

# The Ins and Outs of Cooking for Dancers

by Sarah Pilzer

I like to say that “good food makes for good dancing.” As anyone who’s gone to a dance camp or weekend knows, the food often defines the experience just as much as the callers, musicians and dance hall. To dancers who have only cooked at home, an industrial kitchen can seem like a strange new world—the mixing bowls are as big around as hula hoops, the flour comes in fifty pound bags and the lettuce is sold by the case, and the cooks can peel twenty five pounds of carrots in under fifteen minutes. Many folks may wonder, “What is it like to be responsible for feeding a hundred fifty of your closest dancing friends?” As someone who’s helped serve many a meal to hungry dancers, I’d like to share a few of my thoughts on the subject.



*What types of food do dancers like to eat?*

Dancing is a high-energy activity; your campers will be relying on you to provide the sustenance they need in order to keep their heels from dragging. You can provide that energy by serving a combination of proteins (meats, soy, cheese, eggs, beans) and carbohydrates (bread,

pasta, rice) at every meal. Choose carefully, however, because not all proteins or carbohydrates make equally good fare. I’ve heard many complaints that serving too many beans can lead to an “unpleasant aroma” on the dance floor!

Like your mother always said, make sure to eat plenty of fruits and vegetables. Fresh apples, pears, plums, peaches or oranges can easily be made available not only at meals but also for mid-dance snacks. A vegetable side dish should round out every meal and salad is usually a welcome addition.

Snacks and desserts can also have a place in your menu. Cakes, cookies and brownies are all easy to make on a large scale. For some recipes it will be best to make several smaller batches of a single or double recipe rather than trying to make ten times the batter at once. If there are late night activities planned, a snack break will give dancers the extra boost they need to keep going. You can serve something as simple as potato chips and trail mix or as involved as fresh-from-the-oven pizza. For most people, any snack is a good snack.

*Do your attendees have particular dietary preferences/needs?*

I’ve often encountered the myth that catering to “special diets” at a dance event means sacrificing both tastiness and time. Cooks sometimes fear that in order to satisfy special dietary preferences/requirements, they must make separate dishes which will lack key ingredients and be inferior to the main dish. Yet, from the diner’s point of view, there is nothing more frustrating than sitting down for a meal and realizing you can’t eat anything on the table because it is either not vegetarian, or not vegan, or

## Menu Planning and Recipes

A considerable amount of work must go into designing the menu for a dance event, but it can also be one of the most exciting stages of the planning process. After all, this is your chance to serve hand-picked dishes that you enjoy cooking and eating. Keep in mind, however, that just because you might like liverwurst sandwiches, does not mean that everyone will. The art of menu planning is one of balance and compromise. Ask yourself the following questions to help guide your process:

*How many people are coming to your weekend?*

The more mouths you must feed the better it is to pick recipes that scale well. What I mean by “scale well” is that you should be on the lookout for recipes that are as easy to make for fifty people as they are for five. For example, a large pot of soup is not significantly harder to make than a small pot of soup (it will, however, take a few hours to come to temperature, so plan accordingly). Dishes that require a lot of finicky technique, such as layering many sheets of phyllo dough to make spanikopita, are often not a good choice. Ideally, your recipes should tap into an economy of scale, so that if you double the recipe, cooking the new quantity takes less than twice the original amount of work.

not wheat-free, etc. So, how does one provide meals that meet the dietary needs of everyone, but still taste good and don't require too much extra work? The key is to find dishes that cover the most common ground and need little to no modification in order to be "safe." For example, it's virtually impossible to make a vegan quiche, but pumpkin curry is just as delicious and doesn't require dairy or eggs. If you plan a fully vegetarian meal (complete with protein, carbohydrates and vegetables) you can always add a meat dish on the side for people to choose if they wish. You will probably still end up making more than one dish but the more requirements that are satisfied by each recipe the better.

### **Making a Shopping List**

Once you have decided on a menu, the next step is to determine how much of each ingredient you need in order to make your chosen dishes. These calculations will not be exact because the amount of food consumed can vary wildly from event to event, but you should do your best to estimate based on the total number of attendees.

Often, you can use straight multiplication to determine ingredient measurements. If a recipe says it will serve ten and you have a hundred fifty people, just multiply each measurement by fifteen and you'll have a rough estimate of how much you'll need. Be aware, however, that some ingredients don't necessarily need to be increased by the full amount. For example, baking soda and spices should be increased by only one and a half times when doubling a recipe. You can find more information on how to scale recipes on the internet or in *Food for Fifty*, an excellent book on cooking for crowds by Mary K. Molt.\*

If your first several attempts to gauge quantities are off the mark, don't worry, you will adjust for next time and the experience will develop your sense of macro-scale cooking. Much like picking stocks in investment, however, past performance is not a guarantee of future results. There are a myriad of factors that affect how much food a group consumes, from what the weather is like that year to what time of day the meal is served. In general, overestimating is better than underestimating. You can always give away leftovers at the end of an event but you won't be able to feed hungry dancers if you run out of ingredients.

### **Sourcing and Ordering**

After tallying the necessary ingredients, you must find sources from whom you will purchase the food. A great way to start your search is by contacting local facilities, such as restaurants, grocery stores, camps, hotels, etc., that might have accounts with a regional food distribution company. If the facility that is hosting your event has an account, you may be able to place a purchase order through them. Alternatively, you might be able to setup a one-time purchase directly from the distributor. Buying in bulk from a distributor often allows you to buy products at cost rather than purchasing small quantities at a retail store priced with an additional markup.

Working directly with area farmers is another great way to source ingredients. Often you can network through your dance community to connect with local farmers who will be willing to sell you their produce. If you live in an area with a regular farmer's market or CSA contact the organizers to see which farms participate. Making a personal connection with a farmer can sometimes (though certainly not always) lead to discounts or a barter situation where the farmer offers produce in exchange for free admission to the event.

Make sure to plan how the ingredients will get from the source to the kitchen you'll be using for the event. Suppliers who are familiar with the area can often deliver directly to the kitchen but you may have to pick up the order at a local retail store. Enlisting the help of dancers with pickup trucks or vans can be very helpful when trying to transport four cases of lettuce,

two fifty pound bags of flour, four sacks of corn, five gallons of olive oil, and all the other ingredients you'll need. To minimize the number of deliveries/pickups you'll need to coordinate, try to purchase as many ingredients from one source as you can.

### **Managing the Kitchen**

Unless you are a superhero, you will need assistance to prepare the massive amounts of food you will be serving (actually, even if you are a superhero you will still want assistance). But assistance is only helpful if you know how to communicate your needs and delegate tasks. Your role as kitchen manager is similar to being a conductor of an orchestra. You have the full score and know all the parts so it's up to you to direct people as to what and when they should play.



Therefore, long before you turn on the stove, you should form a clear plan of attack that details what tasks will be necessary to produce each meal. Formulate this plan by breaking each meal down into its component dishes and then assessing what needs to happen for each recipe. Write a list of all these tasks (often called a prep-list because you are preparing the food for cooking/eating) to get a sense of which jobs you should assign to helpers. Pay attention to how long each task might take as that will determine how long before the meal you should start the preparations.

For example, if you wish to serve a lunch consisting of pasta, tomato sauce, green salad, and cookies, start by considering the prep needed for pasta (boil the water, cook the pasta), then the tomato sauce (cut the vegetables, sauté the onions, cook the sauce), then the green salad (wash and chop the lettuce, slice carrots and peppers for garnish) and finally the cookies (measure the ingredients, mix the dough, bake the cookies). After you know what needs to be done, figure out when you need to do it. Many tasks can happen co-currently, such as boiling the pasta water and cooking the tomato sauce.

The more detailed you make your prep-list the less likely you will be to forget a crucial step while preparing a meal. Imagine if you forgot to thaw the frozen chicken on the morning of the day you plan to serve it; that evening, when it comes time to make dinner, you'll be scrambling to get it thoroughly cooked before the six o'clock meal time. Better to save yourself the stress and use a prep-list to track the little things while you use your mind to remember the big picture.

If you cook for dance events long enough, at some point, you will inevitably encounter what is known as a kitchen disaster. It could be dropping a full tray of lasagna five minutes before lunch or realizing the oven you thought was baking your bread never lit and is stone cold. Although extensive planning can help avoid trouble in the first place, when finding yourself in a challenging situation it's best to be flexible and willing to improvise. Chances are, as long as you don't panic, you'll be able to recover from almost any disaster. If the bread is unbaked, serve the chips that

were going to be the midnight snack. If the lasagna hits the floor, whip up a quick tuna or egg salad. If you can think quickly and draw on your knowledge of the ingredients stocking your shelves, it's possible that the majority of the people at the event won't even know you made a mistake.

### Gaining Experience

If you're inspired to start cooking for dancers, the best way to learn is by experience. Every time you put on an apron, you'll learn something new, whether from your own observations or from a tip given by a fellow cook. Many of today's dance community cooks started out as volunteers and worked their way up to being head chefs. Now they are eager to teach the next batch of volunteers; that could be you! Personally, I learned most of what I know from working in the Pinewoods kitchen. Opportunities to cook abound if you're willing to jump in and learn as you go.

For more information these are some of my favorite books about cooking: *On Food and Cooking: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen* by Harold McGee; *The Best Recipes by the Editors of the Cook's Illustrated Magazine*; and as previously mentioned, *Food for Fifty* by Mary K. Molt.\*

\* McGee, 1977, Scribner; Cooks series, from 1999 on, Boston Common Press; Molt, various editions, Prentice Hall.



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*Sarah has had many requests for some of the recipes she's used at dance events. Vegetarian Burgers and Apple Crisp can be seen with this article when we post it on our website in January, [www.cdss.org/current-issue.html](http://www.cdss.org/current-issue.html).*

*Photos by M.-J. Taylor, [ashevillecontra.com](http://ashevillecontra.com).*