

FOOD & WINE

COMFORT *and* JOY

Jess Murphy's
festive recipes



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Table of PLENTY

If you're hosting the big feast this Christmas, the table should be as memorable as the menu. **Emma Blanchfield** gets some tips from expert events organiser Annie Dunne

As the second lockdown restrictions begin to ease, there's one quarantine trend that may have more longevity than others. No, it's not banana bread or sourdough – it's the tablescape.

No longer a mundane chore imposed upon you as a small child, setting the table has become a more lavish affair. In the same way you might lay out an outfit ahead of a night out, tablescaping is the art of dressing your table for a dinner party or special occasion.

Of course, tablescaping is nothing new – it's been practiced by event planners for years for weddings, award shows and other big events. But thanks to both of the lockdowns we've endured this year, it's now moved into our homes, albeit on a smaller scale.

"Tablescaping has really taken off with the pandemic and as a result of more of us spending time at home," says Annie Dunne, who is well used to getting tables ready for diners.

Having worked as an event designer in London under Fiona Leahy Design before going freelance, Dunne has created events for designers such as Alexander McQueen, stores like Selfridges and lots of private clients – all of which included grand tablescapes.

"The best way to describe it is as a landscape you play with using heights from flowers and candlesticks, and layering with tablecloths and napkins. It's really all about making your table personal to you," she says. Dunne believes tablescaping is just as important at home as it is at big events.

"You don't even have to eat dinner at a table to tablescope. You can sit on the couch in front of the TV with a beautifully laid out lap tray, or even a small sofa table," she says.

"It might sound like a great effort, but it isn't. You don't have to go all out, but it is nice to have your plate, cutlery, a glass and even some fresh flowers or a candle. It really just elevates the ordinary."

We are talking – at an appropriate distance – in Xavier's, the bar in FX Buckley's restaurant on Lower Pembroke in Dublin city centre, where Dunne has styled a table that is groaning with food cooked by chef Wayne Kenny and his kitchen team.

Her choices reflect her view that when it comes to laying the Christmas table, it's best not to overthink it. "I went for a green and gold colour palette. It's a traditional choice but it's also opulent, so it adds that little bit of luxury," she says.

"Many of us have had our decorations up since November 1, so tablescaping gives us the chance to decorate all over again"

"I like to use a tablecloth in the main colour theme as I find it helps tie everything in together without overcomplicating matters. I chose a green velvet tablecloth, as both the shade and texture are quintessential to Christmas time. To break it up I used an illustrated table runner that was specially designed by Maria Mekhael, an illustrator based in London, who also made the menus. It's a really great way of adding a personal touch."

Sticking with the personalised theme, Dunne added handmade Christmas crackers (€40 for a box of six available on her website, adeventdesign.com) to each setting. "I collaborated with Bertha's Revenge Irish gin and the craft chocolatiers Bean & Goose to create unique crackers with Irish artisan goods as opposed to novelty gifts."

For Dunne, the most important item you can have on your table is glassware.

"I always like to use the highest quality, so I selected pieces from Waterford Crystal," she



A chef's guide to a great Christmas



How do you keep turkey moist? How do you cater for a smaller crowd this year? Can carrots ever be interesting? Wayne Kenny from FX Buckley dishes up his festive cooking secrets.

READY, SET, PREP

Planning really is crucial. Nobody wants to spend their Christmas stuck in the kitchen and a lot of the work can be done the night before. Make it as stress-free as possible.

HAVE A REST

The biggest mistake I see people making at Christmas is not allowing their meat to rest for long enough. My advice would be to leave your vegetables until the very last minute. This allows the meat ample time to rest whilst you prepare your side dishes.

SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

Things are going to be very different this year and there won't be as many mouths to feed. Rather than buying a whole turkey, consider going for a leg or crown.

THROW IN THE TOWEL

The breast and the leg of the turkey are different pieces of meat and need to be treated as such, so take a wet towel and place it over the breast, then let it roast for two hours depending on the size of your bird. Take off the towel for the final two hours. This slows down the cooking of the breasts while leaving the legs exposed, giving moist, excellently cooked bird.

GET CREATIVE

Come up with a second generation dish so that whatever is leftover can be transformed into an entirely new meal for the next few days. Vegetables and potatoes can be turned into a really warming and delicious soup that you can box up and freeze. Buy some pre-made puff pastry and use what's left of the turkey to make a hearty pie.

SHOP LOCAL

Now more than ever, support Irish farmers and producers. Don't settle for everyday ingredients; splash out on better quality ones if you can. Not only will you be supporting small independent businesses, but your dinner will taste better for it.

Visit [FX Buckley Viceallier & Grocer](http://FX.BuckleyViceallier&Grocer.com) on Pembroke Street to see the full range of products or go to fxbuckley.ie for more info.



Photography: Naomi Gaffey

The fab five



Annie Dunne's five essential elements for the perfect Christmas table.

1. CANDLELIGHT

It instantly adds a mood to the table, while the flickering flames bring a sense of movement.

2. FLOWERS

Both figuratively and literally speaking, flowers bring life to the table. They are also a great way to introduce some colour.

3. A TABLECLOTH

Instantly elevate your table with the introduction of a tablecloth. It does all the hard work for you.

4. GLASSWARE

No, not just any glass will do. Include a wine glass, a tumbler and a champagne flute.

5. A PERSONAL TOUCH

Adding something personal, be it a place setting or trinket, makes your guests feel welcome and shows real thought has gone into the table.

says. "Crystal sparkles in candlelight and white light which makes it a great choice for Christmas. It's such an easy way to really lift the table and make it look opulent."

Matchy-matchy table settings have had their moment; it's time to mix and match. "A lot of people are scared of the idea of mixing pieces but it really is just about letting go and allowing the pieces to work together," Dunne says.

That said, you can have the best of both worlds. "Take the tumblers I used as an example, the Waterford Crystal Lismore connoisseur collection. They're €290 for a set of six but they're each made with a different cut glass, meaning they don't directly match," says Dunne. "It adds a certain charm and personality."

If you're new to tablescaping or have been waiting for the right occasion to give it a go, there's no better time than this Christmas.

"Setting the table for Christmas has long been a tradition, whether it's taking out the good cutlery or laying a festive table runner," says Dunne. "But I think this year, people are going to go big and rightly so. Many of us have had our decorations up since November 1, so tablescaping gives us the chance to decorate all over again."

The first task is to decide on a main colour, Dunne advises, one that will act as a common denominator and tie the whole setting together.

"A big trend last summer, when tablescaping first became really popular, was blue and white, and this can easily be carried over to your Christmas table. The second you add in some candles, a little greenery, festive-themed menus and crackers, it instantly feels like Christmas," she says.

As for tableware, there's no need to break the bank.

"Renting plates and glassware is a great alternative, especially if laying the table is more of an occasional occurrence for you," says Dunne. "Not only is it a far more sustainable option and saves money, but it allows you to change up your setting and create a different experience each time."

That said, there are some pieces that are worth the investment.

"If you're going to buy anything for your table, make it glassware. Not only will it last forever, but it can be used away from the table too," says Dunne. "Candles are worth spending on as well. A lot of people believe candles are just candles but once you spend that little bit extra on a high quality candle, you can really see the difference." **FW**