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Build the perfect summer charcuterie board

By Stacey Stein

With summer in full swing, many of us are happily hosting small gatherings of friends and family in our backyards. Armed with an excuse to prepare food for a slightly larger group, a creatively assembled charcuterie board satisfies the pent-up desire to impress guests.

Composed of a mishmash of various foods, a charcuterie board can easily be customized to suit your guests' dietary needs. You can also have fun by creating themed boards – there are no hard and fast rules when it comes to putting together a charcuterie board, although you'll want to follow a few basic guidelines. Unsure where to start? Not to worry – we've got you covered.

Plan your board

Before getting started, you'll need a large serving board with plenty of room. If you don't have a traditional wooden or slate board, a serving tray will do just fine.

Step 1: First, choose the cheeses for your board. Registered dietitian Shannon Crocker recommends picking three or four different types of cheeses. "Add interest with different shapes, colours, textures and flavours," she says. "Maybe do a wedge of white cheese and some cubed cheese."

Step 2: Cured meats are another highlight of most charcuterie boards. Crocker recommends selecting three different types – salami, prosciutto and pepperoni all pair well with a variety of cheeses. Looking for an alternative to cured meats? Crocker suggests mini meatballs, skewers or hummus, which will all add a hit of protein to your board.

Step 3: Pair your meats and cheeses with a mix of crackers and breads. Try toasted baguette slices rubbed with garlic and add in your favourite crackers, blending different shapes and sizes (like melba rounds and breadsticks) for extra visual appeal.

Step 4: Brighten up your board by adding a variety of colourful veggies. Crocker recommends mixing different colours, cuts and textures to keep things interesting. For example, cut carrots into coins and cucumbers into diagonal wedges.

Step 5: The final step involves adding in condiments and accompaniments – red pepper jelly, honey, sweet jam and marmalade all pair nicely with cheese. You can also include some tangy mustard for the meats. Fill in any empty spaces on the board with pickles, olives or nuts.

Board option 1: Make it meatless

A vegetarian-friendly board is simple to pull off – replace the meat with other protein-rich foods, like hummus or hard-boiled eggs. Pair with an assortment of cheeses like Black River's Pepper Jack, Black River's goat cheddar, and a block of crumbly hard cheese, like Black River's five-year aged cheddar, or a wedge of soft cheese, like a Brie.

These cheeses pair nicely with Parmesan shortbread (top with sautéed mushrooms), these black olive shortbread crackers, and toasted pita bread (cut into triangle-shaped pieces to add visual interest).

Next, add colour and crunch with a well-rounded selection of veggies. Crocker suggests cucumbers, red peppers, grilled zucchini and radishes, all great for dipping with the hummus.

Finally, add the condiments and accompaniments. You can put out a little jar of aioli (mix mayo with some pesto) by the eggs on the board, a jar of red pepper jelly by the aged cheddar, a little pot of salted butter by the radishes, and then add in some kalamata olives and sundried tomatoes. Fill in any empty spaces with nuts, and voilà– you're done!

Board option 2: Make it sweet

Boards work just as well for dessert and can be a fun alternative to ice cream in the summer. Cheese and fruit, a natural pairing, should be the main highlight of your dessert board. Try Black River's cheddar with honey or three-year aged cheddar – both nicely balance off the sweetness of fruit. If you're a fan of soft cheeses, you can add a Brie to the mix. As for the fruit, stone fruit like peaches and nectarines are currently in season and pair well with cheese. Add in some locally grown grapes, raspberries and strawberries for a nice variety of colours and flavours.

The next step would be to scatter different nuts around the board – mix it up by spreading some almonds, walnuts, and chocolate-covered almonds around the fruit and cheese.

Round out your dessert board with some cookies, like these dark chocolate espresso cookies. In place of traditional condiments and accompaniments, Crocker suggests piling on little squares of dark chocolate – try mixing in different types of dark chocolate, like roasted hazelnut, along with plain dark chocolate.

For the finishing touch, place a pot of creamy, protein-packed chocolate almond dip beside the fruit.

Other themed board ideas

Get creative with your charcuterie board by customizing it however you like – the options are endless. Do your guests love Italian food? Create an Italian-themed board that includes Black River's Garlic & Pepper Cheddar paired with Burrata, salami and prosciutto for the meats, and some grilled crostini, baguette slices and flatbread. Add in savory complements like kalamata olives, roasted red peppers and blistered cherry tomatoes. Next, layer on sweet complements like grapes, pears, cherries, figs and berries. Finally, finish off your board with little jars of honey, jams and sweet mustard. This one is sure to be a crowd-pleaser!

Another fun option is a Mexican-inspired board. Place Black River's Chipotle Cheddar cheese log and their 1-year aged cheddar around the board, add in sliced chorizo along with a few other sliced meats, include a mix of fresh peppers along with some guacamole or sliced avocado, put out a jar of salsa dip, and spread a variety of tortilla chips around the board.

Think of different types of foods or cuisines that your guests enjoy and have fun creating your own unique board!

Word of advice

Since we've been given the green light to expand our bubbles beyond our immediate households, many people are eagerly hosting backyard shindigs with small groups. If you're serving a charcuterie board for a small gathering, one person should be designated to serve so that people aren't touching the food on the board.