

# Just try it

By Jill West, RDN



## No Sugar, Gluten, Meat or Fat?

*What to Do About Special Diets for the Holidays*

First appeared in Bay Area Parent magazines: Silicon Valley and East Bay, December 2014

If you are hosting a holiday meal this season, you will likely have more than one guest who follows a special diet. What do you do when one person is vegan, another avoids gluten, and yet another follows a diabetic diet or has a nut allergy? Coming up with a menu can be daunting, but a little planning can make your job less stressful and your guests' meal more delicious, allowing everyone to enjoy the celebration.

I took an informal poll of my 400 Moms e-newsletter readers and some friends, asking them how they deal with menu planning during the holidays to accommodate guests who have special dietary needs. The consensus was that if the special diet was "elective" or "a lifestyle choice," such as a Paleo, South Beach or vegan diet and not a medical need, then they were less inclined to adjust the menu, stating "It's a special occasion" or "They can make an exception for one meal." However, if it was a medical need, such as diabetes, food allergy or celiac disease, then they would most definitely adjust the menu. Here are some strategies that can help you, as the host, provide a menu that works for everyone.

- **Ask in advance.** Before you spend much time planning the menu, communicate with your guests about their dietary needs and restrictions. Your guests can tell you whether they can be flexible or if it is a medical issue that requires strict avoidance. Most people appreciate that you are considering their needs. By asking in advance, you can avoid last-minute menu changes or the risk of a severe reaction to a food item.

- **Collaborate with your guests.** To ensure you are meeting the dietary needs of your guests, enlist their help by asking if there are particular brands or specific ingredients they use in a particular recipe. You can also ask them to bring a dish or two, which guarantees everyone has food options that work for them and encourages others to try new dishes they wouldn't have been inclined to prepare themselves.

- **Keep "safe" foods separated.** Avoiding cross-contamination will be important if any guests have a food allergy or celiac disease. Use separate utensils for stirring, tasting and serving food. Use different preparation areas, cutting boards and cookware that are allergen-free. Wipe down counters thoroughly.

- **Make simple swaps.** Instead of using regular flour, use a gluten-free flour in gravy; substitute vegetable stock when a recipe calls for chicken stock; replace nuts with pumpkin or sunflower seeds; avoid heavy sauces; offer salad dressings and sauces on the side; serve vegetable dishes seasoned with a small amount of oil and a variety of spices.

■ **Aim to provide foods that are allowed for many special diets.** This list provides menu ideas that may substitute for traditional dishes or may be served in addition to usual fare. For example, along with typical holiday desserts, providing fresh fruit or a fruit-based dessert is often appreciated by guests because it is lower in fat and can be made gluten-free.

◆ **Appetizers:** Shrimp with cocktail sauce (except for a seafood allergy), raw vegetables with hummus, gluten-free chips with salsa or homemade bean dip, an antipasti assortment.

◆ **Main dishes:** Roasted or grilled herb-rubbed meat, chicken or fish with sauces served on the side, along with a hearty vegetarian dish that contains beans or tofu as the protein source.

◆ **Side dishes:** Roasted vegetables, green salad (with dressings on the side, including oil and balsamic vinegar), seasoned vegetables (green beans, broccoli, cauliflower or asparagus) and healthy grains, such as quinoa and brown rice.

◆ **Desserts:** Fresh fruit, baked apples or gluten-free fruit crisp.

◆ **Beverages:** Coffee, tea, sparkling water, sugar-free drinks.

■ **Clear communication.** It is important to let our guests know which dishes are safe for them to eat, yet not make a big deal out of anyone's dietary needs at the table. You can make a general announcement about which dishes are vegan, nut-free, gluten-free, etc., or you might prefer to have place cards beside each dish listing the ingredients, especially if you are serving buffet style.

With a few strategies in place, you can make this year's holiday celebration delicious and enjoyable for all. Happy Holidays!



**Jill West, RDN**, is an accomplished speaker and author of 400 MOMS: Discover What 400 Nutrition Experts Feed Their Kids. As a Registered Dietitian Nutritionist and Certified Health Coach with a private practice in Lafayette, she has worked with thousands of individuals and families helping them make healthy lifestyle changes that are practical and realistic for the whole family. Jill lives in the East Bay with her husband and three boys. For more information, visit [www.400MOMS.com](http://www.400MOMS.com)