, play around with healthy food options and healthy cooking methods. Make friends with different natural spices and herbs. You still have time to change up granny’s old recipes to make them higher in nutrients and lower in calories.



REFERENCES

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