

FOOLPROOF TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL PARTY

Wine Spectator

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A Season for Celebrations

PLAN, PREP AND PLATE A DINNER FOR DOZENS WITH TIPS FROM PARTY PROFESSIONALS BY ROBERT TAYLOR | PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEFF HARRIS

Spring is a time of renewal, for gathering with friends and family and celebrating the season of rebirth. Hosting bridal showers or wedding and graduation parties in your home adds a personal touch and can make them more memorable. If you're feeling overwhelmed, or just want some fresh ideas, read on for suggestions from professional party planners on everything from service stations and how to organize to must-have tableware and equipment.

"It's just the nicest thing you can do, to invite people to your home. It doesn't need to be a banquet—it's much nicer to set it up in a way that's manageable for you, so that you're encouraged to do it again," says Mary Cleaver, owner of Cleaver Co., a New York-based catering company that specializes in environmentally sound entertaining. With a little forethought, your special occasion party can be tailored to any budget and headcount and still be an event that both you and your guests can enjoy.

For a dinner party to run smoothly, you'll need to establish three essential stations: an efficient kitchen, an inviting bar, and comfortable dining arrangements. Each demands attention in preparation, but all can be set up in a manner that will enable you to enjoy the evening as much as your guests do.



The only thing more rewarding than throwing a successful party is having fun at it yourself. With the

Kitchen Efficient

When it comes to serving dozens of guests, planning ahead cannot be underestimated. “Planning is 50 percent of any party,” says Cleaver. “You want to really organize yourself before you start cooking.”

A big part of organizing is selecting a menu of foods that are appealing to everyone and that you are comfortable preparing. “Don’t try a new menu item when you’re having 50 people over,” says Ron Parker, executive director of Hudson Yards catering, the events branch of New York restaurateur Danny Meyer’s group. “On occasion, you’ll get lucky, but it rarely turns out how you expected.”

It’s also a good idea to choose dishes that are simple to eat—think fork food, as opposed to fork-and-knife food—and dishes that can be prepared in advance, so that you aren’t forced to spend the duration of your party manning the stove.

“You can feature room-temperature hors d’oeuvres that you can put out on platters and that people can help themselves to. That way, as a host, you have an opportunity to relax and you’re not running back and forth from the kitchen,” says Parker.

Examples of the types of dishes that work well for large parties

and that can be prepared in advance include braises and soups, which can benefit from being made ahead of time. “You’re going to spend some time in the kitchen if you don’t have help, but the more you can do ahead the better,” says Cleaver. “I love things like gumbo and jambalaya [for large groups]. Jambalaya is a great dish in part because it’s not terribly expensive—it’s rice-based.”

Cleaver also emphasizes choosing a menu that will highlight the best of what’s fresh at market. “Think seasonally about your planning—know what is going to be available to you and where you’re going to do your purveying,” she says.

CHECKLIST

- Dutch oven
- cooler
- chef’s knife
- carving knife
- bread knife
- knife roll
- grater
- sheet pans



Hudson Yards executive chef Rob Garceau says good ingredient options for springtime entertaining include fingerling potatoes, fish, lamb, shrimp, ramps and artichokes. "I think a chilled spring soup in a tureen would be great," Garceau says, "something like a cucumber soup with avocado."

Beware of overdoing it, however. Cleaver warns against super-sized portions or too many courses. "Don't overestimate the hunger of your guests. Think about it in terms of weight: How many ounces of protein do I need? It should be somewhere between 4 ounces and 6 ounces per person."

An Inviting Bar

Time spent deciding on the type and quantity of wine you'll serve is time well spent. Wine service for large parties is "where art meets science," says Dave Sokolin of Sokolin Co., a fine-wine merchant that handles orders for large gatherings. "The ratios and quantities are the science; the art comes with wine pairing and selection."

A 750ml bottle of wine is about 25 ounces of wine, so there are about five pours in a bottle. Sokolin recommends having at least one bottle of wine per guest. "This is where the art comes in," says

Sokolin. "What kind of food are you serving? Is it red or white friendly? You have to think about what season it is: In the summer, typically much more white is served; in the winter it's the opposite."

But if the menu and weather don't dictate the dominant wine color, and you're in doubt about your guests' preferences, Sokolin advises erring on the side of red. "You'd be surprised how many people drink red no matter what season it is," he says.

Along with red and white wine selections, you'll need to consider whether serving a sparkling wine is appropriate. If it is, Sokolin says you must have at least a glass per person.

"If there's a toast, sparkling wine is critical. You need to over-order, because people will also be drinking it at the bar. If there are 60 people toasting, there needs to be at least an extra case of sparkling wine just for the toast." Depending on your expectations, a 2-ounce pour may suffice for each toast, potentially reducing the necessary bubbly stock.

The stemware selection need not be as elaborate as a fine



CHECKLIST

- paring knife
- corkscrew
- ice tub
- snack dishes
- wineglasses
- cutting board
- water glasses



department store display, but you will need to have at least two glasses per person. Rather than feel obligated to provide different stems for each wine being poured, Cleaver recommends using a good, universal shape for all of the wines available.

"Some people will only [want to] serve white wine because of their furniture and carpets. This is OK. You're not alone," Sokolin says. "It's something that pops up more often than you'd expect."

Sokolin would also consider hiring a sommelier, not only to help open bottles and pour, but to provide interested guests with wine information. "It's important to have someone there; not to 'sell' the wine, but there's always interested people and they let themselves be known. The sommelier can pour the wine, they can explain it, they can answer questions," Sokolin says. A personal sommelier may sound extravagant, but Sokolin believes the relatively reasonable cost is worth it. He says his company will often offer to send a sommelier for free, based on the size of an order, and that to hire one for a four-hour party would cost about \$250.

"Use a fast-action corkscrew, and open the wines in advance—you already know that a lot of people are going to be there and that they're going to be drinking wine. Open a few cases beforehand, and then put the corks back in," says Sokolin. "You may also want to print out tasting notes for the wines you serve," he adds.

A Comfortable Table

When it comes to tabletop, there are many options to consider, at a wide range of price points. As your planning begins, evaluate the type and quantity of pieces you own, as well as your seating arrangement, and make a list of what you'll need to supplement it.

CHECKLIST

- chafin
- dinner plates
- soup tureen
- flatware
- bowls
- wineglasses
- linens

"My first recommendation for anyone doing an event is rentals, because not too many people have enough china, glass and silver in their house to accommodate 50 people," says Parker. "Not to mention that the ease of packing up the dirty dishes and sending them off for someone else to clean is a nice plus."

The price range for renting equipment is typically between \$5 and \$25 per person, depending on your needs, from the basics—flatware, glassware and plates—to tables, chairs, linens, bar tubs, coasters and more. For plates alone, depending on the quality of the china you select, costs range from

50 cents to \$5 apiece.

Cleaver says not to be afraid of disposable plates—they've come a long way from the Styrofoam outdoor-barbecue standbys of yesteryear. She recommends a line of dinnerware made of pressed palm leaves, from VerTerra. The sturdy plates can be composted, reducing the amount of trash that your party will inevitably generate, a factor often overlooked in planning.

"Trash is a big item," says Parker. "A lot of people don't think ahead as to how much of it is generated by a party of 50. You want to have additional trashcans and containers, and make sure you have a place to store them."

Other common pitfalls of hosting include running out of ice, as well as the inconvenience of having too few salt shakers, condiment dishes or bread baskets on the table, forcing guests to repeatedly pass them around.

And, finally, warns Cleaver, make sure you have a rain plan if it's primarily an outdoor event. Warm-month entertaining with grilling is always fun, but if the weather doesn't cooperate, you'll be glad you have a backup plan.