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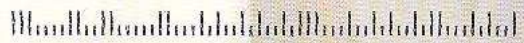
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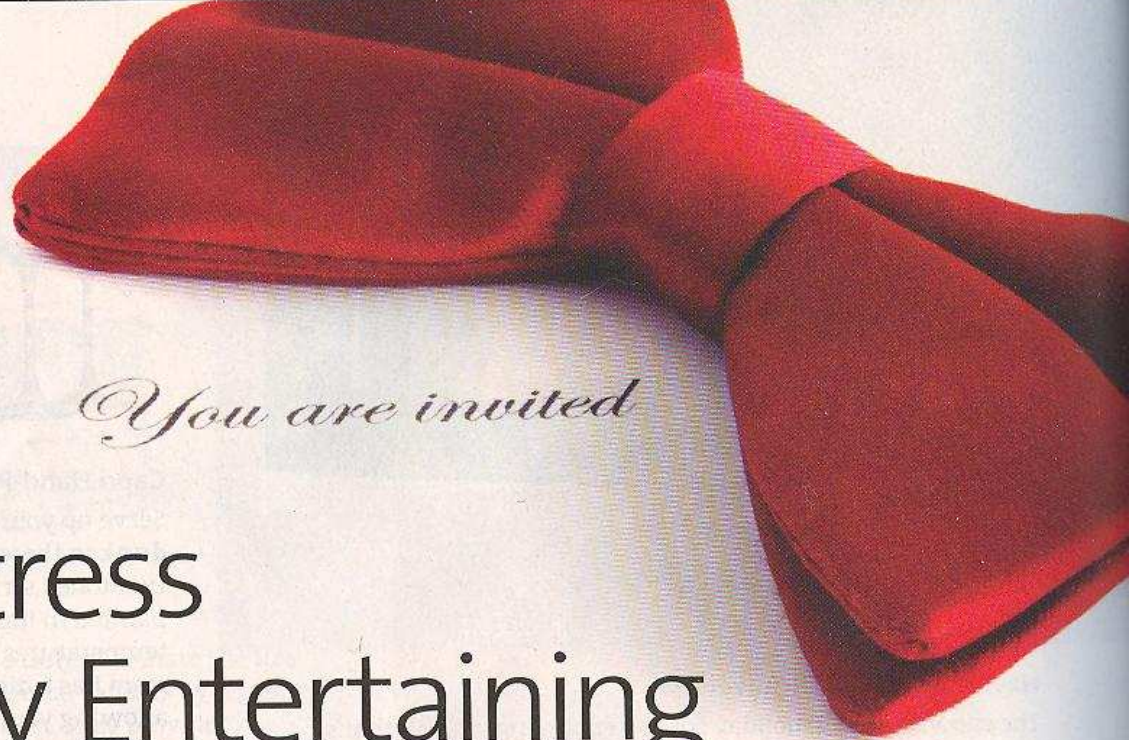
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You are invited

Low-stress Holiday Entertaining

Forget the quest for perfection. Our expert party planners tell you how to pull together a fun and fabulous holiday get-together without breaking a sweat—or your budget.

BY SARAH WESLEY-LEMIRE

IT WASN'T THAT long ago that a memorable holiday party consisted of nothing more than a couple cans of spray cheese, a large punch bowl brimming with spiked eggnog, and a Christmas tree with its colored lights blinking merrily in the corner of the room.

Now, for better or worse, it seems that the holiday party has become an entity of its own. The pressure is on: You must have the perfect setting, the perfect hors d'oeuvres, the latest cocktail du jour. Your decorations have to rival those of the White House, and even be a slight improvement on them if possible.

If you've been charged with hosting the family get-together, the neighborhood gathering, or the dreaded office party, don't fret. Hosting a party is easier than you think. It doesn't take months of planning, thousands of dollars, or even your own personal event concierge. With just a few simple tips and a little bit of planning, you can host the perfect party.

Even better, we've spoken to the party planning experts so that you don't have to.

According to Heather Tolley-

Bauer, owner of Done on the Run LLC in Middletown, the perfect home party begins with the basics.

She says you don't need to throw a fancy shindig or stress about finding the right shade of napkins. Just serve delicious, easy-to-eat food and make sure that there's plenty of it. Set up beverage stations for wine, beer and other drinks, and be sure to include soft drinks or juice for guests who prefer not to drink alcohol.

The invitations should include all the important details of your gathering. Guests should know ahead of time whether you are serving finger food or a four-course meal. This ensures that they won't have eaten prior to arriving at your lavishly catered sit-down dinner.

The invites should also include directions, if necessary. Consider putting balloons or some other event-marking item on your mailbox so new guests know that they are at the right place. Your house should be well-lit and inviting.

As guests arrive, you should personally open the door, and greet them warmly. Don't forget to make sure that your guests are introduced to each other, and

try to spend a few moments of quality time with each of them. Ms. Tolley-Bauer says that attending to these few simple details is what distinguishes a good host from a great one.

Elissa Fallo of Perfect Productions in Farmington says no matter what type of party you're having, picking a theme and then weaving it into every aspect of the gathering, from the invitations to the music, makes for memorable functions.

"Holidays from around the world" is one great theme. Have all of your guests bring at least one ethnic dish to share, and use influences from different parts of the world to inspire your decorating and music.

Unexpected touches also add flair. If your budget allows, offer horse and carriage rides for guests. Halfway through your soiree, have carolers come serenade your guests. Serve traditional holiday fare and then send guests home with ornament party favors.

Ms. Fallo also offers a few basic party tips. If your party includes children, remember to provide child-friendly food and entertainment options. Spread food and

drink stations throughout your entertaining space – you don't want people standing in your kitchen or around one food table for the entire evening. If your budget allows, hire people to help cook and serve, so you'll have more time to enjoy the party.

Tamie Myers and Camille Christiana of Event Connoisseur in East Hartford offer some tips on hosting an office or corporate party. They suggest breaking out of the mold by holding your gathering at an unusual venue instead of the standard hotel banquet or conference room.

Some of their suggestions include staging the party at a museum or a winery, or leasing the VIP section of a sports stadium. If budget isn't an issue, throw your extravaganza aboard a yacht or boat.

They say it's important to develop the invite list ahead of time so that employees can have the option of inviting a spouse or guest.

Also consider the type of gathering you want to host. Do you want your party to be elegant, with centerpieces, caviar and champagne? Or do you want it to be more casual, serving finger food and hiring a band or deejay so people can dance the night away? Consider your co-workers and their likes and dislikes when deciding which way to go.

For budget or philanthropy-conscious companies, instead of hosting a party, have a day of volunteering together at Habitat of Humanity or another charity of choice. Consider organizing an employee art exhibition that features the best creative talents of employees, auction off the pieces, and then donate the proceeds.

So wipe the beads of sweat from your brow. Hosting a holiday party is easier than you think. With the help of our experts and a little ingenuity, your guests will be raving about your event for years to come. 🏠

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