

SUNDAY

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◀A table setting is about love, laughter, thought and care'; Louisa Preskett Mobbs of Maison Margaux

It's nearly tablescaping time...

Madeleine Howell seeks expert inspiration for the perfect festive place-setting

Elaborate table styling is everywhere at the moment, and so firmly back in fashion that “tablescaper” seems a valid career aspiration for those with a good eye. This new generation of modern tableware tastemakers, who share their artfully mismatched and matching

(“matchimalist”) settings on Instagram, are inspiring hosts to playfully subvert tradition and set the mood for dinner parties and gatherings in the most magical of ways. It's all a bit Mad Hatter's tea party: the conventional rules have gone out of the window, and these days there

need be no constraints on creativity or imagination. You might usually lean towards the sparse, minimalist end of the spectrum, but if there's ever an excuse to go OTT and just a tiny bit mad with table styling, it's during the festive season – especially this year, since so

many of us weren't able to gather together in 2020. With that in mind, we've enlisted the experts to help you take your Christmas table to a whole new level...

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Cover story



◀ More is more: Lady Jenima Herbert and Lady Alice Herbert with their 'whimsical, kitsch' Christmas tablescapes



'It's lovely to have conversation pieces on the table'

Lay London, London's first tablescapes rental service, was launched by Lady Jenima, 32, and Lady Alice Herbert, 30, in February 2020. Their family seat is Wilton House, the Palladian mansion in Wiltshire, recognisable as a shoot location for *Bridgerton*. *The Crown* and *Sense and Sensibility*. The pair recently launched an exclusive collaboration with Wickelwood.

◆ Alice: I used to work at Tiffany & Co on events and when it came to capturing the imagination, the table was everything. There was no one out there at the time doing tablescapes to hire for hosting at home, but because we all lead such busy lives, especially in London, we've found there really is a demand. Just as rental fashion has become more popular, seen as less wasteful and more sustainable, so too is there now a place for renting beautiful tableware for one night only, without buying plastic bits that go in the bin.

We love a theme and Christmas is an excuse to go all-out. This table is traditionally festive but in a whimsical, kitsch way. We played with texture by using velvet bows as napkin ties and featured nutcrackers, gold pinecones and glitter reindeer for drama. We went for white

linen because we wanted the decor to pop, but we also love a chintzy print. More is more, and it's fun to leave a little keepsake at someone's place to take away, whether it's an eclectic bauble for their own tree or a little nutcracker."

Jenima: For Christmas this year, we're going full whack. Our clients are so excited to celebrate after last year's more pared-back celebrations. Here, we've put flowers from the New Covent Garden Flower Market in little bud vases, so as not to block the person opposite. Clementines or pomegranates also work well as table decorations at Christmas.

We've shied away from single-use crackers, but we love fabric Happy Crackers with Liberty fabric (happy-crackers.co.uk). We source tableware from all over, collecting as many handmade pieces as possible, scouring craft markets and finding makers on Instagram – but we have our lacquered, twisty candlesticks made by a family of candlestick makers in Italy. It's lovely to have conversation pieces on the table. Flickering candlelight and reflections from mirrored candlesticks or tea lights running down the centre create a timelessly elegant atmosphere. laylondon.com

WHERE TO SHOP THE LOOK

TRUFFLE TABLESCAPES
Founded by Kate Fairlie, Truffle Tablescapes creates stylish and easy-to-use tablescapes packages which take the hassle out of table dressing. This year's Winter Fern collection is a celebration of all things evergreen. It's for those who want to bring nature into their home this year, but with "added gold sparkle for festive glam". truffletablescapes.co.uk

THE EDITION 94
The aesthete behind this lifestyle and homeware store with enviable vintage collections on the Fulham Road is India Whalley, who has an eye for unique treasures sourced from around the world. theedition94.com

SETTING PRETTY
Known for playful, bold colour palettes and prints, Stephanie Bloom and Julie Darwent put together tableware collections for joyous occasions. settingpretty.com

REBECCA UDALL
Rebecca Udall specialises in "designing and sourcing fine linens and luxury tableware to elevate the everyday". Her Christmas table features ruffled burgundy Irish linen, dried split oranges, Murano glass tealight holders shaped like table lamps, tortoiseshell cutlery and dried wreaths of transparent discs of honesty (*Lunaria annua*) tied with green velvet bows. rebeccaudall.com

HAUTE HOSTING

William Hanson, etiquette coach and author of *The Bluffer's Guide to Entertaining* advises:

◆ At Christmas, you might host larger numbers of people than your dining table might comfortably allow. Higgledy-piggledy seating is to be expected, but try to avoid your guests feeling too cluttered. Communal service, in which dishes are served in dishes on the table rather than coming out plated, restaurant-style, is the norm at Christmas, so be mindful that your table decorations allow space.

◆ Don't light candles at Christmas lunch – but candles at dinner are an absolute must.

◆ Everyone has a different cracker policy. Some people are adamant that crackers are only pulled after the meal, but then there's little point in the paper hats. If you pull them at the start of the meal, the terrible jokes within can help to fuel the conversation. In any case, they should be placed to the left of each person's table setting on the bread plate, on a proper napkin. Linen, not tissue.

◆ Do deploy the children to help lay and clear the table.

◆ Warm plates are a must, unless it's a cold course.

◆ Set the wine on the table in carafes for guests to serve themselves. Be liberal with libations. Christmas is a time for generosity.

◆ Guests should also help themselves to gravy – but it should be ladled, not poured, even from a gravy boat.

◆ The hosts should be seated at the heads of the table.

◆ Christmas lunch is a marathon, not a sprint. Hosts should start eating first and finish last, setting the pace of the meal.

◆ Correctly, the fork and the spoon for the pudding does not go above the plate. This style is an Americanism. Rather, it goes down to the left and right-hand side of the rest of the cutlery, unless you need to save space. williamhanson.co.uk



I'm channeling Christmas meets Hollywood'



Party designer Fiona Leahy, 49, is the founder and creative director of Fiona Leahy Design. She made her name throwing dahlia-strewn lunches for Christian Louboutin, lavish suppers for Smythson and Dior, Chinese-lantern-lit dinners for Louis Vuitton and Dita Von Teese and Jade Jagger's 30th birthday pjama party at Claridge's.

◆ My starting point for this Christmas table was a chic burlesque tablecloth from Once Milano (oncemilano.com), with pale-pink porcelain "Rink" plates by Kaneko Kohyo (ko-hyo.com). I like the idea of a well-travelled table, taking

influences from around the world. I make my own marbled paper crackers, with monogrammed velvet bows by Hand & Lock (handembroidery.com) and paper by Jemma Lewis Marbling (jemmamarbling.com). It's so easy to make your own. I'm obsessed with Grandiosa Floral Designs' glamorous blown out roses in deep red (grandiosa.com), and I wanted to channel a "Christmas-meets-Hollywood" look at Tony Duquette's house" look.

I love the idea of a table setting being painterly, and the fresh pomegranates, figs and grapes strewn over the table have a Dutch masters' vibe. The burgundy candles are by a great new com-

pany called Candle Flair (candleflair.com), and the green glasses are from R-DLAB (researchanddesignlab.com). For placements, I buy empty snow globes, spray the base with spray paint from Cass Art to match the tablecloth, cut coloured card into a dome shape and insert it, writing the guest's name with a Tombow brush pen. When it comes to cutlery, I prefer heavy vintage silver at Christmas. The Oliver Messel suite at the Dorchester, where this table was laid by the fireplace, is so decadent. Messel was a stage designer, and to me, this is a really traditionally Christmassy setting. fionaleahy.com



'I'm interested in creating ultra-chic tablescapes which are luxe, but also sustainable'

Wedding planner and luxury events designer Alice Wilkes, 30, made her name styling experiences for the likes of Valentino, Prada and Viktor & Rolf, and events at locations including Heckfield Place in Hampshire and the Four Seasons Hotel George V in Paris.

◆ Last year we threw away 227,000 miles of wrapping paper, so this year I'm interested in creating ultra-chic tablescapes which are luxe, but also sustainable and in touch with nature. Rebecca Udall is my go-to for timeless raffish linens, which are the perfect foundation for any table (rebeccaudall.com). The dried pampas tree by Fiona Fleur floral design

which I've used here can be reused and reimaged every year, with the base as the foundation (fionafleur.com).

This year, I'll be giving everlasting dried floral baubles by Hannah Hunnam Flowers as place-setting gifts (hannahunnam.com), and using reusable fabric crackers. I've got a collection of reusable velvet bows by the Embroidered Napkin Co (theembroiderednapkincompany.co.uk), which can be saved for next year, or used to tie hair. I even put them on the collars of my border terriers. As a finishing touch, I love Heather Evelyn's handwritten calligraphy candles, which can be personalised (heatherevelyn.net).



'If you have beautiful things, use them – especially at Christmas'

Louisa Preskett Mobbs, 41, is the founder of Maison Margaux, an online tableware shop and rental service. Her other company, Polar Black Events, specialises in luxury branded events.

◆ Tablescaping can be seen as quite a frivolous concept, but at the heart of it, it's about gathering people around a table and making them feel special. For me, it's about love, laughter, thought and care. I can't wait to get together around the table with my husband, Jeremy, our children, Margaux, five, Harrison, eight, and Charlie, nine, and our extended family. At Christmas, you might sit around that table for at least three hours. Everything on my Christmas table this year is from Maison Margaux, apart from place names by Romeo + Jules (romeoandjules.studio) and two white candlesticks from Toots Creek Antiques in Virginia. My mother is from Virginia, and every time we go I buy something fabulous, like an art-deco punch bowl.

Place settings are so important at Christmas dinner, because it makes people feel thought about. Little flourishes like ours such as the burgundy and gold-leaf dinner plates, L'Objet gilded salt and pepper swans and glass tumblers with glass red berries inside them are perfect additions to the table. At Christmas, you want drama and magic, which is why I love bold, patterned tablecloths. It's all about layering. I have a rule of three: a placemat, dinner plate and top plate, all stacked as people sit down so the table looks finished. I whisk away the plates just after they've sat down.

A great way to style your table is to buy classic pieces but hire trend-led pieces to change things up each time. My mother used to give me a vintage champagne coupe every year at Christmas, which I found very odd, but now I have this wonderfully mismatched collection. If you have beautiful things, use them – especially at Christmas. maisonmargauxltd.com

FINISHING TOUCHES

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|---|--|---|--|---|--|---|---|
| <p>Esio 28-piece faux tortoiseshell cutlery set £295, oka.com</p> | <p>Nancy and Betty reusable red gingham fabric crackers £36 for six, nancyandbetty.com</p> | <p>Soho House home set of two large brushed brass candleholders £135, sohohome.com</p> | <p>Villeroy and Boch Winter Bakery footed bowl £72.90, villeroy-boch.co.uk</p> | <p>Emma Bridgewater Hawthorn towel 250x160cm cotton tablecloth £94, johnlewis.com</p> | <p>Pick 'n' Mix Humbug tumblers (set of four) £64, laylondon.com</p> | <p>Mackenzie-Childs set of four "Jolly" napkin rings £94, amara.com</p> | <p>Burgundy and gold leaves dinner plate £94, maisonmargauxltd.com</p> |
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