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Hit the deck!

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If there's a Charlotte style in outdoor party food, Holly McLelland will know it. As the owner of the catering company Delectables by Holly, she's a go-to person when it's time to match food and a good time.

She has a soft spot for outdoor parties, she admits. "In my family, if there's a deck or a slab of concrete, we probably are on it."

Pool parties, graduation parties and engagement parties are all good reasons to take it outside and take people with you. And don't forget the return-engagement party – when you've been entertained and you need to return the favor.

"With the advent of the outside kitchens, people just want to be outside," McLelland says. "They're building spaces for it. We're seeing a little more of it than we've seen before."

The first things you have to consider are Charlotte's heat and humidity. They're going to be present at any outdoor event after June.

"I'm intense about food being outside," says McLelland. "If we're going outside, there are some things we need to do to make sure all is well. Temperature is always an issue. You've got to keep the food at the right temperature. Deep in the summer, the little critters and bugs can be an issue." For deck entertaining, she recommends covers and small screens, available at most kitchenware stores. And think about an outdoor fan or two. "If you can get the air circulating, (bugs) won't fly into the food as much."

After you think about how you're going to keep the guests and the food at comfortable temperatures, it's time to start planning a menu. This is when you need to figure out what you want your party to be.

"You have a mission statement for your company – you need a mission statement for your party," says McLelland. "It can be as simple as 'we're having a party and we want to have big fun' or 'I need to impress my mother-in-law.' I've never planned a party that a mission statement didn't evolve. It's really important that you get to that. That's the touchy-feely part of what (caterers) do."

McLelland likes party menus that lean toward the interactive. It lets the host put almost everything together in advance and then involves the guests in building their plates.

"I do a lot of corporate (entertaining) and very often, these guests don't know each other. You have to welcome them and get them pulled in.



“When you build your own food and you’re around the table with other guests saying, ‘Oh, you’ve got to try this’ and ‘have you tried this with that?’, that’s the kind of interaction and being engaged that we love.”

When we asked McLelland to give us a menu for a deck party, she immediately thought of “Fiesta Chic”: A lineup of fish and seafood tacos that can be marinated in advance and finished on the grill, served with salsas and salads that can be made in advance. “People like to graze,” she says. “It’s the perfect kind of menu for that. When you graze around the table, it just promotes conversation. Which translates into fun to me.”

Outdoor entertaining tips

When you entertain outside in the South, heat and humidity are reality. Here are a few of caterer Holly McLelland’s tips:

Watch the time. Perishable food should be at room temperature for only two hours, or one hour when it’s outside in the heat. Divide things up and bring them out in stages, or swap platters with fresh food every hour or so.

Find ways to keep cool. Use ice bases, or bowls of food nestled in bowls of ice. Or place serving platters on ice-filled platters.

Identify the high-risk foods when you plan your menu. Proteins, such as meat, chicken or fish, for instance, or dairy products. “A platter of fruit, that’s less of a risk. A bunch of chips, they might get soggy, but they’re not going to poison anyone.”

Use screens or covers on plates and platters to keep bugs away. An outdoor fan will help with that too.

Menu:

All recipes from Delectables by Holly

Mahi-Mahi, Shrimp and Tuna Tacos with Southwestern Slaw, Pico De Gallo, Mexican Lime Crema, Mango-Radish Salsa and Grace’s Mother’s Onions.

Grilled Corn Salad

Citrus Salad

Mexican Chocolate Cookie Sandwiches with Honey Ice Cream

RECIPES:

Fish Tacos a la Baja

2 pounds mahi mahi

1/2 cup vegetable oil

4 tablespoons lime juice

5 teaspoons chili powder

1 1/2 teaspoons ground cumin

1 1/2 teaspoons ground coriander



1 1/2 teaspoons minced garlic

Salt to taste

Grilled flour tortillas and sauces list below

Preheat gas grill to medium high (or let coals burn down until there is a moderate coating of white ash).

Clean the cooking grate.

Cut the mahi-mahi into 16 equal slices. Combine the remaining ingredients and coat the fish with the mixture. Grill the fish over direct heat until firm and well-marked, about 2 minutes. Turn and grill until cooked through, about 1 1/2 to 2 minutes longer.

Grill the tortillas until they have light grill marks and are heated through, about 15 seconds on the first side. Turn and grill until they start to bubble.

Chili Lime Shrimp for Tacos

4 to 5 pounds shrimp

Marinade:

3 tablespoons chili powder

3 tablespoons ground cumin

3 tablespoons ground coriander

1 tablespoon paprika

1 tablespoon salt

1/4 teaspoon cayenne

1/2 cup fresh lime juice

2 cups olive oil

2 bunches cilantro, chopped

Up to 4 to 5 pounds shrimp

Finishing sauce:

Juice of 4 limes

1 bunch cilantro

1/2 cup olive oil

Combine marinade ingredients. Add shrimp and marinate 20 to 25 minutes (no longer, or the acid will "cook" the shrimp). Make the finishing sauce by combining the ingredients in a food processor and processing until smooth.

Drain shrimp well and grill on a flat grill pan or grill rack until just cooked through. Toss with the finishing sauce and display on a bed of cilantro.



Seared Ahi Tuna for Tacos

2 tablespoons ground cumin

2 tablespoons chili powder

1 teaspoon granulated garlic

2 teaspoons good-quality paprika

1 teaspoon kosher salt

1 teaspoon ground black pepper

4 (6-ounce) pieces sushi-grade ahi tuna

Mix cumin, chili powder, garlic, paprika, salt and pepper. Rub on tuna pieces and let rest 30 minutes at room temperature. Sear tuna on all four sides in a cast-iron skillet on high heat (on grill or on the stove). Tuna should still be rare in the middle. Cut into strips.

Slaw With a Southwestern Flavor

3 cups napa cabbage, cut into thin strips (chiffonade)

3 teaspoons lime juice

3 teaspoons honey

2 1/2 tablespoons minced red onion

2 1/2 teaspoons minced roasted jalapeno peppers (see note)

3 teaspoons chopped cilantro or to taste

Salt to taste

Combine all the ingredients and refrigerate at least 30 minutes and up to 8 hours. Makes 10 to 12 servings.

Note: Char jalapeno peppers over the gas flame on a stove or over hot coals until skin is blistered. Place in a paper bag to cool, then peel off skin.

Pico de Gallo

2 to 3 large tomatoes

8 teaspoons minced red onion

1 teaspoon red wine vinegar

Salt to taste

1 to 2 tablespoons minced cilantro or to taste

Core tomatoes, halve and squeeze to remove seeds. Cut tomatoes into medium dice. Combine remaining ingredients. Refrigerate up to 8 hours.

Mexican Lime Crema

1 cup sour cream or crema (available in Latino markets)

1 teaspoon finely grated lime zest

4 tablespoons lime juice

Combine all ingredients. Can be used immediately or can be covered and refrigerated up to four days.

Mango-Radish Salsa

2 limes

2 mangoes, cut away from pit and flesh cut into large dice

4 to 5 red radishes, cut into matchsticks

1 red onion, diced

1 tablespoon chili powder

1/2 bunch fresh cilantro leaves, chopped

1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Remove the peel and white pith from the limes and cut between the membranes to remove the segments. Put in a bowl and squeeze the juice from the membranes over them. Add the remaining ingredients and stir to mix well. Season and refrigerate until ready to use. (Or place the ingredients in a food processor and puree for a smoother salsa.)

Grace's Mother's Onions

When Holly McLelland encounters a recipe she likes, she promises to always keep the name of the person who gave it to her on the recipe. That way, she says, she remembers them every time she makes it.

1 medium red onion, sliced very thin (on a mandoline is great)

4 green onions, sliced diagonally

4 tablespoons chopped cilantro leaves

2 roma tomatoes, cored and chopped

4 tablespoons olive oil

Salt and black pepper to taste

Freshly squeezed lime juice

Combine ingredients with enough lime juice to generously coat all the ingredients. Use within 2 hours. If making ahead, don't add the tomato until no more than 2 hours before you use it.

Grilled Corn Relish

1 tablespoon vegetable oil

2 ears corn

1 teaspoon chili powder

3 tablespoons lime juice

2 cloves garlic, peeled and minced

1 small avocado, peeled, pitted and diced

1/2 cup diced red pepper

1/4 cup chopped cilantro

1/2 teaspoon salt

Prepare gas or charcoal grill for direct grilling. Rub corn with oil and sprinkle with chili powder. Grill, turning ears until they're flecked with brown. Remove corn from grill and let stand until cool enough to handle. Cut kernels from cobs with a sharp knife.

Combine corn kernels with remaining ingredients and toss to mix well. Serve at room temperature.

Yield: About 2 cups.

Citrus Salad

Dressing:

1 teaspoon grated orange zest
1/2 cup freshly squeezed orange juice
1 cup vegetable oil
4 tablespoons sugar
4 tablespoons red wine vinegar
2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
1 teaspoon salt

Salad:

Romaine lettuce, stems removed and leaves torn (one large handful per person)

3 oranges, peeled, cut into rounds and seeded

2 grapefruits, peeled, cut into segments and seeded

3/4 cup feta cheese

Half of a red onion, thinly sliced

1 avocado, peeled, pitted and sliced just before serving

1/2 cup toasted pine nuts or 3/4 cup sugar almonds

Combine fruit, feta, onion and avocado. Toss with dressing to coat just before serving. Pile on a bed of lettuce and sprinkle with pine nuts or almonds.



Mexican Hot Chocolate Cookies

1 cup all-purpose flour

1/2 cup plus 1 tablespoon unsweetened, Dutch-process cocoa

1/4 teaspoon baking soda

1/4 teaspoon salt

1/2 cup plus 1 tablespoon brown sugar

1/2 cup plus 1 tablespoon granulated sugar

3 tablespoons unsalted butter, slightly softened

3 tablespoons margarine (stick, not tub)

1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon

Generous pinch of ground black pepper and cayenne pepper

1 teaspoon vanilla

1 egg white

Combine flour, cocoa, soda and salt in a medium bowl. Mix thoroughly with a whisk. Set aside. Combine the sugars in a small bowl and mix well with your fingers, pressing out any lumps.

Beat the butter and margarine in a mixing bowl with an electric mixer until creamy. Add sugar mixture, cinnamon, peppers and vanilla. Beat on high speed about 1 minutes. Beat in the egg white. Stop the mixer. Add the flour mixture. Beat on low just until incorporated.

Gather the dough and form into a 9- or 10-inch log. Wrap in waxed paper, folding or twisting the ends shut without pinching or flattening the log. Chill at least 45 minutes or until needed.

Place oven racks in the upper and lower third of the oven. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line cookie sheet with parchment or foil. Use a sharp knife to slice rounds of chilled dough a scant 1/4-inch thick.

Place 1 inch apart on lined baking sheets. Bake 12 to 14 minutes, rotating baking sheets from top to bottom and front to back about halfway through baking time. Cookies will puff and crackle on top and then begin to settle back down when done.

Use a metal spatula to transfer to a wire rack to cool. Cool completely. Store in an airtight container up to two weeks, or freeze up to 2 months.

Honey Ice Cream

5 egg yolks

2/3 cup honey

2 cups milk

1 cup whipping cream

1 teaspoon vanilla

Beat yolks and honey in a bowl. Heat the milk in a saucepan until it just begins to boil, then reduce heat to low. Slowly whisk in the yolk/honey mixture. Remove from heat, strain and cool. Stir in the heavy cream and vanilla.

Transfer to a ice cream maker and freeze according to manufacturer's directions. Use ice cream and two Mexican Hot Chocolate Cookies to form ice cream sandwiches. Freeze until ready to serve.