

# House party

## How to throw the best holiday open house (and have fun doing it)

BY EMILY WYCKOFF

The holidays are the perfect time to open your home to friends and family for good times and good cheer. Hosting an open house is a fun, easy way to get into the spirit and bring your social network together. Fun? Yes. Easy? It can be. With good planning - and doing most of the heavy lifting in advance - you, too, can be the holiday host with the most.

Start with the food. You can keep it simple and still make it memorable. Local caterer Daniela Kayser has owned her own catering business for 10 years, and says less is more. She advises creating a simple menu that you can prep in advance.

"Choose foods that can be set out and served at room temperature, like an imported cheese plate,

roasted sliced tenderloin, spiced nuts, bite size hors d'oeuvres that your guests can graze on," said Kayser. Don't choose this moment to become Martha Stewart - you definitely don't need to prepare all the food yourself.

"Cut corners where you can. Don't be afraid to let someone else do it for you, like ordering a few items that are already prepared," Kayser said.

Not sure about quantity? If you're serving hors d'oeuvres, assume two to three pieces of each item per person. Although, says Kayser, "Young people eat more than an older crowd and guests eat more at casual parties than formal functions."


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Photos courtesy of Daniela Kayser Catering

Left. Make hors d'oeuvres like these tenderloin skewers in advance, advises party planner Daniela Kayser, so you don't need to worry about food prep when guests arrive. Right. Simple garnishes make your Thanksgiving turkey look especially impressive.



A woman with dark hair and bangs, wearing a vibrant red suede jacket and a patterned scarf, is seated at a dark wooden dining table. She is smiling warmly at the camera. The table is set with two crystal glasses, a white teacup on a saucer, and plates with a floral border. A white napkin is folded on one of the plates. The background is a softly blurred interior, possibly a restaurant or dining room, with warm lighting and a bookshelf visible on the left.

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– local etiquette expert  
Beverly Thomas



Photo courtesy of Daniela Kayser Catering

An imported cheese plate is a good make-ahead option to serve at a holiday open house.

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When it comes to the bar, beer and wine with a signature cocktail keeps the cost down. If you can, designate a bartender. A professional isn't needed - a family member or college kid works well behind the bar, too. Or set up a few different self-service bars. Kayser suggests a variety - for instance, a wine and champagne bar, a martini bar and a hot chocolate/coffee bar.

"Don't forget all the specialty fixings and to post recipes on the bar so your guests can properly put it together," said Kayser.

Count on guests consuming two drinks during the first hour and one drink for every hour after that (with five glasses per bottle of wine and 33 drinks per bottle of liquor, get your calculator out!). Make sure to have a nice variety

of non-alcoholic beverages on hand as well - (unspiked) punch is a festive and thoughtful touch.

#### **Preparing to party**

You want your house to be at its very best, which starts with clearing the clutter. Make sure party rooms are cleared of toys, books, shoes and more before the big day. Set up a coat rack (you can rent one from a local party rental business at a reasonable rate), clear out your coat closet or designate a bedroom for coats. Local etiquette expert Beverly Thomas, president of Etiquette for a New Generation, suggests enlisting young coat checkers to help greet guests and take coats.

"Often, young friends' children (or your own) are happy to help with coats, opening doors and more," said Thomas.

When it comes to decorating, a few simple touches can create a special ambience. Before spending hours on Pinterest and breaking the bank at craft stores, remember that less is more. Fresh flowers are always a party décor go-to, but if flowers aren't your thing, decorative bowls of fresh fruit, like a pretty glass bowl of lemons, are surprisingly special.

Kayser suggests using what you already have to decorate. Hang some twinkling lights from your mantel, scatter bowls of silver or gold ornaments, string holiday cards on ribbon across doorways.

"Make a simple centerpiece with branches from the yard. You can spray paint it and hang something fun from it. Be creative," said Kayser. And if nothing else, dim the lights and light some candles. Sometimes, that's all it takes.

### Who should come?

An open house is a great opportunity to cast a wide net. The opposite of an intimate dinner party, an open house can accommodate everyone, from family and neighbors to co-workers and parents of your children's friends, as guests will be coming and going; generally open house "hours" run four to six hours.

Kayser recommends mixing groups. "It makes the party so much more interesting," she said. "It's great to have a mix of people getting together and creating new encounters, or possibly running into someone you haven't seen in sometime."

Etiquette expert Beverly Thomas agrees.

"A variety of people make a party interesting – children, neighbors, co-workers, and more," said Thomas.

The key to enjoying the party yourself is to prepare ahead of time. Start your menu

and decor lists a few weeks in advance.

Create a timeline for the week of (and day of) the open house to ensure you don't miss anything, from assembling hors d'oeuvres to making the playlist to buying ice (don't you always forget ice?).

Get all of your serving platters and utensils and glasses out a few days in advance and wash if necessary (plan on it). Move furniture if need be the day before. The advance prep will ensure you can relax and enjoy your open house because as we all know, if the host isn't having fun, the guests won't have as much fun either. And if all else fails, Kayser advises, "Hire a caterer!" ■

Emily Wyckoff is a regular contributor to Buffalo Magazine who always keeps the lights low and the music loud at her holiday parties.