Safe and delicious holiday foods— temperature matters!

Ice cold eggnog, tender and juicy turkey, perfect pecan pie—there are many special foods we associate with the holidays. According to CSU Extension educators, maintaining recommended temperatures during food storage and preparation can often make the difference between delicious or disastrous results. Don't overlook monitoring food temperatures in the holiday rush.

Do you have the right thermometer for the job? From the refrigerator to the oven or stovetop, using a thermometer can assure food reaches the recommended temperature for "doneness."

Sea-level time and temperature guidelines can be used for roasted meats because oven temperatures are not affected by Colorado's altitude, but internal temperature is the gold standard for obtaining the best results. Monitoring temperatures assures safety and also helps prevent overcooking, which may result in a dry or tough end product.

Likewise, keeping cold foods chilled properly limits the growth of bacteria and helps maintain their nutritional value.

There are a variety of food and appliance thermometers available at hardware and kitchen stores. These essential kitchen tools come in several styles and vary in level of technology and price. It is recommended that all kitchens have a thermometer in both the refrigerator (at or below 40 F) and the freezer (0 F), as well as one available for safely cooking and reheating foods.

Holiday food temperature recommendations for consumers include:

—Roasted turkey or chicken, 165 F.

—Stuffing, 165 F.

—Ham, fresh, 145 F.

—Ham, pre-cooked, 140 F.

—Beef, pork, veal and lamb, 160 F.

—Leftovers, 165 F.

For more info, visit USDA/FSIS at http://www.fsis.usda.gov/home/index.asp.

And don’t forget to keep uninvited microbial guests from crashing the party. Holiday events often require transporting and serving food in a variety of situations. Remember to take temperature into account at holiday get-togethers and potlucks—don’t leave food safety to luck!

Keep cold foods cold (below 40 F) and hot foods hot (above 140 F). Use insulated containers and warming plates to help maintain the temperature of hot foods. Cold foods should be stored in the refrigerator or a cooler until serving begins. One convenient way to keep chilled dishes cold is to nest them in bowls of ice.

What about leftovers? Traditionally after potlucks and group meals, guests take a portion of the leftovers home. Foods that were kept at room temperature for less than two hours can be refrigerated and saved. Leftovers should be reheated to 165 F and consumed within 2-3 days. Leftover foods that exceeded two hours in the temperature danger zone (between 40-140 F) should be discarded.

It is always important to follow the manufacturer’s instructions for using and calibrating a

thermometer. If instructions are not available, check the stem of the food thermometer for an indentation, or “dimple.” This indicates the location of the sensing device.

When checking food temperatures, insert the probe the full length of the sensing area, usually 2-3 inches. Check the temperature of meats at the thickest part, away from bone or fat. The internal temperature of turkey should be checked in the innermost part of the thigh and wing and the thickest part of the breast. If measuring the temperature of a thin food, the probe should be inserted through the side of the food.

Treat thermometers with care. Wash them by hand between uses with hot soapy water to prevent cross contamination, but do not immerse them in water. If placed too close to heat sources, the plastic faces of some models may melt or break.

Monitoring holiday food temperatures can increase your chances of a healthy, safe holiday season!

For more information on safe food handling throughout the holiday season, visit CSU’s Farm to Table Food Safety website at http://farmtotable.colostate.edu/prepare.php .

Holyoke Enterprise December 13, 2012