

Party Like the Pros

From formal dinners and cocktail buffets to theme parties and birthday bashes— the pros share their secrets on how to pull off a great event

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What exactly makes a party great? Fortunately for those of us entertaining without a caterer, the answer is not perfection. “I can make a party beautiful. I can make it delicious. I can’t make it great. Only the people make it a great party,” says Rosinne Chlala, co-owner of Festivities: The Art of Celebrating, a catering and event planning company based in Norwalk. Considering my rudimentary entertaining formula—pizza + fun people = party—this is reassuring news. But after chatting with Rosinne and a dozen other savvy entertainers about how to celebrate in style, I’m eager to take it up a notch...or ten. Even those starting at a nine are sure to learn something about making parties more beautiful, delicious and memorable.

Dinner Parties

The trend is casual, not as in pepperoni-topped, but grazing options offer alternatives to the traditional seated affair. Of course the sit-down is still a superb way to entertain, especially with some fresh twists to the old three-course menu. “To do your own sit-down dinner, you want to entertain intimately, with six to ten people,” says William Kaliff, co-owner and executive chef at Festivities. “For a formal dinner party, you set a beautiful table and present to your guests. So much of that doesn’t even happen anymore. Most at-home entertaining is so casual now.” No matter how fancy, the key to success is organization: plan ahead, make a schedule and pick recipes that can be prepared in advance.

William advises not getting bogged down with elaborate hors d’oeuvres. For crudités, he’ll place bouquets of vegetables in a collection of antique wine glasses. “It’s how you serve it that makes the difference,” he says. To tie in his Middle Eastern background, he always offers a homemade hummus.

“Prepare a cheese board or charcuterie platter the night before,” suggests Frank Daniele, executive chef at Frank & Julio Complete Event Planning in Stamford. “Put it out before guests arrive, then the party has already started.”

For dinner, William says, “year-round I grill something. I marinate it, then ‘mark’ it on the grill. Later I throw it in the oven for ten minutes, and it’s like it came right off the grill.” Dessert should be prepared ahead of time, and William’s secret for topping off the evening: French press coffee presented on a silver tray.

Tasting menus are all the rage at catered affairs, and Robin Selden, executive chef at Marcia Selden Catering & Event Planning in Stamford, says these can easily be done at home. “It’s very leisurely, with a nice amount of time between courses, and it’s a really fun eating experience.” Her five-course tasting menu at a recent event started with an easy “Ricotta and Heirloom Tomato Orgy.” The second course: a pan-seared sea bass with fresh basil pesto and tomato confit. “You want the meal to flow, like a Broadway show,” says Robin, “with touches of things that came before.” A shrimp potato hash accompanied the fish because “serving a starch and vegetable is so eighties.” (Ah, who knew?) Then came asparagus drizzled in truffle oil and Parmesan, followed by petit filets in a red wine demi-glace, and, finally, lemon panna cotta. “Plenty of things can be done ahead of time,” says Robin. “The fish can be pan-seared; the sauce can be made; the hash can be all cut; the filet grilled, then just finished in the oven (use a meat thermometer); the dessert can be made the day before.”

To update dinner party décor, steer away from a large flower arrangement in the middle of the table. Julio Sales, Frank’s partner, recommends a single flower at each place setting or a few small arrangements. “For fall, choose dark containers and mix rich, dark-toned flowers. Also, place candles all over the house where guests are mingling.” Marcia Selden, Robin’s partner, sometimes slips a fresh flower into a pretty napkin fold.

Prefer to avoid setting a table? No problem. Turn the tasting menu into a meal that is passed around like elaborate hors d’oeuvres. “We call this Dinner by the Bite,” says Robin. After appetizers, trays of six-inch plates containing small portions of a tasting menu circulate: two bites of sea bass on cabbage slaw, one lamb chop with a little cous cous; for dessert, miniature cupcakes, mini ice-cream sandwiches... “You can do anything!” says Robin, “It’s just a few bites, so there’s no guilt, and no one is forced to sit with people they really don’t want to sit with.”

Cocktail Parties

So long, strawberry daiquiris and piña coladas. For fall Marcia Selden brainstorms on comfort drinks: “a pomegranate cocktail, a warm drink with cinnamon or nutmeg, apple cider and vodka in a glass rimmed with graham crackers.”

Festivities’ Rosinne says, “People love signature drinks.” Keep it easy by having the mixer premade in pitchers, and then add the alcohol. Also note: liquor stores often accept returns from parties, so better to be overstocked.

For cocktail parties Julio incorporates food and flowers, placing a small flower next to a display of cheese, for example, or an edible hibiscus flower in a glass of champagne. “Sometimes the wine, champagne and food bring in enough color that you don’t need many flowers,” but, he insists, “a small bouquet in the powder room is a must!”

Marcia has an array of trays—from precious silver to Lucite—and uses them to reinforce the party’s theme. “At an art party, we used artist palettes as hors d’oeuvre trays. The décor is on the trays, in flowers, stones, dry beans, rock salts. You can cover a tray in fresh herbs like rosemary. That creates a beautiful feeling.”

Holiday Parties

If you're hosting Thanksgiving, delight your guests with these fresh ideas from Frank of Frank & Julio: apple cider martinis garnished with fresh cranberries, pumpkin cappuccino (serve each guest a bowl with some unsweetened whipped cream in it, then pour pumpkin soup from a beautiful pitcher into the bowl and garnish with fresh chives) and goat-cheese potato gratin in place of mashed potatoes. To add flair to the table, Julio says, "Mix and match white tablecloths and white napkins. Mix plain white china with gold-rimmed [white] china."

For other holiday fêtes, the first tip is to get invites out early. "A cocktail dessert party works well," says William, "with eggnog, mulled cider and plenty of chocolate. At holiday time people throw all caution to the wind as far as diet! Fondue helps people get to know each other. I do oil fondue, and veggies, toasted bread and sausage with cheese fondue." Julio offers tips for holiday decorating on a budget: "Use pinecones you find or bowls of Christmas ornaments you already have at home. [Holiday] greens mixed with berries last the whole month. Crab apples in a tall glass vase work well on a buffet, and scatter small red and white flower arrangements and red and silver votives on tables." Another important point: "Holiday music is OK," Julio says, "but not all night." At one holiday party at a client's apartment in Manhattan, carolers and a magician provided entertainment. Think outside the Bing Crosby Christmas Classics box.

Theme Parties

From Bollywood to British Invasion bashes, the pros go all out, but anyone can apply the same ideas and throw a great theme party. "We served fish and chips, roast beef and mashed potatoes, and tandoori chicken," says Rosinne, describing the U.K. party. "We had hanging umbrellas and a Stones cover band played. You would have sworn it was Mick Jagger." So maybe a Stones mix on the iPod would have to suffice, but the rest is doable.

"You have three elements to a party—the décor, the food and the entertainment—and they need to tell a story," explains Rosinne. "Decide which element is the star. Then make a plan and add some element of surprise: photos from the era, a fun favor, an unexpected dessert or a signature item."

Susan Watson Scully, president of Watson's Catering in Greenwich, says, "It's the details—the unexpected details—that make the party." She suggests orientaltrading.com for inexpensive décor ideas.

Reed Collyer, owner of Collyer Catering in Westport, recalls when her husband threw her a surprise fondue party. "Everyone was given an assignment—a type of cheese or wine to bring," says Reed. "That's really easy and low budget." A Capricorn, she threw a black-tie Goat Girls dessert fondue party several years ago. "Our best bash was a seventies fondue party. Everyone came in funky garb, loved the fondue (cheese, meat and chocolate—easy prep and low stress) and danced till dawn to a great mix of seventies tunes."

Debra Ponzek of Aux Délices Events in Stamford says Moroccan theme parties are always big hits. "We have waiters wearing fezzes, and belly dancers. It's really fun because it takes people out of their element. It's exotic," she says. As someone who's taking belly-dancing classes to feel a tad exotic, I get what she's saying. Actually, I'd take it a step further: How about throwing a Moroccan party for your girlfriends and have a belly dancer come show you all how to shimmy?

A no-brainer theme party opportunity is right around the corner: Halloween! Orange and black is a simple approach to food and décor. To get fancy Robin Selden offers this gory treat tip: use almonds as fingernails on "Pettrified Shortbread Cookie Fingers" or "Stringy Cheese Fingers." Debra recommends "a separate area for kids, where they can bob for apples, make candy-dipped apples and

decorate pumpkins while the adults enjoy an elegant fall meal highlighting squashes and cranberries.”

Kids’ Parties

When it comes to kids’ parties, elaborate does not necessarily equal fun, so don’t make yourself crazy. “Your child will want to help decide on the theme,” says Debra, “and that will influence how you decorate, but it’s really the parents who will notice the décor, not the kids. They are there to have a good time, see their friends, have some food and a great cake—that’s what will keep them happy.” Debra warns against two common mistakes: inviting too many kids, and overestimating how long an activity will take. “Kids move quickly. Have a backup plan—an extra game or craft—just in case there is time to fill.”

For her eight-year-old twins’ birthday, Robin Selden threw a dance party. She burned CDs of songs they selected, Max and Maddie’s Dance Party Mix, and hired a DJ. “I chose an off time to keep costs down,” she explains. On a banquet table sat pails of mozzarella sticks, little sandwiches, hummus and baby carrots, pretzel sticks, and raisins, presented beautifully to make the young guests feel special. “There were pails filled with toppings so the kids could decorate their own cupcakes,” says Robin. “It wasn’t lavish, but the parents were impressed.”

For catered kids’ parties, Robin often lines baskets with colorful bandannas and fills them with a mix of toys and healthy snacks. “Parents appreciate that we’re not just throwing them some chicken fingers and fries.”

Aux Délices throws cooking parties for kids and someone with a little finesse in the kitchen can mimic their approach. “We put out lots of ingredients (edible flowers are always a fave) and let them pick and choose,” says Debra. “We keep it open and easy and find out what their interests are.” Some options: pizzas, chicken/fruit skewers, crepes and flowerpot cakes (all you need are unglazed terracotta pots, cake mix, chocolate frosting for “mud” and decorations like gummi worms and sprinkles). Debra suggests serving a cake anyway. “Then the kids can take home the little party cakes they decorated,” she says.

Which brings me to that pesky detail: gift bags. They are such a hassle to put together, and I often find their contents all over my minivan (or congealed on my kids’ molars). Reed Collyer noted a trend in the eight-and-over group of donations in place of gift bags. Kids can learn about giving back at that age, and the idea of \$5 or \$10 donated in my child’s name—a great lesson—plus less junk in my car? Awesome.