

# Party Perfect

When it's time to celebrate a special occasion or simply gather some friends for a good time, do it with style. Here's the ultimate advice for throwing an affair to remember.

**BY PAM GEORGE**

The end of fall signals the approaching party season. With holidays such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hannukah and Kwaanza, its time to gather family and friends for some of the most important occasions of the year.

Throwing a party at home, however, can be challenging. Guests have high expectations. They want something fanciful and fun. Couple that trend with well-traveled guests who've developed educated palates and the pressure to impress goes up a few notches.

No worries. From invitations to flowers to food, here are some ideas to help you throw the perfect party.

Make it Easy

Plan to Have Fun

Planning a party is no picnic, especially when you're juggling work, household chores and kids with homework. Too often, you're so stressed that you can't enjoy your own event. Relax. Here are a few ideas to help you ease the strain.

## **Buy prepared hors d'oeuvres and desserts.**

It's important to start and end the meal on a memorable note. But unless you're Nigella, you probably abhor the thought of fussing with puff pastry.

Leave the fancy foods to the experts. The Cheese Chalet in Pike Creek sells a variety of phyllo-wrapped appetizers. Choose from spinach and feta, goat cheese and artichoke, or crab and brie (the most popular), says owner Carol Huffman.

## **Supplement your main course with prepared side dishes.**

With all the gourmet food stores in the area, there's no reason to do it all yourself. Moveable Feast in Wilmington offers an array of side dishes, from roasted potatoes to mesclun salad with goat cheese, granny smith apples and walnuts.

In Dover, 33 West features broccoli and green bean salads that add vivid color to your entrée. The Cheese Chalet is so well known for its broccoli salad—made with raisins and walnuts—that one steady customer brings a serving bowl intoelaware Today

the shop and tells the staff to “fill it up,” Huffman says.

### **Buy the whole meal.**

If you're pressed for time, but expecting six for a dinner at 8 p.m., buy the entire meal. Gourmet food stores including Janssen's and Food Source, both in Greenville, can offer soup to nuts.

### **Hire a caterer.**

For larger parties, consider a caterer. It will save time and your sanity. Some caterers will drop off the food. Or, you can pick up your order. Many will deliver the food, set it up and serve it. They can also provide ancillary items, such as tables and linens.

If you opt for servers, ask about server policies. The caterer may only provide waitstaff if you have a certain number of guests. Also ask if gratuity is included in the price.

If you nix the servers, at least consider hiring a bartender, which lets you mingle with your guests instead of mixing their cocktails.

### **Care for the kids.**

Kids might be welcome at your event, but you don't want them underfoot. Bobbie Yarrusso, owner of Creative Event Designs by Bobbie in Wilmington, has seen the move toward activities designed to keep kids occupied. At a 40th birthday party, she arranged games with prizes.

### **Call a rental service.**

You can rent everything from serving spoons to plates to wine glasses. And here's the bonus: afterward, you need only scrape and rinse—no washing dishes into the wee hours of the morning. The convenience has prompted people to rent place settings for small functions, says Beth Martin of Events Unlimited in Wilmington.

Rented linens are an easy way to set the stage without props. Gold lamé and silver linens add glitz. Imperial stripes—a tone-on-tone pattern created with texture instead of color—deliver class. Diamond State Party Rentals in Wilmington offers 50 solid colors, as well as prints, says owner Annie Jones.

To make a fashion statement, drape the serving table in a contrasting color, Jones suggests. After the party, simply shake, fold and return. Nothing could be simpler.

Buy the Numbers:

How to Plan Food and Drink

It's a common scenario. Worried that you won't have enough food, you overbuy. For days afterward, your family is stuck eating canapés for dinner. Meanwhile, bottles of unused wine take up space in the basement.

Determining the right amount of food and drink is a numbers game. Here are some general formulas to help you budget. Remember, the numbers will vary depending on your guests' preferences. If there are few beer drinkers on the guest list, you can cut back on the cases. Be flexible.

- For individual appetizers, including bacon-wrapped scallops and the like, figure between two and three appetizers per person per hour. If you also have stationary setups, such as cheese and fruit trays, you may not need as many individual pieces. You'll need more pieces, however, if hors d'oeuvres are the primary menu item. You'll also need more substantial selections.

Choose at least three different appetizers for a guest list that runs eight to 10 people, four to five choices for 14 to 16 people, and six selections for up to 45 people.

- A 750-milliliter bottle of wine yields about five 5-ounce glasses. A case of wine is enough for 24 people.
- A case of beer offers 24 12-ounce servings.
- A 2-liter soda bottle offers about 11 6-ounce glasses. Remember to buy enough for mixing.
- Allow two beverages per hour for the first hour of the party. Allow a beverage an hour for the next three hours. The consumption should decrease as the party progresses. If it doesn't, start collecting car keys.
- Allow a pound of ice cubes per person, more for larger parties.
- Buy enough salad to give each person a 4-ounce serving.

Chef's Special:

Fashionable Food

In the old days, hosts and hostesses could rely on a few good party dishes. Consider pigs-in-a-blanket, chicken breasts wrapped with chipped beef, and cheesecake cupcakes, made with Nilla wafers and jarred fruit toppings. The host could trot out the same fare every year, and no one minded.

Things have changed.

"People are moving toward delighting and surprising their guests," says Daniel Love, a partner in Catering By Design in Conshohocken, Pennsylvania.

Paula Poorani, co-owner of Sugarfoot Fine Food in Little Italy and downtown Wilmington, agrees. "People want to do something different than the rest," says Poorani. "They're looking for something new."

Novel menu-making is easy when there's a theme, such as a Hawaiian luau or Southern barbecue. Poorani recently planned a Cuban party, where everything promoted the theme, from the food to the mojito drinks to the cigar-roller stationed on the patio.

Sometimes the menu sets the theme and not the other way around. Toscana Catering in Wilmington has seen an increase in wine parties, says Leslie McElfresh, director of catering. Wines are matched to multiple food courses. Chef Dan Butler will even come and cook the meal in the homeowner's kitchen.

One of Love's clients held a party to compare different vintages of Dom Perignon, which he'd collected over the years. "We had beautiful oysters with a saffron beurre blanc," Love says wistfully.

The party's location can also influence the menu. Along the beach, seafood is almost expected, says Leanne Silicato, co-owner of Make My Day Event Planning in Lewes. Take lobster fritters or the ever-popular cocktail shrimp.

Theme or no theme, there are trends in party fare. Bisques or consommés, for instance, have become increasingly fashionable, Love says. And you needn't confine soup to sit-down dinners. Serve it surrounded by demitasse cups or Japanese teacups. Cocktail party guests can take a quick sip and move on. Similarly, perch tuna ceviche or another tasty tidbit on a teaspoon or Asian soup spoon.

In keeping with the handheld theme, Love creates unconventional lollipops with cheesecake. Seared rack of lamb, cut from the bone and propped on a stick, also makes for an unusual lollipop. "People love not having the bone left in their hand," he notes.

No mess is now the way to go, he says. It's been years since he left the tail on shrimp. Instead of the typical crab claws, which leave guests wondering where to put the shell, he serves bite-size chunks of Alaskan King crab leg that are lightly brushed with drawn butter. "It's clean and simple."

Cheese trays remain stylish, but cubes of cheddar just won't do. The Cheese Chalet in Pike Creek incorporates cubed havarti and Stichelster cheddar, an English cheese comprised of a layer of Stilton cheese between two layers of double Gloucester.

When it comes to appetizers, the old can become the new. Carol Hoffman, a partner in The Cheese Chalet, says customers lately have showed more interest in mini meatballs, whether they're Swedish style, doused with marinara or spiced with barbecue sauce.

For dessert, you might think the ubiquitous chocolate fountain would be all the rage. Love isn't a fan. "They're messy," he says. "They splatter and splash." He much prefers chocolate fondue.

Gail Ashe, general manager of Moveable Feast in Wilmington, is seeing a trend toward a medley of bite-size desserts, including chocolate-dipped strawberries, cream puffs and miniature fruit tarts. "For some reason, when they're small they're more guilt-free," she says.

The Cheese Chalet also offers a variety of bite-size temptations, including lemon bars and brownies.

The manner in which the food is served can also distinguish the party. As is the case at weddings and corporate events, food stations are popular—if you have the room, that is.

Food stations not only encourage guests to mingle, but they can also add drama. Consider the sizzle and flame of an outdoor grilling station or the sight of a chef carving rare roast beef, both of which are offered by