

christmas

survival guide

CASSANDRA LAFFEY QUIZZES THE EXPERTS ON HOW TO PREPARE FOR THE SILLY SEASON.



RESEARCH CONDUCTED by Westfield in 2006 concluded 11 percent of Westfield shoppers had finished their Christmas shopping by October and 40 percent were on their way to completion. That leaves 49 percent of us scrambling around in December to plan, cook, purchase gifts and get the family together.

Professional organiser Adele Elair recommends thinking about the day and working backwards.

"Work out where Christmas is going to be and who's going to be there. If it's going to be at your place, who's coming? If not, where are you going?"

Tackle the Christmas meal next if you're hosting the day. "As silly as it sounds, actually write down a grocery list for every single thing you want to eat or drink, and I mean, down to 'Have I got flour to make the Christmas cake?'," counsels Adele.

If you're planning to serve seafood, ideally purchase your shellfish the day before Christmas. Cairns Ocean Products owner Stephen Georgouras says the best way to choose prawns is to taste them. "Don't be afraid to ask – you'll know straight away if they're good quality."

Store fresh shellfish like prawns, crab, bugs and lobster in a bowl of ice cubes in the bottom of the fridge. Oysters can be stored for up to three days in special metal containers and whole fish and fresh filets are best kept covered in cling wrap on a plate to ensure they don't dry out or taint other products in the fridge.

"Be careful about putting a lot of seafood on the table and leaving it in the heat, because it will deteriorate," Stephen cautions. "Seafood should be kept refrigerated until the last minute so it's nice and cold, then bring it out in small amounts."

If you're serving more traditional Christmas fare, Port Douglas Catering event manager Nicola Hood says people need to think about how many people are coming, what time of day the meal will be served and what

storage space they have available in their fridge.

"You don't have to be cooking a full roast at 4am – you can do a lot in the days before and do a reheat or a flash in the oven. You can do vegetables the day before – just par-cook them and finish them off in the morning."

Drinks can be stored in laundry tubs or bathtubs with towels laid down to protect the enamel.

"People just need make sure they've got enough

"Plan in advance, and if you can't think of anything, replace it with a voucher – don't torture yourself."

glassware and ice, and can get ice on the day," Nicola says. "Jugs of cold, colourful refreshing drinks are great this year – Campari and soda with long slices of cucumber is definitely coming back."

An important part of Christmas preparation is gift shopping. To avoid being distracted by Christmas merchandising, Adele advises writing a list of everyone you need to buy a present for, a budget for each and an idea of what you think they would like.

"Plan in advance, and if you can't think of anything, replace it with a voucher – don't torture yourself."

Modern manners maven Marion von Aderstein says gift vouchers are absolutely acceptable.

"With gift vouchers, everyone knows how much you've spent, but it is a wonderful gift and very easy to do at the last minute."

Marion cautions to accept any unwanted gifts graciously



"but don't be too over-enthusiastic or you might get the same one next year." It's OK, she says, to give the gift *away* to someone you think may like it as long as that person doesn't know the one that gave it to you.

"It depends whether the person that's given it to you expects to see it in your house," she says. "If it's a picture that you put on the wall, I think you have to store that *away* and bring it out."

If you're buying gifts for staff, Adele recommends you bypass the hamper because "you're stuck with so many baskets and so much food that you're never going to eat".

Adele advises her corporate clients to reward their staff with that most precious commodity – time.

"If employers give their staff a gift that encourages them to take some time out, it actually makes them feel as if they're being asked to come back refreshed in the New Year."

Try beauty salon vouchers that can be used on products, or a choice of services or travel vouchers that can be redeemed on accommodation or toward airfare.

If you can't leave the office or only have a lunch hour to brave the shops, online shopping guru and author of *The Global Shopper* Nicole Hopkinson says it's possible to purchase all your Christmas needs on the Internet. By visiting general sites like wishlist.com.au, you can purchase assorted presents for different people and have them gift wrapped and sent together.

"At Christmas time, when everyone has got so much on, it's so much easier logging on and choosing a site than standing in line waiting to get gifts wrapped," she says.

For first-time online shoppers, Nicole recommends starting with the big retailers whose brand names they are familiar with. Always shop from secure sites and use one credit card for all your online transactions, so you are only giving information about one card and can keep track of your purchases on one statement. Nicole also advises arranging your online purchases to be mailed to a work address, if possible, to avoid queuing at the post office to collect your packages.

In *The Penguin Book of Etiquette*, Marlon von Adlerstein says Christmas is also a time to be generous and inclusive of people who are without their families. For many people, the festive season is a lonely time when the absence of family and friends is felt more.

"It can be a time of huge challenge for families," Relationships Australia counsellor Sue Muller agrees. "We have this myth about happy families at this time of year so it puts a lot of pressure on people."

The first Christmas after a loss can be a very difficult time, but it's also an opportunity for families to come together and acknowledge the impact that the person who is no longer sitting at the table contributed to the family.

Sue also recommends arming yourself with self-soothing strategies, such as going for walks or having coffee, if you're going into an environment where you're not feeling accepted.

"Christmas and birthdays are quite ritualised," Sue says. "If you are alone or from a broken home, think about how you would like to put your stamp of a ritual on your Christmas with the people you classify as family. Create your own rituals instead of living up to other expectations."

On Christmas Day, Marlon believes it's important to have everyone seated around a table to avoid juggling glasses and plates on the lap.

Nicola agrees. "Generally you want the table presentation to be visually appealing but you also want it to be practical in terms of being able to reach things."

And for those leftovers?

"My favourite Christmas leftover is pudding pan-fried for breakfast in a bit of butter with cold custard – it's completely evil – terrible for the waistline but absolutely delicious," Nicola says.

If you would like assistance in strengthening family relationships during the Christmas period, contact Relationships Australia p 1300 367 277

nicole's top gift sites

www.wishlist.com.au
great all rounder

www.top3.com.au
another all rounder, with a designer feel

www.davidjones.com.au
hampers with local and International delivery

www.bockersandpony.com.au
stylish hampers

www.amazon.com
great for books

www.redballoondays.com.au
unique experiences

www.sendatoy.com.au
kids' toys

www.herringbone.com.au
great for men's accessories

www.linemandmoore.com.au
fab linens

www.oliverandcoco.com.au
designer bags and accessories