

How To Host a Fabulous Holiday Party

By Charles Hansen

It often seems like from Halloween right through New Year's Day is one long succession of parties: some of which you may be responsible for hosting. Even if it's only family and friends, you want your holiday season party to be a memorable success, and here are some tips to help make you the perfect host.

- 1) **Think like a caterer.** Sit down and make up at least a general budget based on how much you want to spend for your party. Not only will this help you keep costs under control, but also you'll also soon find out if you're being realistic, overly stingy or (almost impossibly) overly generous. If you're thinking of inviting 20 people, and you want to spend \$20 a person, then set aside \$400. If you can match your shopping list to that amount, you're probably already a pretty professional party giver.
- 2) **Better safe than fishy.** Just about everyone has seen the memorable episode of Everybody Loves Raymond where Deborah serves a fish for Thanksgiving. The underlying message is a good one to keep in mind – a holiday party is no time for experimentation. Make the recipes you know are your specialties or family favorites, and if you want to try something new, try making a practice batch or two before the party. Unlike the rest of the year where compromise has to be the order of the day, holiday parties are about pleasing everyone.
- 3) **Invite participation.** Though your family may be comfortable with the men in front of the football game, women in the kitchen, kids underfoot rule, your party will be a lot more fun if everyone participates in some way in the preparation of the meal. This can be as simple as having kids make place cards, napkin rings or other table decorations: you can get some great ideas at your local craft store. Or, if weather permits, let the men take charge of rotisserieing the turkey or smoking the ham or brisket. And of course, when people ask, "can I bring something," don't say no. Unless you're having a very formal dinner party, you can tolerate your menu being supplemented by some surprises like green beans with mushroom soup and French fried onions or cranberry sauce in the shape of the can.
- 4) **Don't forget to decorate.** Have the fun of holiday parties are the little touches that you notice everywhere that stimulate all the senses. So invest in pine boughs or wreaths, get out all of the holiday dishes and accessories, and have some holiday music on the

stereo. Even if this is your first holiday party, a huge number of inexpensive white votives in simple clear holders can make for a successfully festive effect on a budget, as can strings of inexpensive lights (remember, when stringing lights, both safety and neatness counts, so hang with Velcro strips or removable hooks.)

5. **Divide and conquer.** Split up party tasks to those that can be accomplished in advance and those which must be done at the last minute. Do as much as you can in advance of the party, and make an hourly plan for tasks on the day of, including task lists for everyone helping you put the party together. Ideally, by the time the guests start arriving, you too should be confident, relaxed and offering your guests a drink at the door, not rushing around like a maniac putting out fires, literally or figuratively.
6. **Outsource.** Whether you have the whole party catered to your specifications or simply rent tables and chairs, remember that there are any number of companies out there whose business it is to make your life easier. Rent things like dishes, wineglasses, linens, chairs and table and the like, and have the satisfaction of knowing that everything matches and everyone has a place to sit. Or, start planning your party really early and take advantage of January white sales to stock up on glasses, linens and other holiday items in advance. There's nothing that makes you feel more clever than having all the beautiful Christmas serving and decorative wear you could possibly want that you purchased at rock bottom post holiday prices.