

Instant appetizers

When guests drop in, uncork the wine and serve a snack you can whip up in minutes. These are great for cocktail parties too.

White Christmas Place an 8-ounce block of cream cheese or Neufchâtel cheese on a platter and top with a few spoonfuls of hot-pepper jelly, mango chutney, olive paste (olivada), or salsa. Surround with olive oil potato chips, crackers, and/or toasted raisin-nut or pumpernickel bread cut into triangles.

Little latkes Heat frozen mini potato pancakes; top with dollops of sour cream and sliced green onion.

Toasted almonds Spread whole natural nuts in a single layer on a cookie sheet; sprinkle with salt if you like. Bake at 350°F. for about 10 minutes or until lightly browned and fragrant, stirring occasionally. Serve in a pretty bowl.

Greek platter Arrange baby carrots, celery sticks, toasted pita wedges, and assorted olives around store-bought hummus.

Gourmet grilled cheese In a skillet, prepare grilled Cheddar cheese sandwiches on raisin-nut or thick country bread. Cut each sandwich into eighths and serve with jarred chutney.

Dunking potatoes Stir minced garlic, capers, and lemon juice into light mayonnaise. Serve as a dip with oven-browned shoestring potatoes (sold frozen in bags).

Winter's-night goat cheese Coat a log of plain goat cheese with cracked black pepper and sprinkle with chopped roasted red peppers from a jar. Drizzle with extra virgin olive oil and serve with toasted, sliced French bread or water crackers.

Stuffed celery Toast chopped walnuts in a skillet for 2 minutes, until fragrant, shaking pan often. Mix crumbled blue cheese and cream cheese until smooth. Spoon into celery sticks and sprinkle with nuts.

Hot popcorn Toss microwaved popcorn with Cajun seasoning mix or grated Parmesan cheese and ground red pepper (cayenne).

Mexican dip In a glass pie plate, layer store-bought bean dip, jarred salsa, sour cream, shredded Cheddar cheese, and sliced green onion. Serve with tortilla chips at room temperature or warm (microwave, lightly covered, on High for 1 minute).

Quick pinwheels Spread large plain or flavored flour tortillas with cream cheese and sprinkle with chopped pimiento-stuffed olives or sundried tomatoes. Roll up and slice crosswise into rounds.

Emergency pizza Spread an unsplit large pita bread with spaghetti sauce and top with shredded mozzarella or a sprinkle of Parmesan or Romano. Bake at 450°F. about 5 minutes, until cheese melts and pita is crisp. Cut into wedges.