

YOU'RE INVITED: INSIDE THE HOTTEST PARTIES EVER

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HOW TO THROW THE PERFECT PARTY

Drinks or dinner, a few friends or a crowd—our soup-to-nuts guide, packed with tips from the pros, will let you entertain 'em

Photographed by Lisa Hubbard



Party for 20: major drinks and mini meals



Party for 10: an intimate dinner with friends



Party for 50: cocktails and fun bar snacks

Ever notice how some hosts make get-togethers seem as simple to pull off as a champagne cork? There's a kind of art to entertaining well. It's not hard, it just requires following a few rules: ▶ **Keep it simple.** When in doubt, narrow choices—menu, décor, etc.—and err on the side of simplicity. Too many options just muddle the mix and cost you time and money. ▶ **Project your personal style.** A party is more than food and drinks. Think about the total picture: ambience, décor and presentation. ▶ **Nail down the details.** Write a "party script:" Imagine the entire sequence—including planning, purchasing and preparation—right up to the moment your first guest arrives. ▶ **Get others involved.** No matter what size your party, it's nice to have help. Recruit guests to take coats, open wine, carry a tray of hors d'oeuvres. Hire help if you can afford it. It will help you enjoy your party. ▶ **Mix up the guest list.** People are the party. Invite fresh faces, guests of different backgrounds, generations, persuasions. ▶ **Always greet guests at the door.** Offer a drink, and introduce them to at least one other guest. If they bring a gift, acknowledge it gracefully. ▶ **Relax and enjoy your party.** When the festivities kick off, let go of details and have fun. Want more ideas on parties with panache? On these pages are three worth celebrating. —**Dave Gibbons**

MEET THE EXPERTS

Avi Adler and David Stark, N.Y.C. event planners and authors of *Wild Flowers* (Clarkson Potter, February 2003). **Susan and Elizabeth Allen**, a sister catering team out of Boston and New York who count Matt Lauer and Ben Stiller among their clients. **Eliot and Alexandra Angle**, owners of L.A.'s Aqua Vitae: Events & Interiors, and authors of *Cocktail Parties with a Twist* (Stewart, Tabori & Chang). **Jeffrey Best**, of Best Events, one of Hollywood's premier firms for party and large-event planning. **Katie Brown**, author (*Katie Brown Entertains*, *Katie Brown Decorates*; HarperCollins) and host of *The Katie Brown Show* on E! Style Network. **Marianne Weisman-Nelson**, of Special Occasions Inc., an L.A. wedding and event planner for Anne Heche and Janet Jackson, among others. **Mindy Weiss**, a Beverly Hills wedding planner for clients such as Charlie Sheen and Brooke Shields.

GETTING READY

To encourage chatting, snacking and general mingling, cluster furniture into several small groupings, not just one big one. Make room for at least half your guests to sit at any time, with a table surface nearby. It's nice to have floor cushions or little stools to work as extra seating (like the lavender Ultrasuede cube, opposite, \$90; 415-255-8516 or at easybean.com); if you're short on table space, add a few tray tables (IKEA's blond-wood version, opposite, is \$29; 800-434-4532). Instead of scattering small bunches of flowers, create a few large arrangements that can be set on the floor or around the perimeter of the room. We used hydrangeas, but any tall flower will do (try lilies or orchids); branches or large tropical leaves would also look great.

DRINKS

Set up a self-serve bar away from the entryway and prime seating area, and stock it with a selection of wine, beer, soda and sparkling water, along with a specialty cocktail. Keep the white wine, water, beer and soda on ice, and have extra ice in a bowl or ice bucket. Plan on six bottles each of red and white wine (a good inexpensive choice: Ca'del Solo Big House California-blend white and red wines, \$10 each). As a special cocktail, mix up a batch of rum-n-ade martinis (mix 5 cups light rum, 3½ cups each Grand Marnier and sour mix, 2 cups club soda; chill until cold; makes 20 drinks); serve in cocktail glasses with a thin round of orange. Note: A bottle of wine serves four to five glasses. Figure on three drinks per person for a two- to three-hour cocktail party.



Floating orange slices garnish rum-n-ade martinis.

For more product information see page 505.



Florals on the floor: Fill tall vases with blooms or branches.

SETTING THE MOOD

Switch the lightbulbs in all light fixtures in the party area to low-wattage and/or use colored bulbs (try peach or pink). Scatter votive candles in clear glass holders on coffee and side tables. Remember to dim the lights in surrounding rooms, including the kitchen and bathroom. Load your CD player and set it to random-play a mix of hip electronic music: Felix da Housecat's *Excursions* (Obsessive Recordings), *The Karma Collection: Sunrise* (Ten/3MV), Björk's *Greatest Hits* (Elektra), Morcheeba's *Morcheeba*.Charango (Reprise) or Dot Allison's *We Are Science* (Mantra Recordings). And include a selection of West African pop music in the mix: *The Touré Kunda Collection* (Putumayo), Ali Farka Touré's *The River* (Mango) or King Sunny Adé's *Synchro System* (Mango).



From top: mini muffins with turkey, smoked salmon on cocktail pumpnickel; mini hamburgers

FOOD

Serve mini versions of favorite comfort foods: tiny hamburgers on Parker House rolls, roast turkey and cranberry chutney on mini corn muffins, smoked salmon and crème fraîche on cocktail pumpnickel, grilled cheese squares served with tomato soup in shot glasses, pigs in blankets. Skip the standard buffet setup and arrange snacks on serving trays (renting 14" x 20" metal trays runs \$10 to \$14) placed on side and coffee tables. Keep hot items in a warm oven (and soup over low heat) for replenishing. Note: For a party this size, serve four to five types of hors d'oeuvres, and figure on three to five pieces per guest.

MORE IDEAS

- **Think globally** Pick a different country for the drinks and mini foods:
- **Mexican** Serve cranberry margaritas with wedges of chicken-cheese quesadillas, tortilla chips topped with black-bean salsa, and mini burritos.
- **Japanese** Offer saketinis (cosmos with a shot of sake) with edamame, dumplings and vegetable sushi.
- **Italian** Serve prosecco kirs (Italian sparkling wine with crème de cassis) with an assortment of mini bruschetta: tomato and mozzarella, prosciutto and pear, fresh ricotta and pesto, mushroom and fontina.