



FOOD & DRINK / DINING

Robb Report Host Guide: Party Favorites

BY LISA MATTE

Abbondanza! The word alone evokes images of joyful celebration, family ties, and hearty feasts — which is exactly what Francesca Abbracciamento, one of Manhattan’s premier party planners, is predicting this season. Keep in mind, however, that letting the good times roll does not necessarily mean rolling out the red carpet for everyone in your address book. “Events are more intimate now,” she says. “Five years back it was the bigger the better. Now people are selecting guests who are in their closest circle. That’s true whether it’s a corporate or private event.”

Still, Abbracciamento says it is possible to create an intimate party atmosphere even when your guest list runs long. The secret is in the setup. Think old-world charm. Mix and match china and stemware. Select colors that are rich and deep, hues that caress the senses. “Go with family-style serving and use your beautiful things,” says Abbracciamento, who routinely shops antiques galleries and even tag sales in search of classic stemware, flatware, place settings, and accessories to grace her clients’ tables. “Show off your heirlooms, your vintage glassware and china. Years ago, families had beautiful hand-crocheted table runners and exquisite hand-sewn linens. Get them out and layer different kinds of tablecloths. Start with an aubergine cloth in cotton or silk, which is really rich and regal. Overlay it with something lace or sheer. I love the idea of in-home entertaining where guests are seated at a rustic table set with opulent china and stemware.”

Abbracciamento embraces the philosophy that a successful event, large or small, should engage the senses. Guests should experience the party through sight, sound, scent, taste, and touch. To that end, she might choose to replace floral centerpieces with vibrant arrangements of seasonal fruit. Even the beverage selection comes into play. “For fall and winter, I love serving Chambord,” she says. “It’s a beautiful, deep, rich color. Pair it with Champagne and vodka. Put the bottle of Chambord in the center and offer a selection of flutes, martini glasses, and cordial glasses. Add a bottle of Pellegrino and you’re all set.”

A similar shift toward a more intimate style of entertaining is taking place on the West Coast, says Marley Majcher, the president and chief creative officer of The Party Goddess, an event producer based in Pasadena, Calif. She says social gatherings today are more focused on spending quality time with friends and family, but things can still become interesting once the guest list is established. While Majcher takes her party-planning responsibilities seriously, she approaches each event with a touch of whimsy. After all, parties are supposed to be fun, but that does not necessarily mean themes and costumes—at least not in the traditional sense. Themes can come in the form of color, cuisine, or even cocktails. “Everybody still wants a good martini,” says Majcher. “Or you can mix it up with interesting and funky drinks like a cosmopolitan, lemon drop, sour apple, or chocolate martini. For a Latin influence, serve Mojitos.”

Ahhh, the Mojito. The Cuban cocktail, a pleasantly intoxicating blend of white rum, sugar, lime, and fresh mint rumored to have been favored by Ernest Hemingway, is one sure way to get the party started. The next step, says Majcher, is to introduce an element of surprise, something totally unexpected. If the theme is Latin, bring on the salsa lessons. Going for a Polynesian flair? Have a lei maker at the party. “When something happens that’s a total surprise, people won’t be able to stop talking about your party,” says Majcher. “That’s a magic ingredient that makes a successful event.”

The element of surprise was the key to success for one of Majcher’s most memorable events. In the course of planning a Flag Day party for 250 guests, Majcher encouraged her client to pull out all the stops to create an over-the-top celebration of patriotism. Invitations prompted partygoers to dress in red, white, and blue. Table settings echoed the color theme. Centerpieces were created using red neon gel stars, and walls were splashed with red, white, and blue. At the end of the evening, a Dixieland band struck up “God Bless America,” and revelers joined the chorus while servers distributed silver tubes. When the tubes were shaken on cue at the end of the song, they burst open, filling the room with an explosion of red, white, and blue confetti. The hostess later reported she had never, in all her party-giving experience, received so many thank-you notes from guests thrilled by the evening.

To surprise guests, you need to remain ahead of the party-giving trends, and the key to that is learning how to spot a trend in the making. It does not require a crystal ball—but don’t rule that out when it comes to selecting entertainment for your next gala bash—just a bit of research and a lot of imagination. Greg Jenkins, a partner in Bravo Productions of Long Beach, Calif., peruses magazines for ideas. While fashion and design publications come in handy, *Popular Mechanics* is one of Jenkins’ favorite sources of inspiration. He says the magazine’s articles about emerging technologies and predictions about products that will be on the market decades from now offer an insightful peek at the future. “I feel like I just gave away a secret,” says Jenkins.

Renowned New York party planner David Tutera, author of *A Passion for Parties: Your Guide to Elegant Entertaining* (Simon & Schuster, 2001) and *America Entertains at Home*, which is due out in late 2003, has his own secrets for making any event memorable: a list of dos and don’ts that he is happy to share. First of all, says Tutera, sell the drama. Parties are like theatrical

productions: There should be constant motion; something new should be happening at all times. If a Broadway show fails to entertain, the audience loses interest, and the same holds true for social events. Second, says Tuter, create tons of texture. Combine layers and levels of texture to convey a feeling of intimacy and warmth. The third component is service, service, service. Tuter firmly believes that party guests should be waited on hand and foot. And, finally, make sure the space is not just a pretty room. A party is all about the experience, counsels Tuter. "Guests should become part of the party, not just attend the party," he says. "They should be compelled to circulate and experience the entire evening."

For one recent event, Tuter managed to create an intimate experience even though the guest list topped out at close to 300. He accomplished that seemingly impossible task by throwing caution to the wind and setting 30 individual tables in 30 unique styles.

Each table reflected a specific color palette, and that palette carried through the linens, the china, the stemware, and the centerpiece. Guests at each table were left feeling as though they were seated in the dining room of a friend's home.

"I always encourage my clients to allow me to step away from the expected and try unique and innovative ways of entertaining," says Tuter. "Never take the safe route or follow a formula everyone else is doing. Be daring and you can become the trendsetter."

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