

HOLIDAY PARTY SURVIVAL GUIDE (logo or stamp to run with the 4 articles?)

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 ten years, *Daniela*, 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. But don't choose this moment to become Martha Stewart - you definitely don't need to prepare all the food yourself (not that Martha does either, no matter what she says).

“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.”

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, another option is to 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 the coats. Beverly Thomas, president of local *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 ambiance. Before spending hours on Pinterest and breaking the bank at Michael's, 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 you need 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.

Small Talk 101

The holidays are the most social time of the year, and you need to be on top of your game when it comes to making conversation. There can be some challenges, however, like when you ask your long lost high school friend when the baby's due (you know where we're going with this one) or you get stuck in a corner with your neighbor's boss's wife, you've exhausted all conversation and you're ready to move on...but she's not.

Here are some handy dos and don'ts for all your holiday party conversation conundrums :

DO stick to safe subjects with someone you've just met.

DON'T choose this opportunity to vent about politics.

It's an old saying for a reason: when it comes to party chatter, stay away from politics and religion. Save the sensitive topics for your nearest and dearest. What are safe subjects? Beverly Thomas, president of *Etiquette for a New Generation*, has a few suggestions. "The weather! Buffalo's resurgence. The waterfront," Thomas says. More ideas; books, movies, kids. Pick a positive topic that everyone can relate to in a non-controversial way.

DO be an active listener in a conversation.

DON'T spend the whole time looking over your conversation partner's shoulder.

The art of listening is important, and a holiday party is the perfect time to practice. Really listening and asking questions is the key to a good conversation – and just good manners.

"Ask if they like to travel, and to tell you about a recent trip. Ask the other person questions," said Thomas. "Lean in to the person. Show interest with body language."

When it's time to wrap up the conversation, don't bolt, do it with grace. Thomas recommends a simple sign off: "It's been so nice meeting you, hope to see you again."

DO be a good host and help with introductions for your guests.

DON'T hang out with your best friends in the corner of your own party.

It's a host's obligation to greet guests and facilitate introductions. You can meet your BFFs for coffee next week, but when it's your shindig, greet everyone, circulate and try to have a conversation with most guests. Make it your business to notice if someone is on his/her own and invite them into a conversation. There is usually a common thread, and according to Beverly Thomas, helping people mingle isn't difficult, especially in Western New York, "It's Buffalo. Everyone is connected somehow," she said.

DO be prepared for tricky conversations.

DON'T let one bad apple ruin your night.

Without a doubt, the holidays bring out the best, and worst, in people. Emotions can run high, and it's inevitable that you'll experience at least one less-than-perfect encounter at a holiday get together. How to react? Don't. Always take the high road. Be gracious, Smile.

"Humor always works," Thomas advises. "Find something safe to say and move to another topic." One handy line that always works to diffuse a sensitive conversation in Buffalo, according to Thomas: "We can agree to disagree, but I'm sure we can both agree we want the Bills to win."

— Emily Wyckoff