

at HOME
for the
Holidays

PLAN THE
Perfect Party
How-tos for a great holiday event

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Planning the perfect party can be overwhelming, especially for a novice host or hostess. Following are some tips for planning a great event from local planning professionals.

Pick a date

While it's impossible to get everyone to attend — especially a holiday party — choose a date that will work for a majority of the guests ... the last weekend before Christmas probably isn't the best time.

If you plan on throwing a large event with live entertainment at a venue other than your home, start planning now — or 13 months in advance — for next year, suggests Julie Woodward, catering director of the Madison Concourse Hotel.

To theme or not to theme?

Establishing a theme — especially for a holiday party — is an easy way to make the event fun and memorable.

“A theme is inherently built into a holiday party, but picking a specific holiday emblem, such as a snowflake, will add a memorable touch to the event,” says Angela Dupont, owner of Top Shelf Weddings and Events.

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Carry the theme through every aspect of the party, from invitations to décor to giveaway items, which will remind guests of the party for seasons to come. Use the theme as a jumpstart for creative food and beverages. With Dupont's snowflake theme, she suggests concocting a signature blue drink called "The Flurry" and serving coconut-covered mini-cakes on the dessert buffet.

"The courtesy of a reply..."

Invitations are essential to a well-attended party. Though the telephone, e-mail and other online tools like evite.com make invitations an easy, almost thoughtless process, save these informal invitations for impromptu gatherings.

"Custom holiday invitations and greeting cards send a much stronger impression than a phone call or e-mail," says Liz Vega, owner of Liz Vega Fine Stationery in Sun Prairie. "They're stylish and unique."

They also help set the tone for the event. Standard protocol is to send invitations



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A holiday theme can employ a simple visual motif such as a star or snowflake; carry it through everything from the invitations to the table decorations and food.

six weeks in advance. Use save-the-date cards only if you're concerned about attendance; otherwise, make an effort to send invitations earlier.

Feeding the masses

As parties are as much about food as they are about fun, dedicate time to menu planning.

"Whether you are preparing your dishes at home or catering in, be mindful of offering a variety of items to cater to all of your guest's needs," suggests Dupont. "Be respectful of the vegetarians, the dieters, and the allergic. Do the best you can, but this is your party and you should prepare foods that you enjoy!"

If working with a caterer, communicate your needs and wants to the caterer. This allows them to match your needs with their specialties.

Once you've established a menu, says Woodward, inform your guests as a courtesy.

Woodward also suggests making sure there is an ample amount of food on hand, so guests don't overindulge at the bar.

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Go pro

While most people want to be known for throwing a great party, that doesn't mean you need to go it alone. Hiring a caterer, consultant or professional party planner alleviates the stress of fine details, last-minute decisions and time crunches. Depending on the level of service, they can take care of everything from tracking invitation responses to menu planning to post-party clean-up. With those aspects taken care of, it's your job to do what you do best: Throw a great party.

"Most everyday people will misjudge the planning involved in pulling together the actual party in the days leading up to the event," says Dupont. "They will try to prepare all the food on that day, when they could have prepared some things like sauces or salads the day before. They will leave the house cleaning until the day before when they should be shopping and decorating the house. Professional party planners are just that, planners. We make timelines and stick to them so that ideally we are never in a time pinch, everything flows smoothly, and our clients are relaxed because of it."

Flying solo


If you opt to go solo, Woodward and Dupont offer this advice:

"Plan ahead and don't leave things go to the last minute," says Woodward. "But understand that there will be some decisions made the day of."

"Plan ahead for 'situations,' and most importantly, have fun!" says Dupont. "Remember that the dishes don't need to be cleaned right away and that it's OK if you run out of hummus. Your guests are your friends and family, so don't hesitate to ask for help if you feel overwhelmed." ■


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