

BY ROSEMARY MANTINI

WHO LIKES TO

PARTY

... *Ahh... the holidays. I love this time of year — watching snowflakes fall gently from the sky, listening to the crackling of the fire, relaxing with ... wait a minute. Who am I kidding? The holiday season is no walk in a marshmallow world.*

It's frenzied shopping and parties, parties, parties. Hosting one yourself, are you? No problem. I asked Maureen Allen, wedding and event planner, and owner of Memorable Occasions in Mississauga, Ontario (memorableoccasionsunlimited.com) to reveal the secret to creating a remarkably fun event.

PICK A THEME

When everyone else is doing the same-old-same-old, you can show off your creative talent by putting on an imaginative and unexpected bash. The sit-down meal may still be the most popular kind of fête, but there are lots of ways to punch up the cool factor. In ten years of party planning, Maureen has developed a lot of creative ideas.

WINTER WONDERLAND

Use colours like silver, ice blue, lilac and white to decorate your home. White tablecloths with metallic organza overlay, white chair covers, sparkly snowflake invitations and falling snowflakes in the en-

try area (hire an ice company to do that for you!) create a magical effect.

CALYPSO NIGHTS

Turn up the heat with tropical foliage, twinkling lights, a steel drum band and flavourful island-style cuisine. Whip up a batch of rum punch to serve with rum cake.

COUNTRY CHIC

Trim your home with the muted colours of the season — red, green and brown. Place a small Christmas tree on the table as a centerpiece and scatter small pinecones around it. Keep a pot of apple cider simmering on the stove for a deliciously welcoming smell, and serve each guest a mug upon arrival. Steak, turkey and roasted potatoes should definitely be on the menu.

SET THE SCENE

So, you've decided on a theme for your party. Now comes the hard part. Are you going to invite cousin Sally who hoarded the cheese tarts last year? What about

your neighbours and their kids? You will have to keep those pint-sized picky eaters in mind as you plan the menu, and don't forget to provide them with games and toys to keep them occupied.

MAUREEN'S TIPS

... *Determine how many people you'd like to have attend, and how many will fit into the space comfortably.*

... *Make a master list, then divide it into two. List A contains the names of people you would really like to see. List B includes the "would be nice" guests. Send out invitations to the A list first. If any decline, immediately send out an invitation to someone on the B list. Needless to say, you probably want to be just a tad discreet about whose name is where.*

... *Invite a good mix of talkers and listeners with different interests and backgrounds.*

Now that you've got that sorted out, what will you dish up? Don't be afraid to turn a main course into hors d'oeuvres. Soup can be served warm or cold in small cups or glasses, and a roast can be thinly sliced and folded onto crackers spread with mustard. Aim to have approximately 75% of the food prepared in advance. That, of course, raises the specter of storage.

Once you've constructed appetizers, mains, sides and dessert, where should you keep them so as not to induce unfortunate memories of your party? Short of storing perishables out in the snow, your best bet is to simply clean out your refrigerator. A few days before you begin to prep, eat up what you can then freeze the rest.

PRE-PARTY PREP IDEAS

- ... Chop vegetables and fruits, and store in the refrigerator
- ... Arrange fruit and vegetable salad trays
- ... Stir up cold dips and spreads
- ... Purchase or bake desserts, like cakes, pastries and cookies
- ... Make and refrigerate appetizers, such as fruit skewers, chicken skewers, and cheese balls
- ... Mix the fruit punch
- ... Stock up on bar supplies
- ... Cook soups, pizzas and casseroles; they can be reheated on the day of the party.

PARTY PLANNING COMMANDMENTS

- ... Budget: decide how much, and stick to it
- ... Type of party: casual or formal
- ... When to hold the party: weekend or weekday; before, during or after the holiday rush
- ... Number of guests
- ... Location of the event
- ... Parking facilities
- ... Allergies and special needs
- ... Always have extra servings of food and drink

THE GOOD HOST'S CHECKLIST

There are a lot of little details to remember when planning a great party. Here are Maureen's essential tips and tricks for a stress-free event.

- ... Hire a party planner to take care of everything; or plan ahead and get some help.

- ... Pick the theme and colours, and start shopping for them early; do a mock set-up so you can visualize everything ahead of time.

- ... Place your order for rental items as soon as you can; make sure you have enough dishes, glasses, flatware and napkins for everyone.

- ... Send out invitations six to eight weeks in advance.

- ... Plan your menu and compile the shopping list; purchase the non-perishable stuff ahead of time.

- ... Take some time to relax before your guests arrive; you need to look fresh and happy when greeting them.

FLASH IN THE PAN

Relax, you're almost there. There's just one more thing that will make your party planning smooth as fondant — the right cookware. Do you have enough pots and pans? If not, you have three options: run out quick and find a sale on cookware, cut down on the number and variety of food, or invite your guests into the kitchen while you work away. Here are the party planner's top four must-haves.

- ... Rice cooker
- ... Crock pot
- ... Steamer
- ... Turbo oven

ON YOUR BEST BEHAVIOUR

We've all heard the stories — the lampshade-adorned colleague, the friends who arrive fashionably late. Throwing a great party isn't just the host's responsibility. Make sure everyone has a good time by being a good guest.

- ... RSVP by the date indicated on the invitation

- ... Dress appropriately for the occasion
- ... Drink from a glass and never from a bottle or can

- ... Converse, mingle and smile, and avoid hot button topics

- ... Leave at a reasonable time, and remember to thank your host.

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