

Cornish hens: dinner for 2

With family sizes getting smaller, the increase in one- and two-member households, and the many people who just can't afford to make it home for the holidays, many traditional family meals are not as big as they used to be.

A meal for two can be just as festive as one for twelve. In fact, if you are cooking for that special someone, a romantic meal can help create a holiday to remember.

Easy yet elegant Apple Glazed Cornish Hens is the perfect main dish for this intimate occasion.

APPLE GLAZED CORNISH HENS

1 pkg. of escalloped apples, defrosted
2 Cornish hens
Melted margarine
Salt
Black Pepper
Cayenne pepper
Ground ginger
Paprika
3 tbsp. orange juice concentrate
3 tbsp. brown sugar

Wash and dry hens. Brush with margarine; season with salt, black pepper, cayenne pepper, ginger, and paprika. Place in a roasting pan.

Roast at 350 degrees for 35 to 40 minutes or until golden brown.

Combine in small bowl: escalloped apples, orange concentrate and brown sugar. Spoon part of the apple mixture into cavity of hens and spoon the remaining apple mixture over hens.

Continue roasting for 35 to 40 minutes or until fully cooked. Serves 2-4.

Microwave Method: Remove escalloped apples from metal tray; place in a microwave proof dish. Defrost escalloped apples on defrost cycle (50 percent power) for 5-7 minutes. Place seasoned hens on a microwave proof roasting rack; tie legs and wings close to body, shield wings with aluminum foil. Microwave on high power for 15 minutes, breast side down, turning once. Spoon part of the apple mixture into cavity of hens and spoon the remaining apple mixture over hens. Microwave on high power for 12-15 minutes.

Baked ham will bring enjoyment

You know the family will be warm with the feeling of contentment as they enjoy a holiday dinner featuring a traditional baked ham. There's nothing like the aroma of a ham in the oven to arouse appetites in anticipation.

Fortunately for the holiday cook, there's a ham styled and sized to meet every family's needs. Especially appropriate for a family gathered around the Christmas table is an impressive smoked half ham. You can take your pick of a rump (butt) or shank half. If you wish a smaller bone-in ham choose either a rump or shank portion. If your guests are many, select a whole ham.

When determining what size bone-in ham to buy, allow 3 to 3 1/2 servings per pound. Of course, you'll want to plan to have plenty for second servings and some left over for a variety of bonus meals that will be most welcomed during this busy time of year.

While preparing the holiday ham is simply a matter of roasting in a slow oven, special care should be taken not to overcook, for this could cause the ham to be dry and less tender. Total cooking time can be estimated; however, to determine exact doneness, roast meat thermometer should be used. Most hams on the market are fully cooked and need only to be heated through to a temperature of 130 degrees to 140 degrees.

For a special holiday treat, pair the ham with Poached Pears. This delicious accompaniment is easily made by cooking fresh pears to tenderness in a sweet-sour liquid that's warmly seasoned with cloves, cinnamon and allspice. The spicy cooking liquid is then used to glaze the ham during the last minutes of the cooking time.

BAKED HAM WITH POACHED PEARS

5 to 7-lb. smoked rump or shank half ham
6 firm ripe pears
1 cup water
1/4 cup sugar
1 tbsp. lemon juice
2 tsp. red wine vinegar
6 whole cloves
1/4 tsp. ground cinnamon
Dash allspice

Place ham, fat side up, on rack in open roasting pan. Insert roast meat thermometer so bulb is centered in thickest part. Be careful that bulb does not rest in fat or on bone. Do not add water. Do not cover. Roast in a slow oven (325 degrees) until the meat thermometer registers 130 degrees to 140 degrees for "fully-cooked" half ham (18 to 24 minutes per pound); 160 degrees for a "cook-before-eating" half ham (22 to 25 minutes per pound). Meanwhile pare and core pears, leaving stem intact. Combine water, sugar, lemon juice, vinegar, cloves, cinnamon and allspice in a large saucepan. Bring to a boil, reduce heat and add pears, placing on sides. Cover and cook slowly 10 minutes. Turn pears and continue cooking, covered, 10 minutes or until tender. Remove pears and keep warm. Strain cooking liquid; return to saucepan and boil to reduce until thickened, stirring constantly. Lightly brush pears with syrup. Brush warm syrup over ham 20 minutes before end of cooking time.

The flavorful ham and pear accompaniment can be supplemented with mashed sweet potatoes and asparagus spears dressed up holiday style with pimiento strips. Christmas colors can be repeated in a shimmering red and green layered gelatin mold. Then end the meal with a holiday favorite — plum pudding topped with creamy hard sauce.

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