

# Food, Glorious Food!

## The Goal:

To serve reasonably healthy meals that guests will eat, in an atmosphere of warmth, hospitality and good feelings.

## The Challenge:

To do it better, so that guests are more satisfied and volunteers are less frustrated!

Food is an important part of culture, and there is generally a large cultural gap between our guests and volunteers. Volunteers are, on average, Caucasian and middle class, while our guests are 50% persons of color and nearly 100% from the culture of poverty.

We must keep the unique aspects of food in the culture of poverty in mind, while still satisfying volunteers' food instincts.

Here are the "top ten tips" about food:

1. **It's not about us; it's about THEM (the guests).**  
Our ideas about healthy, balanced meals matter, but they matter less than the guests' desire for food that is tasty to them, comfortable for them, and that their children will eat without complaint.
2. **Don't cook "up".**  
Provide ordinary family-style meals. The guests will appreciate that you take care with the food, but they will not appreciate you fussing over the food or adding exotic (to them) ingredients. We are not out to impress the guests with our knowledge, style or skill – we are trying to provide reasonably healthy food that the guests will eat.
3. **Keep it simple.**  
Use common ingredients and not too many in any one dish. For instance, prepare a simple meatloaf with just one or two flavoring ingredients, rather than an unusual meatloaf with several different things inside or on top. Offer a simple green salad, with the possible added elements on the side, rather than already mixed in.
4. **Have more than enough.**  
In the culture of poverty, quantity is the most important attribute about food. It is offensive to our guests when there is not enough. This may mean providing lots of a less expensive choice, rather than one-per-person of a more costly choice. For example, the guests will appreciate having ordinary sliced bread and butter at each meal, but will likely not have a special fondness for specialized breads or rolls, if it means that there are not enough.
5. **Provide lots of choices.**  
Since you cannot be sure what dishes the guests will like, provide choices in many categories. Just one main protein dish is fine, but in other categories, have two or more choices. Have both hot and cold side dishes. Have salads that the guests can personalize. *Don't try to teach the kids to eat a new vegetable – provide something that you know they'll eat.* If baked potatoes are on the menu, provide many possible additions.
6. **Have quickly-prepared back up choices, especially for picky eaters.**  
Keep some standards in the cupboard, the frig' and the freezer: mac 'n cheese, spaghetti, canned fruit; crackers, cheese, peanut butter and jelly, fish sticks or chicken fingers, and the makings for grilled cheese.
7. **Have spicy condiments on hand for the guests to add to their food.**  
This includes salsa and hot sauce.
8. **If something you serve is a hit with the guests, and they want it again and again, that's OK!**  
Even if what the guests want is ice cream for dessert every night, that's OK. If you can do it, please do!

**9. If something you serve is a dud with guests, that's OK too.**

Remember, it's not about us, it's about them. It is NOT personal. It should not be taken as an offense. In any group of strangers whom you try to feed, there will always be some who will not like your food. That's just the way it is. If the guests are verbally rude about your food, we're sorry. Try to not take it personally, but do let the Staff know about it. Rudeness is not tolerated – but it is up to Staff to address.

**10. Consult the list of Meals that (usually) Work and the list of Meals that (usually) don't Work. Atmosphere:**

Even the greatest food in the world will taste like dust in your mouth if you are emotionally upset with sadness, anger, disappointment or frustration – emotions our guests frequently feel.

Part of setting the stage for a good meal is establishing a warm and welcoming environment, so nothing *you* do is upsetting to the guests, instead encouraging them to let go of any emotionally disturbing things that happened that day.

**1. Greet guests warmly when they arrive.**

Pretend that your friends and family are coming to your house for a meal for a happy occasion. How would you greet them? Do the same for the guests. Let them know that you're happy that they've returned. Offer to help with the children. Let the guests know when the dinner will be ready (hopefully, no more than 15 minutes after the guests arrive, except on Sundays).

**2. Guests and volunteers eat together.**

**THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT.** Help with the children, chat about the weather, and let the guests know that you're glad they're staying with you. If you are serving buffet style, the volunteers don't need to hold back on the line – the point is that everyone is equal here – everyone can get their food and sit down together to eat.

**3. Consider having a small play area in or near the dining room.**

This will allow the little ones to get down and play when they're finished with their meal, while the adults can linger and talk, if the mood is right. You just need a few toys and books in this area – not a whole playroom.

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## Meals that (usually) Work

Main Dishes	Sides	Breakfast
Fried chicken Meatloaf Pork chops Hot dogs Sloppy Joes Grilled hamburgers Chinese food Turkey dinner with all of the trimmings Ham Pizza Stir fry chicken and vegetables Tacos with lots of options – both hard & soft shell Chicken/wild rice/cream of mushroom soup dish Soup/Salad/Sandwiches	Broccoli salad Refried beans Macaroni & cheese Sweet potatoes Plain bread Potato salad Fresh fruit – peeled and cut Green salad with extras to add: cucumbers, tomatoes, carrots, etc. Baked potatoes with lots of toppings Hash brown dish with cream soup Greens	Hot breakfast – on the weekends, but the guests must know ahead of time that it will be available.  Pancakes Egg dishes Individual yogurt Juice boxes Chocolate milk Cereal  <b>Breakfast-to-go items:</b> pop-tarts, bagels, muffins, breakfast bars, coffee, juice  <b>Lunch items in addition to meat, bread, chips, fruit</b>  Fruit snacks String cheese Leftovers Juice boxes

## Meals that (usually) don't work

Fruit salad with nuts Salmon or Fish Steak Exclusively Vegetarian dishes Hot dishes/casseroles with many types of ingredients
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