

## The X factor

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I wasn't planning to write a word about my sister's sleek new kitchen renovation, because kitchen envy is such a very unattractive trait and I don't want you to think ill of me. But she has left me no choice.

I usually look forward to this post-Thanksgiving column, and I'm sure you do, too. For you, it's a chance to catch up with the latest excesses of my hyper-organized sister Judy. For me, it's my fall vacation. I'm not talking about the stay in Florida, though it is always relaxing and the weather is usually balmy than at home.

My real vacation comes afterward, once I am back at my desk. With Judy's spreadsheets, checklists, complicated menus, thick notebook of recipes and of course my status as a scullery slave to report on, this annual column practically writes itself. I was planning to put my feet up today and let that happen.

But I've run into a slight hitch.

Judy is onto me. And she was determined to give us all nothing to laugh at this year.

All of her systems worked perfectly. Every dish was a success. The turkey was the best ever; the pies were delicious. Not only that, but she exercised extremely uncharacteristic restraint. There was only enough food to feed twice the number of actual diners, rather than the usual multiplier of four or five. And I actually heard her utter the words, "I decided to skip that dish this year," not once, but twice. I had to pinch myself to make sure I wasn't dreaming.

Though she could easily have added a dozen more dishes to the menu and pulled it off with aplomb — she was that calm and collected.

I blame it on her newly renovated kitchen. The one I wasn't going to write about. The one I'm not at all jealous of, that made cooking a breeze and cleanup a snap.

Her shiny new kitchen was so futuristic, it might have been an artifact left by a space-traveling alien from a distant planet. Dominating the center was a large, utterly pristine island whose geometry told me the distant planet is populated by mathematicians. The floating LED lights above added a further otherworldly glow to the scene.

Of course, this Space Age kitchen featured all new appliances, replacing her previous set (which were also all newer and better than anything in my Stone Age kitchen, not that I noticed or anything). The brand new ones included five burners, four freezer drawers, three refrigerators, two ovens, one of those whisper-quiet dishwashers and a partridge in a pear tree.

And did I mention the storage? The miles of gleaming, well-lit countertops sat above dozens upon dozens of deep drawers. There was a place for absolutely everything, with room to spare. (There were even some empty drawers. Gosh, I'd forgotten what they look like. So pretty.)

Also, the aliens had applied some highly advanced technology to the room. The entire place appeared to be coated in a clutter repellent that made it a physical impossibility to abandon dirty dishes or mail on the counter. Even my sister Marge, a world-class strewer, found it hard to leave half-empty soda cans on the slick surfaces. It was eerie.

I have to admit to some small twinges of envy now that I am back in my own kitchen.

It's not so much the appliances or the counter space or the thousands of drawers (OK, I confess I covet them, too). I know I could obtain those by applying some major sum of money.

But I also am convinced that within a few minutes of completion, my shiny new kitchen would resemble my current one (and Marge's), with every horizontal surface magnetically attracting a colorful array of papers and other useful stuff.

What I can't figure out, and Judy refused to tell me, is how to acquire that alien clutter-repellent technology. With it, I know I'd love even the kitchen I have.

I've been searching the skies in the hope that Judy's UFO will return, but so far, I haven't spotted anything. So I'm asking for your help.

If you spot E.T., would you please ask him to phone home and tell me?

### **Goat cheese and watermelon canapes**

One way to keep the clutter down during holiday entertaining is to serve simple foods, and make them in advance. Judy made these (well actually, I made them, following her instructions — she's still Judy, new kitchen or not) to serve at one of our holiday gatherings.

She stole the idea from a party she attended, so I don't know the origin of the combination. I just wish I had thought of it. The juniper berries add a surprising and sophisticated note. To reinforce it, I may try marinating the watermelon in gin next time, for real cocktail party fare.

4 ounces goat cheese

3-4 Tbsp. juniper berries

3/4 cup olive oil

Watermelon

Fancy bamboo cocktail toothpicks

Grind the juniper berries in a spice grinder and place them on a plate or in a shallow bowl.

With your hands, pinch off about 1/2 a teaspoon of goat cheese and roll it in your hands until it resembles a fat marble. Place it on the ground juniper berries and roll until it is covered, then drop it into the olive oil. Repeat until you have as many as you want to serve. You can do this a day or two in advance if you like.

To serve, cut the watermelon into small chunks. With a toothpick, skewer a piece of watermelon followed by a cheese ball. Arrange on a pretty plate and serve.