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OPEN HOUSE

Hosting an open house for a gathering of good friends is the anxiety-free way to welcome the holidays. Start with festive seasonal décor, then create a low-key mood with **lots of nibbles** to graze on, plus casual food (served buffet-style), and, finally, a make-your-own dessert bar



“Open houses are best when you walk in and smell the aroma of food wafting through the air. It’s inviting, homey and makes guests want to be there.”

—EVENT PLANNER YIFAT OREN

1 Host the party on a weekend afternoon. Set it for 2 to 6 P.M. Friends can socialize for a few hours and still have time to go holiday shopping.

2 Create a tight vibe. “If a room feels empty, things won’t get off the ground, so use fewer rooms,” says N.Y.C. caterer Peter Callahan.

3 Decorate with seasonal items. Stack fragrant dried pieces (pinecones, clementines, cranberries, cinnamon sticks) in a glass cylinder, suggests N.Y.C. florist Raquel Corvino. Or make it a Golden Year party: Weiss uses gold tablecloths and gold florals like mums, calla lilies, Curiosa roses and maple leaves.

4 Play upbeat tunes. “Music drives the energy level of a party,” says DJ Ursula rooo. Keep it interesting with Federico Aubele’s *Gran Hotel Buenos Aires* (ESL Music), a mix of tango and hip-hop.

5 Welcome guests with drinks. Have a tray waiting in the entryway. Later serve hot mulled wine; add raisins, almonds and a dash of whiskey. Or arrange a tea bar with various single-bag selections and a few liqueurs for spiking.

6 Set out munchies. This is a grazing party, so put out dishes of nuts and dried fruits and replenish often. Or create an edible arrangement of crudités in a clear-glass bowl.

Phillip Weingarten of Good Food Catering suggests a white, red and green color scheme: endive, mushrooms, cherry tomatoes, red and green peppers and zucchini.

7 Pick a food theme. Try a home harvest party, serving a hearty soup right off the stove. Or go Italian: Food Network chef Giada De Laurentiis likes a charcuterie platter (left) of salami, hard cheeses, fruit and breadsticks with bowls of marinated olives, roasted bell peppers and bocconcini. Or create a sandwich bar: On a buffet, set out a ham, turkey or smoked salmon; add cheese, breads and condiments (horseradish, mustards and crème fraîche with dill), and let guests make mini-sandwiches.

8 Create a decorate-your-own dessert bar. Set out plain cupcakes (or holiday sugar cookies) next to colorful frostings and sprinkles. Or, Weingarten suggests having a cookie swap: Ask guests to bring a batch of their favorite cookies to share. Display on stacked pedestals.

guest tip

RATHER THAN BRINGING FLOWERS TO A PARTY (A FRAZZLED HOSTESS MAY NOT HAVE THE TIME TO ARRANGE THEM), SEND A SWEET BOUQUET THE NEXT DAY AS A THANK-YOU.

DINNER

Dust off the good china, press the linens and create a beautiful sit-down dinner. A good host should bring to the table a few **simple and delicious courses**, flattering candlelight, fun music ... and lively spirits. The payoff: a get-together guaranteed to be as sparkling as the conversation



“It may be a special occasion, but using a smaller table—say, a six-foot rectangle for 10 guests—encourages conversation.”

—CATERER PETER CALLAHAN

1 Let a theme be your party road map. Pick a single cuisine (say, Chinese) or color (think Diddy’s “white” party) and use it to decide everything: invites, décor, music, food and drink. “It creates a cohesive look

and makes the room dressier,” says Callahan.

2 Arrange guests to maximize conversation. Using place cards, seat the best listeners next to the best talkers.

3 Listen up. Start off with cool sounds (like Radiohead or Beck), suggests DJ Ray Jarrell. During dinner play a sexy bossa nova or *Henry Mancini: Greatest Hits* (RCA).

4 Go for the glow. Everyone looks best in warm candlelight, so surround tall silver or glass candlesticks with votives. Or float short candles in a clear bowl of water.

5 Think holiday. Line the center of the table with evergreen branches wound with Christmas lights, suggests Hiro Sone of Terra restaurant in Napa Valley, Calif. N.Y.C. florist Meredith Waga Perez attaches 10-inch wreaths to chair backs with white ribbon.

6 Start off sparkling. Offer guests a flute of champagne when they arrive;

serve wine with dinner (one bottle for every two people). “Liquor shops can suggest wines to fit both your menu and budget,” says Mark Miller of Morrell & Co. in N.Y.C.

7 Keep the first course simple. L.A. event planner Yifat Oren suggests pumpkin ginger soup topped with goat cheese crumbles. Or serve shrimp cocktail in a chilled martini glass with a dollop of cocktail sauce in the bottom.

8 Update a classic for the main course. Instead of serving plain roast chicken, serve chicken with chorizo. Another idea: roast lamb with star anise and garlic mashed potatoes.

9 End on a sweet note. “Save the best for last,” says Weiss. Finish the meal with mixed winter greens topped with cranberries and candied walnuts, then blow guests away with a decadent dessert. Stick a sparkler into a layer cake and turn the evening into a special occasion—even if you have to make one up.

guest tip

PRESENT A BEAUTIFUL BOX OF DARK CHOCOLATES, CARAMELS OR CRYSTALLIZED GINGER FOR AFTER DINNER. THEN SAY A TIMELY GOOD NIGHT 30 TO 45 MINUTES AFTER COFFEE HAS BEEN SERVED.

BLOWOUT

Rock your world—not to mention your guests'—with a big-time bash for 40 or more. Invite an eclectic crowd, turn your living room into a chic lounge, choose an upbeat playlist, **pour the cocktails**—and get the party started. Now all you need is to polish your small talk—and work on those dance moves



“You never want lighting that’s too bright or space in between your music. Each song should flow into the next so there’s never silence. Think about hiring a DJ or a funky new band.”

—CLUB OWNER AMY SACCO

1 Create a dance party.

Your home doesn’t have Disco-on-Demand? No problem. N.Y.C. nightclub owner

Amy Sacco suggests putting down a black-and-white-check linoleum floor and hanging multi-size disco balls (both are

available at party rental stores). Or go bohemian: Hang Moroccan paper lamps and scatter jewel-tone cushions on rugs.

2 Let your inner boogie out.

“Get people dancing with familiar disco and eighties tunes,” says DJ Jarrell. Later, trust the pros by playing a party mix like Ursula 1000’s *Ursadelica* (ESL Music).

3 Create a showstopping arrangement.

Put silver holiday balls in a tall, clear-glass vase, add long-stemmed white flowers like amaryllis or Casablanca lilies, and fill with water, suggests N.Y.C. floral designer Jen Stone. Place in the foyer for immediate impact.

4 Lighten up.

For maximum glow, place luscious lily blooms on a mirrored tray with flickering votive candles. Guard against accidents in congested areas by placing hurricane shades over pillars.

5 Create a uniform look with chic glassware.

Callahan suggests renting square rocks glasses for every-

thing—cocktails, wine, beer, nuts and olives. A good rule of thumb: three glasses per person, plus extras for the nibbles.

6 Avoid one crowded bar.

Instead, Callahan keeps guests moving by creating little vignettes. Set up drink stations, with wine in one area, Belgian ales in another, and flavored martinis in a third. At each station offer bottled waters, suggests Bryan Evans of the New York Bartending School.

7 Serve easy-to-handle snacks.

Guests won’t need to put down their cocktails to eat shrimp skewers, roast beef on brioche or grilled-cheese sandwich sections. Sacco suggests luxe nibbles such as toast points with caviar and crème fraîche.

8 Cap off the party with sweets.

Toward the end of the evening bring out pedestals brimming with bite-size brownies, blondies and lemon bars, suggests Oren.

—Francine Maroukian; additional reporting by Rebecca Sample Gerstung, Erika Lenkert, Anna Nordberg



THERE’S NO EXCUSE FOR NOT DANCING AT A PARTY, SO GET INTO THE SWING OF THINGS—YOU’LL FIND IT’S A LOT MORE FUN THAN STANDING IN THE CORNER AND NURSING A MARTINI.