

Ask the Experts // Family Reunion Tips

A close-up photograph of a buffet table. The table is covered with a red and white checkered tablecloth. Several glass bowls are filled with different types of salads, including a green salad with tomatoes and a potato salad. There are also trays of fresh fruit, including grapes and oranges. A woven basket in the foreground contains several round bread rolls. People's hands are visible, some holding white plastic forks and spoons, as they serve themselves. The background is slightly blurred, showing more of the buffet area and a person with long blonde hair.

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ASK THE EXPERTS:
FAMILY REUNION TIPS

Draw the short straw on family reunion assignments and are suddenly faced with preparing food for the multitudes? Here are some tips from USU Extension family and consumer sciences faculty to help ease the pain.

Keep Food Safe!

Be cautious and observant. Whether at a buffet-style luncheon, a family, community or church dinner or a picnic, just be cautious up front. Do a cursory review of what food is available and how it is being kept hot or cold. Ask yourself, “Does the food look fresh?” “Do I trust that the person preparing the food had clean hands and avoided cross-contamination with raw meats or juices?” “Has the food been held at a safe temperature?”

–Kathleen Riggs, Iron County

I make sure all food is well chilled and packed in a cooler if I’m traveling. Rather than mixing everything together and trying to keep a large container cold, I keep individual ingredients for a salad packaged separately to keep them cold. I pack the dressing separately, then combine it all in a large bowl when I arrive. I make desserts that are not temperature sensitive, such as brownies without frosting (I just sprinkle powdered sugar on top), Rice Krispy treats, cookies or fresh fruit with a fun dip. With meat to be served cold, I keep it well chilled. If keeping it hot, I use a crockpot or a casserole container that can be placed in an insulated bag. Dutch oven meat, vegetables and desserts are a favorite, and since they are generally cooked on site, there is no worry about the food sitting in the danger zone too long.

–Marilyn Albertson, Salt Lake County

Make sure hot food stays hot and cold food stays cold. Place bowls of ice or ice water under salads, etc., and use heat packs or slow cookers for the hot stuff. Make sure food gets put away quickly. That's a thing in my family that worries me—we all wander away and leave the food out. When making food ahead of time, don't put super-hot foods in the fridge to cool when they are in very large bowls or pots. Separate for faster and consistent cooling.

—Melanie Jewkes, Salt Lake County

Don't use home-canned potatoes in your potato salad, or in your funeral potatoes, for that matter, unless you want them to [live up to their name...](#)

Even if you're boiling or (otherwise cooking) whole potatoes the night before and plan to finish prep the next day, make sure they're properly cooled and then refrigerated until you use them. When we talk about *C. bot* requiring an anaerobic environment, remember that includes microenvironments.

—Karin Allen, USU Extension Food Quality and Entrepreneurship Specialist

One last food safety tip from the USDA: [Use a Meat Thermometer!](#)

Food Planning Ideas

Meal-in-a-bag – Pre-bag the entire meal for each person, and they can eat right out of the bag with no fuss or mess. This works well for something like taco salad. You can also put raw ingredients, like omelet fixings, in a bag and then cook the bag in boiling water. The meal is already served out and people just need to pick a bag.

—Ginger Hack, Juab County

You have to have homemade root beer with dry ice.

If serving homemade ice cream, let family members twist the hand crank ice cream freezer or [roll the ice cream in a can](#) or [bag](#). You will need a #10 can with a tight-fitting lid. Inside that, place a smaller can with a tight-fitting lid filled with the ice cream mixture. Add ice and rock salt and put the lid on and tape it with duct tape. Then roll it on the cement if it is in a shady place (sunny, hot concrete will slow freezing) or in the grass for about 15 minutes. Take lid off, take off lid of small can and stir down ice crystals and repeat the process until ice cream is firm.

–Marilyn Albertson, Salt Lake County

Buy food in amounts that are easy to handle. It may be cheaper to buy a 20-pound chub of ground beef, but have you ever tried to defrost 20 pounds of ground beef in order to use 5 pounds for the taco salad that night?

Have a sign-up sheet – everyone eats so everyone helps! You make the menus, you buy the food, you provide the recipes, but the point-of-contact labor force is the whole reunion population.

Keep the menus very, very simple. It doesn't mean it has to taste bad, just that it has to have universal appeal. Meals like Hawaiian haystacks where people have an array of topping choices to put on rice make life easy. Rice will feed everyone, and people can choose what they would like to add to it.

–Cathy Merrill, Utah County

From a health perspective—do less salads that are mayo based. They often separate in the summer heat, anyway, and there are way too many delicious veggie dishes to try out (my favorite is a black bean, corn, avocado salsa made with more tomatoes and peppers and raw tomatillos...yummy!). I don't have a recipe typed up—I change it up each time I make it based on what I have from my garden. This one is very similar to what I start

with, But I always add more tomatoes, more peppers, and usually tomatillos and avocados if I have them:

Food \$ense Black Bean and Corn Salsa

Ingredients:

- 2 cans black beans, rinsed and drained
- 1 can whole corn, drained
- 2 large tomatoes, chopped
- 1 avocado, chopped
- 1/2 small red onion, chopped
- 2 fresh jalapenos, seeded and finely chopped
- 1 small can sliced black olives, drained
- 1/4 cup cilantro, finely chopped
- 2 Tbsp olive oil
- 1 Tbsp red wine vinegar
- 3 to 4 Tbsp lemon juice
- 1 tsp salt
- 1/2 tsp pepper

Directions:

Mix olive oil, red wine vinegar, lemon juice, salt and pepper in a small bowl and set aside. Combine all other ingredients and pour liquid mixture over and stir. Chill or serve immediately.

–Melanie Jewkes, Salt Lake County

There you have it, folks! Tips from family and consumer sciences faculty from around the state. Obviously, what worries us most is **KEEP YOUR FOOD SAFE!** Don't let a reunion memory of a fantastic family meal be spoiled by a food-borne illness report to the Centers for Disease Control afterward!

This article was compiled and edited by Cathy Merrill, FCS

Utah County