

Charcuterie Boards 101

Charcuterie is a culinary practice that dates back more than a thousand years. There has been a recent surge in popularity of serving portions of meals or even whole meals using charcuterie boards. But how much do you really know about charcuterie boards? We will explore the history of charcuterie, food safety issues and how to avoid them, and some creative presentation ideas for charcuterie boards.

What is charcuterie?

The term *charcuterie* comes from chair meaning “flesh,” and cuit meaning “cooked.” It is a French term for a branch of cooking devoted to prepared meat products, such as bacon, ham, sausage, terrines, galantines, pâtés, and confit, primarily from

pork. The French word for a person who practices charcuterie is *charcutier*, generally translated as “pork butcher.”

The Food Lover’s Companion says, “it [charcuterie] refers to the products, particularly (but not limited to) pork specialties such as *pâtés*, *rillettes*, *galantines*, *crêpinettes*, etc., which are made and sold in a delicatessen-style shop, also called a charcuterie.”

The 1961 edition of *Larousse Gastronomique* defines charcuterie as “[t]he art of preparing various meats, in particular pork, in order to present them.”

The history of charcuterie

In the first century AD, Strabo, a Greek philosopher and geographer, recorded the import of salted meat from Gaul (Western Europe). The Romans may have been the first to regulate the trade of *charcuterie* as they wrote laws regulating the proper production of pork joints.

The French have also had some influence. In 15th century France, local guilds regulated tradesmen in the food production industry in each city. The guilds that produced *charcuterie* were those of the *charcutiers*. The members of this guild produced a traditional range of cooked or salted and dried meats, which varied, sometimes distinctively, from region to region. The only “raw” meat the *charcutiers* were allowed to sell was unrendered lard.



The *charcutier* prepared numerous items, including *pâtés*, *rillettes*, sausages, bacon, trotters, and head cheese. The preservation methods used to prepare the meats ensured they would have longer shelf life and that none of the animal was wasted. Charcuterie became symbolic of lower status peasantry.

Charcuterie still refers to preserved meats, but the method of presenting these foods has undergone an evolution that is only limited by one's imagination. Nowadays, charcuterie boards are a means of creatively arranging food on a board and sharing it with others. The foods placed on these boards are more than just charcuterie and are probably better referred to as sharable food boards.

Food safety and charcuterie boards

Food boards that contain charcuterie as well as other foods usually sit out at room temperature which can cause issues with foodborne illness. You can avoid many of these issues by paying attention to three basic rules of food safety: Clean, Separate, and Chill.

Clean

The easiest way to spread foodborne illness is by not washing your hands. Wash your hands before, during, and after preparing food, as well as after touching garbage, after blowing your nose, sneezing, or coughing, after using your cell phone, and before eating. This list is not all-inclusive, so you must use common sense and good judgment. Clean utensils and surfaces before, during, and after service. Keep an extra set of clean utensils around that can replace the used ones after a certain period of time.

When including raw fruits and vegetables on your board, you must wash them first. This is done by running them under cool running water for at least 30 seconds then drying with paper towels to help remove moisture.



Separate

When we talk about separating foods, usually it is to avoid cross-contamination, or the transferring of bacteria between foods. It is important to keep foods separated when shopping for and preparing foods. While the foods you put on your board are usually pre-processed or cooked at home, you should still be mindful of keeping foods separate. When grocery shopping, keep raw meat, poultry, seafood, and their juices away from pre-processed, cooked foods. When you get home, keep them separate in the refrigerator.

With charcuterie boards, another consideration is cross-contact with food allergens. This happens when foods come into contact with one another and their proteins mix. When this happens, each food contains a little bit of protein from the other. Even the tiniest amount of a food allergen can cause a reaction.

You may or may not know if you will be serving someone who has food allergies, but there are some things you can do to prevent cross-contact of allergens. The top nine food allergens are milk, eggs, peanuts, soybeans, wheat, tree nuts, shellfish, fish, and sesame. If you have any of these on your board, separate them from other foods by putting them in containers. Use a separate utensil (tongs, spoons, cheese knives, toothpick, etc.) for each food, just like you would at a restaurant buffet. Set out plenty of extra plates and utensils to encourage guests to use

clean ones for return trips. It is also a good idea to label foods or have a menu board on the side so guests will know what foods could cause a problem.

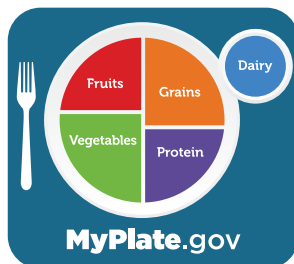
Chill

Bacteria that cause food poisoning multiply quickest between 40 degrees F and 140 degrees F. Refrigerate perishable foods within two hours. For packaged products, read and follow the label. If it says, “refrigerate after opening,” you need to refrigerate it. Put it out in small quantities and replenish, as necessary. If the food is exposed to temperatures above 90 degrees F (like a hot car or summer picnic), refrigerate it within one hour.

At the end of the event, it is best to get rid of food that is left on the board. Many hands have touched this food, and you do not need to save it for other uses.

Nutritional considerations

Choose MyPlate can be a great guide for creating a pleasing and nutritious board, especially if you are using it as a meal. Make half the board fruits and vegetables, use whole grains when possible, choose lean meats, and don't be afraid to vary those proteins by using hard-cooked eggs, nuts, and hummus. Add dairy to your board with a variety of cheeses and dips made with yogurt. Remember to make your board a work of nutritional art by including all the colors of the rainbow when choosing your foods.



Getting started

Once you have decided that you want to create a board, there are certain items you will need. You don't have to go out and buy specific boards or utensils. You don't even have to use a board! Search through your kitchen and pantry and use what you have on hand. Think outside the box, or in this case, the board. Here is an idea of what you will need:

- **Boards, platters, or trays:** Consider a variety of materials from wood to stone to china. Unexpected shapes and sizes add to the appeal.
- **Serving vessels:** There may be some foods that you need to put in their own vessel such as olives, jams, or nuts that may be allergens. These containers are usually small to medium in size such as ramekins or food-safe decorative ceramic bowls.
- **Serving utensils:** This is a reason to pull the cheese knives, spreaders, and dainty forks out of the back of the drawer and use them. You can also use your regular silverware or various sizes of tongs.
- **Plates, utensils, and napkins:** Ideally, you would want to use nice plates, silverware, and cloth

napkins when you entertain, but cleanup can be a chore. Consider disposable items to make entertaining easy. To help the environment, stick with paper and recyclable products when possible.

- **Garnishes:** You can add flair to any food board by using lots of showy fresh herbs such as rosemary or sage. You can also use fresh edible flowers as garnish but be mindful of any sprays or biological contamination that might transfer to food when choosing this route.

Tips for creative boards

Timing is everything with preparation. Food quality and safety can be an issue if prepared too far in advance of your event. Follow these tips for creating your board.

- It's better to have too much food than not enough. No one wants to run out of food halfway

through the event. Keep extra food refrigerated until needed. Consider replenishing your board throughout the event rather than putting all the food out at one time. The longer food sits at room temperature, the greater the chance of foodborne illness.

- Cover the board. There should be no visible bare spots. Fill in spaces with fruits, veggies, and fresh herbs.
- It's better to design your board around your largest containers or foods, such as a dip bowl or large wedge of cheese. Once you place these main elements, you can fill in with the smaller items.
- Pay attention to your board during the event. Replace perishable foods such as meats, cheeses, raw fruits and vegetables, dairy and mayonnaise-based dips at regular intervals. After two hours at room temperature, bacteria start to grow rapidly and can cause foodborne illnesses.



Choosing your foods

We choose food primarily by how it looks, smells, tastes, feels, and sounds. Our senses are very important to the eating process.

- **Sight:** It is said that the first thing we eat with is our eyes. Sight determines whether the shape, color, serving size, and presence of outward defects makes a food desirable. Choose foods with a variety of colors and shapes to make it more appetizing.
- **Smell:** The second sense we eat with is our smell. If a food does not have a pleasing aroma, we probably will not choose it. It is important that the smells of the foods on your board do not clash, creating a foul odor. Too many cheeses with strong aromas can ruin the board.
- **Taste:** This is the most influential factor in selecting foods. Our taste buds let us know if a food is sweet, sour, bitter, salty, savory, or oleogustus, a new term for describing the flavor of fat. Choose foods with a variety of tastes to keep your board from being boring.
- **Touch:** This may seem odd because we associate touch with our hands, not with our mouths. But for food, touch includes texture and mouthfeel. Think about the way apples or popcorn or pudding feel in your mouth. If we do not like the way a food feels in our mouth, we will not eat it. A variety of textures will be more pleasing than all soft or all crunchy foods.
- **Hearing:** There are certain sounds associated with certain foods — steaks sizzling or celery crunching. Once again, choosing foods with a variety of sounds makes for a more appetizing board.

How much is enough?

Knowing how much food to buy can be an issue when planning any meal, but especially with a

charcuterie board. Many of the cured meats you find on a board can be very expensive. How can you know how much to buy without breaking the bank?

Consider whether you are using the board as the main meal or just as an appetizer. If the board is for a meal, then you need to buy more than if it is an appetizer. When considering meats, you should plan on buying 6 ounces per person for a meal and 3 ounces per person if it is an appetizer. For cheeses, buy 4 ounces per person for a meal and 2 ounces per person for an appetizer. You can fill in the board with less expensive raw fruits and vegetables.

Build a charcuterie board

Building your charcuterie board may seem hard, but it can be simple. Here are some suggestions for foods:

- **3 to 4 cheeses.** Most everyone loves cheese. Choose a variety of cheeses: hard such as parmesan, semi-hard such as cheddar, semi-soft such as gouda, and soft such as goat cheese.
- **2 to 3 meats.** Cold cured or salted meats, such as salami and prosciutto work well on charcuterie boards. An easy way to decide is to buy a variety pack. Be aware that these meats are usually high in fat and sodium, so supplement with alternative proteins.
- **2 to 3 crackers.** Many times, crackers are the way you get the food from the board to your mouth. Choose crackers that are up to the task. Once again, variety packs are an easy way to go. Make sure that some of the crackers are whole grain.
- **Colorful fruit.** Fruit choices can be fresh or dried and are a great way to add color to your board. White and purple grapes, strawberries, and apple slices are all colorful fresh choices. Dried apricots, cherries, or cranberries and raisins are great dried choices. Remember that dried fruit has more concentrated sugar than fresh so plan accordingly.

- **Sweet and salty spreads.** It is probably best to limit your spreads to one sweet such as jam and one salty such as a course mustard. Honey or sauces made by reducing balsamic vinegar over heat are also good choices.
- **Simple nuts.** Choose one or two nuts you may have on hand. Almonds and pistachios are great heart healthy choices. Remember those guests who may have nut allergies!
- **Something briny.** For a little extra saltiness, consider adding foods like olives, pickles, or capers.

Conclusion

While we may call them charcuterie boards, a better name might be creative food boards. You can use boards for any meal or any occasion to add flair to an ordinary meal. Remember boards are not limited to boards. Use items you have around the house to present your food in a decorative way. Food boards can be nutritious. Be especially mindful of cross-contamination and cross-contact when planning your board. Food safety is a must.

Step outside of your comfort zone and let your creativity flow. Make your board your own. Your family and guests will be impressed!

Authors

Cecelia Hostilo, UK Family & Consumer Sciences Extension agent, Trigg County

Jill Harris, UK Family & Consumer Sciences Extension agent, Todd County

Angie York, UK Family & Consumer Sciences Extension agent, Lyon County

References

- Brown, A. (2019) *Understanding Food Principles and Preparation* (6th ed.). Cengage.
- Baxter, A.H. (2021). Fabulous Food Boards! Quarto Publishing Group.
- Smith, T. (2021, February 4). Torrie's Top Ten Tips for Building a Valentine's Day Charcuterie Board. Torrie's Top Tips., Retrieved 8/12/22. https://www.uaex.uada.edu/counties/carroll/torries-top-tips-blog/posts/charcuterie_board.aspx.
- Honig, N., Bashford, C. (2020) Charcuterie Boards. Retrieved 8/12/22. <https://wildwest.k-state.edu/health-nutrition/videos/Charcuterie%202020%20Week%201.mp4>.
- "Do Meat and Cheese Really Need to be Refrigerated?" Penn State Extension, Retrieved 10/28/21, <https://extension.psu.edu/do-meat-and-cheese-really-need-to-be-refrigerated>.
- "What You Need to Know About Preventing Listeria Infections," FCS, Retrieved 10/28/2021, <https://fda.gov/food/buy-store-serve-safe-food/what-you-need-know=about-preventing-infections>.
- Barnes, S. "Are Charcuterie Boards Safe?" (2021). Allrecipes.com, Retrieved 10/28/21, <https://www.allrecipes.com/article/are-charcuterie-boards-safe/> (article interviewed representative of the National Environmental Health Association).
- "Four Steps to Food Safety: Clean, Separate, Cook Chill." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Retrieved 10/28/21, <https://www.cdc.gov/foodsafety/keep-food-safe.html>.

Pictures provided by Jill Harris, Angie York, Elizabeth Lancaster.

Educational programs of Kentucky Cooperative Extension serve all people regardless of economic or social status and will not discriminate on the basis of race, color, ethnic origin, national origin, creed, religion, political belief, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, pregnancy, marital status, genetic information, age, veteran status, physical or mental disability or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity. Reasonable accommodation of disability may be available with prior notice. Program information may be made available in languages other than English. University of Kentucky, Kentucky State University, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Kentucky Counties, Cooperating.