

Entertaining Season

From Formal Dinners to Cocktail Buffets, Theme Parties to Birthday Bashes—the Pros Reveal Their Secrets on How to Pull Off a Great Fête

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What makes a party great? Fortunately, for those of us who chose to entertain 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 Chlala and a dozen other savvy entertainers about how to celebrate in style, I’m eager to take my effort up a notch...or ten. Even those starting at a nine are sure to learn something here about making parties more delicious, beautiful, fun, and unforgettable.

Dinner Parties

The trend is casual—not as in pepperoni-topped, but, rather, as in grazing. This is an acceptable alternative to the traditional seated affair. Of course the sit-down is still a superb way to entertain, especially with fresh twists to the 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/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.” Regardless, the key to success is organization: Plan ahead, make a schedule, and pick recipes that can be prepared in advance.

Kaliff advises not getting bogged down with elaborate hors d’oeuvres. For crudité, 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 and Julio Complete Event Planning in Stamford. “Put it out before guests arrive, then the party has already started.”

For dinner, Kaliff 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 Kaliff’s secret for topping off the evening is 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 this “totally can 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 was 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 ’80s.” (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,” she adds. “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 Cesar Sales, Daniele’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. (By the way, the iPhone has napkin-folding apps.)

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 couscous; for dessert, miniature cupcakes, mini ice-cream sandwiches, and so forth. “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.”

Kaliff adds, “You can put out stationary platters: Scottish salmon with toast points, jumbo shrimp in a fresh marinade. People love grazing.”

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 Chlala says, “People love signature drinks.” Keep it easy by having the mixer premade in pitchers, then add the alcohol. Liquor stores often accept returns from parties, so better to be overstocked.

Kaliff suggests supplying a combination of bought and homemade appetizers. “So many places sell great frozen hors d’oeuvres now. For cheese trays, Mirabel in Westport and Darien Cheese Shop are great. And people love sausages. Slice them, grill them on skewers, and serve with a selection of mustards.”

For cocktail parties, Julio Cesar Sales incorporates food and flowers together, 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 Selden 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 are hosting Thanksgiving, delight your guests with these fresh ideas from Frank Daniele: 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 Cesar Sales says, “Mix and match white tablecloths and white napkins. Mix plain white china with white with gold-rimmed china.”

For other holiday fêtes, the first tip is to get invites out early. “Then, a cocktail dessert party works well with eggnog, mulled cider and plenty of chocolate,” says Kaliff. “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.” He suggests improving on classic turkey and ham buffets with “wonderful breads from the SoNo Baking Company. I also fill a big glass or silver bowl with little roasted potatoes drizzled in olive oil and serve them with sides of chopped bacon and dips.”

Sales has tips for holiday decorating on a budget: “Use pinecones you find or bowls of Christmas ornaments you already have at home. Christmas 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 he makes is: “Holiday music is OK,” but not all night.” At one holiday party at a client’s apartment in Manhattan, carolers provided entertainment, as did a magician. 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 Chlala, describing a 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,” she explains. “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 ’70s 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 ’70s tunes.”

A no-brainer theme party opportunity is right around the corner: Halloween! Orange and black is a simple approach to food and decor. To get fancy, Robin Selden offers this gory treat tip: use almonds as fingernails on Petrified Shortbread Cookie Fingers or Stringy Cheese Fingers. Costumes are a hit with adults and kids, and, in my experience, a cardboard box maze with creative homemade decorations makes for a more rewarding haunted house experience than a \$1,000 one with gargantuan plastic ghouls.

Kids' Parties

“Whether it’s a color scheme or the entertainment—have a starting point and build everything around that,” recommends Reed Collyer. Keep in mind that with kids, elaborate does not equal fun (e.g., those haunted houses). “What you want is enough entertainment to keep the kids occupied, but not so much that there’s too much for them to choose from,” says Reed Collyer. “And if you want the adults to have fun, hire a couple of teens to help with the kids. It will be the best money you’ll spend.”

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,” explains Robin. 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,” she says. “It wasn’t lavish, but the parents were impressed.”

For catered kids’ parties, Robin Selden 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.” For a child who loves to cook, she planned the perfect bat mitzvah. “We did culinary activities: rolled truffles, dipped pretzels in different chocolates, made smoothies, created jars of layered ingredients with accompanying recipes,” she explains. “There were fifty kids and not one child left that room. They were so excited.” At the end of the party, they had the goodies they made to take home with them.

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 age 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.