

Charcuterie cheer: Crafting healthy and tasty holiday boards

A charcuterie board can be a staple of any holiday gathering. Carly Zimmer, a registered dietitian-nutritionist at OSF HealthCare, says we love charcuteries because there are “no rules.” You can make them however you want and be creative. But Zimmer has some tips to find the right balance between tasty and healthy.

- Make produce the star. Try apples, pears and pomegranates. Vary the color, texture and flavor.
- But don't let one item dominate the board.

“Think about the [MyPlate](#) visual from the USDA [United States Department of Agriculture],” Zimmer says, referring to guidelines about a balanced meal. “Half of your plate is fruits and vegetables. A quarter is protein. A quarter is grains. It's a good visual to think about when making these charcuterie boards.”

- Try preparing ingredients in different ways, like fresh, dried (like a raisin) or roasted. Zimmer says cooking vegetables in an air fryer gives them a crunch. You can try pickled foods like cucumbers and olives, but they'll be high in salt.

“If we can balance that with the amount of salt in the other foods, I'm OK with including pickles and olives,” Zimmer says. “It helps get different flavors like sweet, salty and spicy.”

- For starches, try crackers or pita bread. When shopping, look at the food label. If the first ingredient starts with “whole,” it's a good choice.

“With whole grains, you're getting more fiber. It helps keep you full,” and prevent overeating, Zimmer explains.

If your guests follow a gluten-free diet, try cauliflower chips or bean-based crackers.

- Meats and cheeses tend to be a popular choice on charcuterie boards. Try for healthier options. A little bit of salami is OK, but better choices include turkey, chicken and smoked salmon. Plant-based proteins like nuts and hummus also get Zimmer's thumbs up.

“Another suggestion is to make sure the meats are thinly sliced. So if you do have a piece, it's not quite as much,” Zimmer says.

When choosing cheese, opt for a low-fat or low-sodium variety. Swiss and mozzarella top Zimmer's list.

- You need a dip for those veggies and grains, right? Although tasty, try to wean yourself off traditional ranch or French onion dips. Instead, Zimmer suggests a bean dip or hummus. If you're making your own dip that calls for sour cream, try substituting plain, non-fat Greek yogurt. Or, Zimmer has seen a vanilla Greek yogurt and peanut butter mix for dipping pretzels or fruit.
- Make as much at home as you can.

“Homemade is always a good option because you are in control of what and how much of each ingredient goes in,” Zimmer points out. “However, it's not always feasible during a busy holiday season. So, if you do go store-bought, look at nutrition labels. Look for reduced sodium or less added sugar.”

Visit the [OSF HealthCare website](#) for healthy recipes for your holiday party.