

WILLIAM O. WARE LODGE OF RESEARCH

REFRESHMENT, FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE STEWARDS

By Jaime Gonzalez, PM,
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Many lodges establish an identity for themselves by the style of dress they wear, the quality of their work and by the food they serve during refreshment. Many rural or “country” lodges are known for their bean soup and cornbread or hot dogs and beans, or fried bologna and sliced tomato sandwiches. Others have an annual pig tails dinner or an annual “bibs and ribs dinner,” where the members are encouraged to wear bib overalls and are served bar-b-que ribs. Some lodges offer catered meals. I have attended all of these lodge events (in Kentucky) and they are all fine events. From the perspective of the lodge stewards, mealtime can be a challenge. Not knowing how many brothers will attend is probably the greatest challenge, because the stewards don't want to run out of food. Also, any leftovers can be sent home with older members, or those who need an extra meal at home. Food allergies and sensitivities are a consideration, as well as religious preferences. The Table Lodge, Festive Board and Annual Installation of Officers, by their very nature, require a separate planning committee. Here, I will offer some suggestions for stewards regarding meal planning, meal preparation, costs, quality of the meals and timing. These comments will not include the Table Lodge, Festive Board and Annual Installation of Officers meals, which, as I indicated above, generally require special planning.

Planning for a meal at lodge can be difficult. My estimate is that, on average, a lodge can expect about 10% to 15% of its registered members to attend a stated communication, plus a few guests. There are likely to be more, however, on the occasion of degree work. The Fellow Craft and Master Mason degrees usually attract a larger attendance, especially if there is more than one candidate for the degree. Another occasion when a steward should plan for greater than average attendance is the occurrence of lodge education. A particular guest speaker or topic may attract a larger crowd. Also, visits by the Grand Master, other Grand Lodge officers and lodges attempting to claim the traveling gavel will likely lead to greater than average attendance. Contact the Master or Secretary a few days in advance to make your best estimate. Grocery shopping can be easy with a little planning. Make a list like you would do at home. Decide in advance what you plan to serve. Try to offer healthy entrees and one or two side dishes and a salad. Be mindful that corn, potatoes, pasta and bread are high in carbohydrates, which are bad for diabetics. If serving cornbread, I recommend cornbread muffins. The portion is pre-determined and easy to serve. Green vegetables such as broccoli, green beans, and asparagus are tasty, nutritious, and easy to prepare. Having a quick option available on hand to avoid shortages can be helpful such as having one or two number 10 cans of beef stew available which can be quickly heated and served if necessary. Desserts can be tasty but are dangerous (really) for our older brothers and those with diabetes. Many of us are overweight already, and don't need any help from the stewards to increase the waistline. Desserts can be as simple as providing a small tray of cookies, brownies or fruit salad. Accordingly, it is easy to plan for healthy meals by serving meat and vegetables and a simple dessert. Beverages can be coffee, iced tea, and canned or bottled soft drinks and bottled water. Remember that fresh meat and vegetables are better than frozen foods, and frozen foods are better than canned foods. Some canned foods can be convenient, but, in my opinion, canned foods should be considered as a last resort.

Meal preparation can be easy. Evaluate the kitchen, and clean before doing anything. Many of our lodges are used only once or twice per month. No one knows what insects or rodents are roaming around. Consider the two most important positions in a restaurant: the dish washer and the busser. Remember, “cleanliness is next to Godliness.” If the dishes, utensils, and tables are dirty, no one will be happy. In fact, people can get sick.

Consequently, it is important to take the time to properly clean food preparation areas and utensils. Even though these items may have been cleaned after the last meeting, they can still get dirty in between meetings. Clean the counters, sinks, utensils, pots and pans before using them, and after everything is finished too. Thoroughly wash your hands frequently when preparing food, especially before and after handling meats. Use food preparation gloves if necessary. The local county health department may offer different types of food service classes or training. If so, take advantage of the educational opportunities available. Have plenty of plates, bowls, napkins and cutlery on hand as well as hand sanitizer. Try to provide quality items here. Avoid offering flimsy paper plates and the cheapest plastic utensils.

Cooking main dishes can be easy with the oven. Baked chicken, pork chops and fish are easy. Place a sheet or two of foil on a baking pan, place the food on it and bake according to directions. If unsure as to how long, and at what temperature, to cook something, consult a cookbook or the internet. I have inserted a table below for internal temperature of meats. A little cooking spray will help keep items from sticking. While meats are baking in the oven, take the time to prepare other items.

Vegetables can be boiled, steamed, grilled or sauteed (in a modest amount of oil) and seasoned with pepper, onion powder, salt, paprika, and other spices. An easy method for seasoning I like is to sprinkle a small amount of a combination seasoning (like steak or poultry seasoning), where many spices are in the same container, such as those available from the larger spice companies found in the spice aisle. Kidney beans, pinto beans, carrots and garden salads are also good choices. When serving salads, be mindful of the dressings, which can be high in calories and fat. Pre-packaged salads make it easy to prepare, rather than chopping all of the ingredients. However, you may wish to add other fresh items such as hard-boiled eggs, tomatoes, green pepper, etc. You may choose to combine all of the ingredients or offer them in separate dishes for self-service. Light salad dressings are tasty and provide a nice alternative to the full fat varieties. For smaller numbers of attendance, I recommend one meat, one or two side dishes, and something simple for dessert, such as cookies. Nothing has to be too fancy. Baked chicken, pork chops and fish are a hit. Frozen vegetables such as broccoli, green beans and carrots are easy to prepare. Even pre-cooked foods can be easily reheated. Consider rotisserie chicken from your favorite grocery store. Stewards can buy them, refrigerate them and de-bone them at the lodge. Then, heat and eat! If lasagna is on the menu, frozen lasagna is easy, but be mindful of the carbohydrates. Dehydrated mashed potatoes are also easy to prepare. Diabetics can have some starchy foods, but only in small amounts. While it is not the responsibility of the stewards to manage someone else's diet, the stewards can help re-enforce their good habits by offering fresh meat and vegetables, and limiting starchy foods such as rice, bread, pasta, potatoes, desserts and sugary soft drinks. I have seen many lodge members go overboard at refreshment and try to compensate by taking extra medicine. It doesn't work that way. Portion control can be helpful here too. Having a steward serve the food helps reduce the possibility of contaminating the serving utensil handles. If a member has a cold or other illness, that member should not touch the handles; have someone else prepare a plate for him. Servers also help reduce the likelihood that someone will over-indulge and lead to the possibility of running out of food. While most of us do not think about bacteriology at our lodge meetings, food safety is important. As mentioned earlier, thoroughly clean the kitchen before beginning meal preparation. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) offers several helpful tips: (www.fda.gov/food/buy-store-serve-safe-food/safe-food-handling):

- The FDA recommends that all perishables left at room temperature for more than two hours be discarded.
- Bacteria grow most rapidly between 40 degrees Fahrenheit (4.4 degrees Celsius) and 140 degrees Fahrenheit (60 degrees Celsius), doubling in amount every 20 minutes.
- Many bacteria produce heat-resistant toxins that cannot be destroyed by reheating at a high temperature.

Please remember that hot foods need to be hot, and cold foods need to be cold. Leftovers need to be stored shortly after everyone has been fed. The following table is from the Food and Drug Administration,

United States Department of Agriculture and themeateater.com websites:

Safe Minimum Internal Temperatures *as measured with a food thermometer*

Food Type	Internal Temperature
Beef, pork, veal, lamb	145° F with 3 minute rest time
Rabbit, squirrel	160° F
Ground meat	160° F
Ham, uncooked (fresh or smoked)	145° F with 3 minute rest time
Ham, fully cooked (to reheat)	140° F
Poultry (ground, parts, whole, and stuffing)	165° F
Eggs	Cook until yolk & white are firm
Egg Dishes (hot)	160° F
Fin Fish	145° F or flesh is opaque & separates easily with fork
Shrimp, Lobster, and Crabs	Flesh pearly & opaque
Clams, Oysters, and Mussels	Shells open during cooking
Scallops	Flesh is milky white or opaque and firm
Leftovers and Casseroles	165° F
Salads, (Pasta salad, potato salad, coleslaw, deviled eggs, leafy salads)	40° F

In general, Consider one meat, one or two vegetables, soup or salad, beverages and maybe a small dessert. It is each person's responsibility to watch their own diet, but the stewards can limit bad options.

The cost of providing quality meals can vary greatly, depending on what is on the menu and the number of people expected to attend. Surf and turf will be expensive, and not generally appropriate for regular stated meetings. Bologna sandwiches may be too casual. Sandwiches and hotdogs can be very inexpensive. Quality meals can be affordable by buying some items in bulk. Restaurant supply stores have many items for sale in larger quantities. If shopping at your local store, consider a family pack or two of chicken, chops, and other meats. A pork loin roast can be easily cut into chops, which keeps the costs down. Use coupons to help keep costs down. Catering meals may have higher costs to your lodge, but the workload is reduced. Your lodge may want to set a fixed price or donation amount for mealtime. With a little practice, meal preparation becomes easy. Some lodges ask their Eastern Star chapter or Rainbow Assembly to help provide their meals, particularly for larger events.

Quality of the meal is certainly something to consider. While hot dogs and spaghetti are cheap and easy to prepare, they don't exactly present an image of quality. Some lodges might participate in an annual chili cook-off. In this case, chili is the expected dish. As mentioned above, surf and turf may be excessive for regular stated meetings. While I admit that I served hotdogs and potato chips during my terms as a steward, I was not happy with the outcome. My home lodge is known for its fish fry on Fridays. From time to time, we would promote the fish fry by serving fried fish and French fries for our lodge meal.

Timing is important, because like the stated communication, we want to be on time. Stewards should arrive early enough to clean the kitchen and dining room, sweep or vacuum the lodge room, turn on the lights, set the thermostat and prepare the meal. Plan so that everything is ready about five minutes prior to mealtime. Ensure that plates, bowls, eating utensils, napkins, condiments and serving utensils are in place. Notify the Master when you are ready, and the Master or a warden will ask the chaplain to offer a blessing for the meal.

A note about the Table Lodge, Festive Board and Annual Installation of Officers: The Master will likely

appoint a committee to prepare the meal or arrange for catering. It would be a good idea for the stewards to make themselves available and provide assistance and learn.

Sources:

www.FDA.gov

www.USDA.gov

www.themeateater.com

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