

# LET THE HOLIDAY PARTY PLANNING BEGIN!



## *Relax, You Got This*

Everyone knows that hosting the holidays can take your stress level from 0 to 60. But, worry not, with careful planning and our 12 tips, this year will be the holiday entertaining season that you actually enjoy just as much as your guests.

## *Make a List*

Perhaps the ultimate way to create a stress-free holiday is to live by a list. Plan ahead, and don't be afraid to delegate. "Know what you're capable and comfortable doing and give other people things to do," says Kathy Gunst, culinary expert and author of *Relax, Company's Coming!* and co-author of *Stonewall Kitchen Harvest*. Asking guests to help with a party-related task makes them feel more involved, so never be afraid to ask.

## *Cook Ahead*

Do as much ahead of time as possible. "Soups and stews are the ultimate winter and holiday food — they'll feed a crowd. Quiches and tarts also freeze well," and you don't have to make them from scratch, Gunst says.

## *Stock Up*

You'll never run out of nibbles if you shop with an aim to entertain. Stock your pantry with a selection of cookies and crackers. Consider purchasing nuts in bulk — which can be mixed together, tossed with maple syrup and cooked in a pan until they caramelize, Kathy says. Serve them with drinks or chop and scatter around a cheese platter. Long-lasting jarred tapanades and pestos make an impressive dip when mixed with fresh sour cream.

## *Keep Drinks on Hand*

As far as beverages go, it's always smart to stock up on soda and mixers. Make sure to have coffee (regular and decaf), cocoa, cider and a basket of teas handy. Keep your bar stocked with vodka, rum and a few choices of wine.

## *Deck the Halls*

Monica Gullon, former caterer, food editor and frequent entertainer, suggests going with the unexpected. "Bowls of vintage ornaments (from your family's collection or a flea market) grouped by color or glass bowls filled with white twinkle lights can both look striking. Or place a bare branch in a vase and hang small ornaments from it."

As for your exterior, you don't need a house encrusted in twinkle lights to make an impact. Try a single stand-out wreath, potted evergreens, or a big bow on the front door.

## *Keep It Tidy*

The best holiday host isn't necessarily the one who lives in the world's cleanest house. Got one messy room? Just close the door and turn off the lights and guests won't go in. A touch of clutter? Consider keeping one bin or drawer empty to sweep papers into when unexpected guests arrive. You can save your filing for when the party is over.

## *Create Comfort*

For a casual holiday party, don't feel compelled to seat guests around a dinner table. If you've got a lot of company, a buffet may be a better way. "Buffets are the most efficient way to serve a lot of people, but be sure to pull the table away from the wall so that there are four sides available to people, otherwise lines form and people can't get to the food easily," Kathy says.

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## *Add Joyful Sounds*

Set the mood with a homemade CD or computer playlist of holiday songs. It's easy to make and you'll get to hear your favorite mix of seasonal tunes. Remember to keep the music low — conversation is what counts at any celebration, writes caterer extraordinaire Sheila Lukins in her party-themed cookbook *Celebrate*.

Try to avoid musical selections with lyrics during the dinner hour, which causes competition between the lyrics and the scintillating dinner conversation that could go unheard.

## *Open Your House*

Too many friends and family to host at one time? Have an open house and let them know they can drop by any time between certain hours on one special day. Your guests will appreciate the flexibility and you'll gain quality time with the ones you love.

Gunst says the secret is preparing foods that can be done well ahead of time. That way, "When the doorbell rings for the first time, you're ready." Open houses work best when there are lots of smaller dishes to bring out throughout the day or evening as opposed to one huge main course, she adds. That way your buffet is always fresh.

## *Be a Graceful Giver*

Store a few extra gifts in a closet and you'll never be caught off-guard when a friend springs an unexpected gift-exchange; try to collect items for all ages and a few gift bags in holiday colors. If you make a practice of picking up items as you stumble upon them throughout the year, it'll be easier when the season comes around.

Consider buying in bulk — divide one case of good red wine or champagne or prettily wrapped portions of quality tea or coffee. Or do some extra baking. Double that cake recipe or cookie confection and you'll have freshly baked gifts ready to go. While a fruit cake may not be everyone's favorite, no one will turn up their nose at a sweet tin of homemade cookies — an inexpensive gift that never fails to impress.

## *Wrap It Up*

Gullon suggests wrapping all of your gifts in one signature style — saving time and creating a finished appearance. "Any solid wrapping paper will look elegant with fancy satin ribbon or cord." Simple can be chic — and it allows you to add gift tie-ons and tags tailored to the recipient's interest.

And don't overlook the power of a creative container. Everything from Chinese take-out containers to fabric remnants (illusion, organza) can help wrap gifts that are irregular in size or shape.

## *Your Holiday, Your Way*

We all know the value of family traditions and the sense of comfort they impart. However, sometimes breaking from old traditions can save your sanity; living up to Grandma's years of holiday handiwork is hard work. Keep the best, ditch the rest. Going around the room and sharing favorite holiday memories can be just as meaningful as singing every song in the holiday songbook if piano time has grown tedious over the years. "Every holiday season offers a new chance to start your own traditions," Gullon says, so be creative.