

# KC

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Spruce  
up your  
space for  
the

# Holidays

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a fresh take



# PRESSURE COOKER

EXPLODING UNDER HOLIDAY EXPECTATIONS — AND HOW TO AVOID THAT

By Katie McCall, local food columnist

The tree is trimmed, the house is twinkling with lights, gifts are bought — possibly wrapped — and meals are planned. Your calendar is overflowing with holiday activities like ice skating, visiting Santa with the kids, brunch with friends and cookie baking with grandma ... not to mention the million Pinterest projects you've been cataloguing for months. (Yes, I *will* make those tiny winter wonderland terrariums this year!)

The holidays have always held a special place in my heart. But since having a family of my own, there's an even deeper desire to create that storybook holiday season filled with picturesque sleigh rides and gingerbread houses. Yet, somehow, it seems the more pressure we put on ourselves to fulfill this fantasy-like, often societally imposed checklist of to-dos, the less we appreciate the pure enjoyment of them.

When we had our bakery, Two Wild Seeds, I remember sitting with couples at their wedding cake tastings, reassuring them that whatever didn't get done or unfold perfectly wouldn't matter at the end of the day because nobody else knew it was expected in the first place. Well, doesn't the same go for the holidays?

Often, we're too worried about fulfilling other people's expectations that we lose sight of our own desires and wishes. So this year, things are going to be different. With our second baby due the first week of January, I'm on a personal mission to peel away the fluff and savor those special moments in between the hustle and bustle.

Naturally, let's start in the kitchen. One word: potluck. It might sound old-fashioned, but I'm a firm believer in power by numbers. Preparing a multicourse meal for a crowd is no easy task, even for the well-seasoned cook. Summoning

friends and family will not only lighten their load at the stove, but it also allows them the opportunity to partake in the festivities. To ensure a cohesive meal, create a full menu, pick the main course for yourself and then assign the remaining dishes to each guest based on their culinary abilities. If your friend has a tiny kitchen and hates cooking, suggest a bottle of wine or store-bought cheese and crackers as an appetizer.

The same method can be applied to activities: You might be able to do it all, but you shouldn't have to. Learning to set boundaries and declining a few invites here and there is absolutely OK. Instead of scrambling to every party, brunch and shopping trip, suggest a cozy afternoon at home by the fire in slippers with a warm beverage. You'll get quality, one-on-one time with your pals — and avoid long lines.

My personal Achilles' heel is anything handmade; I relish in creating something from nothing (food, desserts, wreaths, sugar scrubs, ornaments, etc.) and know I won't be able to do it all this year. Instead, I'm choosing a handful of



projects that will satisfy my DIY bug and keep my hands-on toddler entertained. The key here is gathering supplies ahead of time and setting a game plan, as impromptu projects typically end in an explosion of glitter and hot glue.

So, whether your list shrinks from 20 things to 10 or from 10 to 5, take a moment to pause and evaluate your intentions, asking if it's a representation of your true, authentic self — or if you're simply doing it to say you did it. If all else fails, sit down, grab your loved ones, make a cup of hot cocoa and put on your favorite holiday movie. This activity makes my list every year and never disappoints.



■ Katie McCall, former owner of Two Wild Seeds Baking Co., is a bona fide Midwestern girl. Raised on four acres of rural property in Yorkville, she was always taught to respect nature and all of its bounty. From foraging morel mushrooms in the woods to picking wild black raspberries for homemade jam, Katie feels most at home when in nature and preparing food for others. When she's not creating new dishes in the kitchen (and writing about them) she can be found nose-deep in cookbooks, exploring the outdoors with her family — and eating ... always eating. Photo by Victoria C Photos.

## HOLIDAY SPICE ORNAMENTS

**NOTE: NOT FOR CONSUMPTION; FOR DECORATIVE PURPOSES ONLY**

Growing up, we made these ornaments every holiday season with my mom and hung them on a small tree in our breakfast room. The house smelled of warm, fragrant spices all month long, and we always made extras to give away as gifts or attach to gift boxes.

MAKES 10-15 ORNAMENTS, DEPENDING ON SIZE OF COOKIE CUTTERS USED

### EQUIPMENT:

- Rolling pin
- Parchment or wax paper
- Assorted cookie cutters
- Baking sheet(s)
- Small tool to poke hole (knitting needle, nail, etc.)
- Decorative ribbon or string

### INGREDIENTS:

- 3/4 cup applesauce (plus more on hand)
- 1 cup ground cinnamon
- 2 tablespoons ground cloves
- 1 tablespoon ground allspice

Preheat oven to 225 degrees. In a medium-sized bowl, combine the applesauce, cinnamon, cloves and allspice. Mix with a spoon or hands until the dough begins to come together.

If it's too dry and crumbly, add more applesauce 1 tablespoon at a time, mixing and mashing thoroughly until the dough is workable and pulls away from the sides of the bowl. (Mine took an extra 3 tablespoons of applesauce to achieve the correct consistency.)

Form the dough into a small disk and continue to work it with your hands until smooth.

Place the disk between two sheets of parchment or wax paper and roll out until 1/4 inch to 1/3 inch thickness is achieved. Cut desired shapes with cookie cutter(s) and transfer them to a parchment-lined baking sheet.

With the small tool, poke a hole in each shape (about 1/4 inch away from any edge) and gently wiggle the tool in circular motions to form a hole big enough for the string or ribbon to fit through once baked. Keep in mind that the hole will shrink slightly during baking, so don't make it too tiny!

Bake ornaments for approximately 2 hours, turning them over every 30 minutes to dry out properly. Because all ovens bake differently, ornaments could take up to 30-45 additional minutes.

Once dried out, allow them to cool at room temperature, thread the ribbon through the hole and enjoy these adorable, fragrant ornaments!

Any extra dough can be stored in the refrigerator in a zip-lock bag and used up to three days later.