

A Very Merry Party Manual

Want the secret to hosting a memorable holiday bash? We've got 60 of 'em, courtesy of top entertaining experts. Crib from their brilliant decorating tricks, budget-friendly sources, go-to recipes, and more!



"Wrap small bouquets in plain paper and group them in galvanized buckets, where they'll serve as rustic decor *and* gifts for your guests."

—David Stark, event planner

How to set the scene

"Select one affordable material and run with it. Right now I'm obsessed with burlap, using it to create wreaths and stitch up table runners."

—Libbie Summers, author of *The Whole Hog Cookbook*

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"When it comes to flowers, stick with the classics, like amaryllis and poinsettias, but in white." —Eddie Ross, style blogger; eddiross.com

Do you hand out favors?

50%
say yes



"I give guests small jars filled with honey from local bees."

—Ted Allen, host of *Food Network's Chopped*

50%
say no

"But I make sure people leave with a full belly!"

—Sarah Richardson, host of *HGTV's Sarah's House*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY (BOUQUETS) FRANCES JANISCH; (HONEY) PHILIP FRIEDMAN/STUDIO D



What kind of invitations do you send?

53%
say e-mail

"I send out e-mails, but I attach a fun vintage party photo [left] to get people in the holiday spirit."
—Joanna Goddard, lifestyle blogger;
joannagoddard.blogspot.com

47%
say regular mail

"I love handwritten notes, because they add a truly personal touch."
—Bunny Williams,
interior designer

Start here for the perfect playlist

Enter a single song into pandora.com, and you'll be granted an endless party soundtrack. Our pros suggest beginning with these offbeat tunes:

John Denver and the Muppets
"Deck the Halls"

—Mary Giuliani, event planner

U2
"Christmas
(Baby, Please Come Home)"
—Ken Oringer, chef at Clio in Boston

Wham!
"Last Christmas"
—Amy Atlas, event planner

Johnny Cash
"It Came upon a Midnight Clear"
—David Guas, chef at
Bayou Bakery in Arlington, Virginia

Bing Crosby
"Happy Holidays"
(Beef Wellington remix)
—Eddie Ross

"Rather than spend big on a fancy centerpiece, arrange inexpensive herbs like rosemary and mint in silver mint-julep cups, then line them down the center of a table."
—Lulu Powers, event planner

"Scatter tea lights everywhere to make an entire room glow. They don't cost much but look magical." —Joanna Goddard

"Outdoors, there's nothing more festive than strings of white lights wrapped around tree trunks and porch railings."
—Betsy Burnham, interior designer

"At my New Year's Day brunch, I fill vases with gorgeous bunches of collard greens!" —Virginia Willis, author of the cookbook Basic to Brilliant, Y'all

"Elevate a simple, round serving dish, literally, by placing it atop a wreath." —David Guas

"I clear out my living room and use a projector to show old music videos from You Tube on the wall. It's fun to watch everyone try to imitate the dance moves of the The Spinners and The Jackson 5."
—Libbie Summers

ESSENTIAL PARTY PROP



"Pearlriver.com sells beautiful, inexpensive trays, lanterns, and dishes—like these gold-leafed bowls, terrific for holding candy." —Lulu Powers

Bowls, from 6.95; pearlriver.com



PHOTOGRAPHS BY (ORNAMENTS) CAP INTERIORS; (PLATTERS) FRANCES JANISCH; (PARTY) GETTY; (BOWLS AND CANDLE) PHILIP FRIEDMAN/STUDIO D

"Put your prettiest ornaments where people can really see them. I display my favorites on a vintage tray."

—Rosanna Bowles, tableware designer



Always be prepared

"If you're able to fit it in your budget, pay for a cleaning service to come a few days before the party. That may sound extravagant, but it's money well spent." —Virginia Willis

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"Clear any little accessories from your side tables, so guests have plenty of surface area to set down drinks." —Libbie Summers

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"It's a smart idea to pick up three or four extra bags of ice."
—Nick Olsen, interior designer

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"Hire a bartender, and you'll be freer to enjoy yourself. The last one I used poured drinks, restocked ice, and even washed dishes as the party wound down." —Ted Allen

ESSENTIAL PARTY PROP



"I stash a Votivo Red Currant candle in my powder room. Why? It looks pretty and smells divine!"

—Tricia Foley, interior designer

Candle, \$28; globaltable.com

"Simplify your buffet prep by sticking Post-it notes on empty platters and bowls, indicating which finished dish goes where." —David Stark



The most relaxed (yet refined) approach to appetizers

Our experts all agree: You can't go wrong with a cheese-and-charcuterie board. Simply unwrap the perfectly paired picks on these pages, and—voilà!—instant crowd-pleaser.

Podda Classico

"One of my all-time favorites! This nutty cheese also tastes great served alongside salty potato chips and champagne."

—Lulu Powers

\$24.99 per pound;
murrayscheese.com

Sopressata

"This Italian meat goes well with so many cheeses—and lasts a long time in the fridge."

—Eddie Ross

\$9.99 for 9 ounces;
igourmet.com

Roquefort

"Put out at least one cheese with a pungent flavor, such as this funky blue."

—David Guas

\$29.99 per pound; murrayscheese.com

Fromager d'Affinois

"Almost everyone adores this soft, Brie-like selection."

—Rebekah Zaveloff, kitchen designer

\$16.99 per pound; murrayscheese.com

Cheese Straws

"Mississippi Cheese Straws taste as if they came straight from my mother's Virginia kitchen."

—Bunny Williams

\$8 for 6.5 ounces;
mscheesestraws.com

PHOTOGRAPHS BY (CHEESE BOARD) FRANCES JANISCH; (GLASS) PHILIP FRIEDMAN/STUDIO D



**Carr's Table
Water Crackers**

"This simple choice
never competes with
other flavors."

—Serena Thompson,
CL contributing editor
and author of *The Farm
Chicks Christmas*

Available at grocery
stores nationwide

**Marcona
Almonds**

"They're
wonderfully salty
and rich."

—Nick Olsen

\$11.95 per pound;
amazon.com

**Picholine
Olives**

"Mild in
strength, this
variety improves
martinis, too."

—Rosanna
Bowles

\$7.99 for 7
ounces;
amazon.com

Plum Chutney

"Homemade condiments, like
a quick chutney or jam, make all the
difference." —Ken Oringer

More satisfying fare—plus drinks!

"Three words: pigs in blankets.

The ones from Trader Joe's [*trader
joes.com for stores*] are inexpensive
and a surefire smash hit. I serve
them on white trays next to rame-
kins filled with Dijon mustard."

—Joanna Goddard

"Vintage cookbooks can be fantastic
resources for old-timey drinks,
like the Apricot Nip, Raspberry Shrub,
Currant Fizz, or Chocolate
Highball." —Serena Thompson

"I do an all-white crudité platter
of endive, cauliflower, fennel,
white celery, white asparagus, and
thinly sliced radishes—with
an herb yogurt dip on the side."

—Tricia Foley

"My mom always puts out a box
of See's Candies during the holidays;
now I do the same." —Kathryn
Storke, wedding blogger; snippet
andink.com

"I go to so many parties where
there's no beer—and I'm a beer guy.
Remember to stock up for
folks like me!" —Marc Murphy, chef
at Landmarc in New York City

ESSENTIAL PARTY PROP



"These super-cheap wine-
glasses are more elegant, and
eco-friendly, than disposable
ones." —Tricia Foley

Glasses, \$4.99 for six;
ikea.com for stores



idea notebook

"To whip up a quick dip: Defrost frozen spinach in a casserole dish, top with shredded Parmesan, and bake at 350 degrees until the top is golden brown." —*Mary Giuliani*

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"Prosecco is my favorite party drink, because it's light, fizzy, and more affordable than champagne!" —*Tricia Foley*

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"Pinholepress.com offers a service where you can create custom-photo wine labels. I have such a blast designing ones with funny holiday snapshots." —*Joanna Goddard*

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"Crostini can be made with whatever you have in the pantry. Brush baguette slices on both sides with olive oil; toast bread until golden, then flip and repeat. Top with ingredients like white beans and sage or ricotta and peas." —*Ken Oringer*

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"I'm a sucker for cute packaging, so I can't resist stocking my home bar with those miniature cans of Coke and bottles of tonic water." —*Nick Olsen*

Do you include an end time on invites?

33%
say yes

"Otherwise, guests may drain your wine cellar completely!" —*Ted Allen*

67%
say no

"My wife and I are both from New Orleans, where you never shut a party down till the last person's ready to leave." —*David Guas*

"You can't beat a country ham surrounded by a mountain of biscuits. And if you don't want to make the biscuits yourself, just buy them from a local bakery." —*Virginia Willis*

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"Pour hot-pepper jelly or Pickapeppa sauce [\$4.50 for five ounces; amazon.com] over cream cheese. It'll get devoured long before the dishes you worked all night to prepare." —*David Guas*

ESSENTIAL PARTY PROP



"These dish towels from Ikea can function as over-size, bistro-chic napkins. Then after the party, they're perfect to use for cleanup." —*David Stark*

Dish towel, 79 cents; ikea.com for stores

Roll with the punches!

"I skip the fuss of preparing individual drinks and instead concoct two punches—one that's served hot, the other cold."

—*Gina Chersevani, beverage director at PS 7 in Washington, D.C.*

"Ale"ments

Peel, core, and quarter 8 apples. Tie up 5 cardamom pods, 2 cinnamon sticks, and 1 star anise in a piece of cheese cloth. Place apples and wrapped spices in a large pot and add 2 quarts pale ale and 2 cups honey. Simmer on medium-low heat for about 20 minutes; remove from heat. To serve, pour 1 ounce dark rum into a mug, then top with ale mixture. Serves about 10 to 12.

Old Faithful

In a large bowl, combine 1¾ cups powdered sugar, 1 (750-ml) bottle bourbon, and half of 1 (750-ml) bottle St. Germain. Whisk until sugar dissolves. Add 4 cups pink grapefruit juice, 20 dashes grapefruit bitters, about 30 mint leaves, and 20 grapefruit peels. Stir gently, then let sit for 1 hour before adding 1 (750-ml) bottle sparkling water. Serve over ice. Serves about 20.



"Pull off the coolest party trick with plain old dry-erase pens. Simply draw a playful design directly on the glass of a framed portrait, then use a damp rag to wipe it off the next day." —David Stark



PHOTOGRAPHS BY (PUNCH AND FRAME) FRANCES JANISCH; (TOWEL AND RACK) PHILIP FRIEDMAN/STUDIO D

ESSENTIAL PARTY PROP



"Prevent guests from having to dig through a mountain of coats by investing in a metal folding garment rack." —Ted Allen

Garment rack, \$69;
containerstore.com

And above all else, keep your sense of humor!

"If a blunder happens, just take it in stride. At one of my get-togethers last year, a friend spilled red wine on our brand-new duvet cover. I just laughed and told him, 'It's not a *real* party unless red wine is spilled.' PS: We ended up getting it out with Tide!" —Joanna Goddard

"Order funny paper cocktail napkins, like the ones from mikwright.com, to lighten the mood. I set out a few stacks, then wait to hear guests crack up when they read them. Mix the napkins like a deck of cards so that people standing together won't have the same ones." —David Guas

"It may sound odd, but I actually like to see the mess the next morning. It reminds me of how much fun we all had the night before!" —Libbie Summers