

Ring in the Holidays with Seafood Platters

Spending quality time with friends and family is what the holidays are really all about. Well, that and food. Nothing brings people together and makes a gathering special like a good spread. Unlike Thanksgiving, where it is a requirement to serve turkey with its' normal accompaniments, holiday menu options are only as limited as your imagination.

That being said, traditional foods can be a true comfort. For me, Christmas is all about my mom's peanut butter and *Hershey's Kiss* cookies. For George Baxevanis, owner of Fisherman's Quarters II – a family restaurant in Asheville, NC, it's all about seafood.

Bringing the Coast to the Mountains with Seafood Platters

For more than 10 years, George has provided Western North Carolina with family-style Calabash seafood.

“Our seafood platters are very popular,” says George. “People like a variety. Large platters are great for parties or family gatherings and make it easy to serve dinner buffet/family style.”

Classic Holiday Shrimp Cocktail

Shrimp cocktail is a classic any time of the year. You can prep the shrimp yourself or buy them already peeled and cleaned. If you don't buy them pre-cooked, you can cook them the night before and leave them in the refrigerator until you're ready to serve. Shrimp becomes tough if boiled too long and poaching is a preferred-cooking method. Some chefs insist on peeling and deveining the shrimp after it has been cooked as this helps maintain the curved shape and prevents butter flying.

When you're ready to serve, use a deep serving tray filled with ice and place the shrimp on top. Add cocktail sauce and for a festive twist, cut limes instead of lemons (to complete the holiday color scheme) and you've got an easy appetizer that will feed a lot of people and leave your stove free for other tasks.

Holiday “Raw Bar” Platter

The addition of raw clams and oysters, along with other chilled seafood like smoked fish, takes a shrimp cocktail platter to a whole other level. For instance, the winter months are stone crab season in Florida. If you can get your hands on stone crab, this delicacy is a welcome addition to a raw bar style-seafood platter. Like shrimp cocktail, raw clams, oysters and chilled seafood are best served over ice. For a truly extravagant experience include champagne and caviar. This would be perfect for New Year's Eve!

Steamed Seafood Platter

Guests who have just come in from the cold might be more appreciative of hot food and a platter of steamed seafood is sure to warm their spirits. Steamed shrimp and clams are great with drawn butter. Tell your guests to leave their nice clothes at home or provide bibs so you can dive

into some peel and eat shrimp or crab legs. Garnish a heaping platter of steamed crab legs with kale for the ultimate holiday centerpiece.

Southern Comfort – Calabash Style

Calabash-style seafood is the epitome of comfort food. If you want to be sure you won't have leftovers, serve popcorn shrimp. Soft shelled crab, scallops, clams and oysters are also all crowd pleasers, especially when served with tartar or cocktail sauce.

Just about any whitefish is delicious fried and fried fish dinners are a tradition among many families. Different breading mixtures and frying techniques can impart a variety of flavors to your favorite fresh fish.

Calabash is about abundance and variety so pick your favorite seafood to create a personalized Calabash platter. For a gourmet touch try different recipes for the all important dipping sauces.

If cooking for a smaller crowd or preparing a more intimate dinner, look for seafood recipes from your favorite chefs or cookbooks to incorporate seafood into your holiday menu. For example, Clams Casino and Oysters Rockefeller also make great appetizers and Oyster Dressing complements meat dishes as an alternative to stuffing.