

AT HOME WITH *Hester Hodde*

WISDOM FROM A SEASONED
HOME COOK & HOST

Hester Hodde is a long-time friend, wonderful cook, and gracious host. We met when Hester transferred to UNC Chapel Hill from St. Mary's and have been close friends ever since. She is my son Eddie's godmother. Each time I leave a dinner party hosted by Hester and her husband, Bob, I am inspired to try new things.

Hester grew up as the oldest of four. Her father served as CEO of BB&T from 1972 to 1982, when it was headquartered in Wilson, NC, and her mother was a homemaker who often hosted bank clients and their spouses. Hester says that the only options for going out in town at the time were a Western Sizzler and a local barbecue place.

Her mother, being a natural student, turned to Julia Child for inspiration. "Mother watched her show, read her books, and put us to work as sous chefs," she says. "The trial and error helped us build confidence. Sometimes things turned out and sometimes not, but the message was: *keep trying.*"

This formed the foundation for Hester,

and she, too, became a student of cooking. Though Hester and Bob's children, Hester and Will, are grown now, Hester and Bob usually opt to eat in even when it's just the two of them. "I'd rather have something nice and fresh. It doesn't have to be complicated."

Hester says they love having company too. "Historically, people have always come together over a meal in their homes. I love the social aspect of having people over. It's so different from sitting down in a restaurant. At home, you create a comfortable space where you and your guests can feel relaxed and not rushed. The food doesn't have to be gourmet at all."

Hilton Head is Bob and Hester's primary home, and they are also members of Linville Golf Club in the North Carolina mountains. In both places, one of Hester's



Hester, on the far right, with her sister Wynn, brother-in-law Jim, and Ed (Mr. EE).

favorite ways to entertain is with a picnic lunch or supper. The key to entertaining for a picnic on the beach, on the boat, or on a mountain hike, is preparation.

For a boat picnic, Hester says, "I go into 'boat picnic mode.' We keep everything ready to go in canvas bags: a battery-operated lantern, plastic plates, wineglasses, the salt-and-pepper grinder, and those little things that you might not normally think about but that we've learned it's nice to have."

EE members will recall Step Eight of the guide: "Don't Wait for the Party to Be Ready for the Party!" For me, for Hester, and for many of the home cooks out there, being prepared is still one of the most important ingredients when it comes to whipping up a successful – and *effortless* – dinner party. To make it super simple for our EE members to host friends for dinner, Hester has offered a menu with easy recipes that can be prepped and prepared ahead of time. *Enjoy!*

HESTER'S TIPS FOR ENTERTAINING AT HOME

- A party of six to eight is ideal. With this size you can talk to everyone and have more meaningful conversations.
- Opt for buffet style. Buffets are easy to do and allow guests to choose the foods – and the portion sizes – they prefer. A buffet also makes it easier for guests to serve themselves seconds.
- Set the mood. Create a nice ambiance through background music, candles, and flowers. You don't need big floral arrangements; flowers can be single stems in small vases. Pick something that looks good with your linens, being careful not to choose something with an overpowering fragrance. Create visual interest with votive candles. You can also use greens from the garden – ferns or other foliage in different textures and shades of green.
- Divide and conquer. Friends always ask, "What can we bring?" Many hands make light work, so let people help. That way everyone is invested in the meal; they feel good, because they've contributed.
- Do what you can ahead of time. This way you will enjoy your own party, and others will enjoy it more, too!