

# Entertaining Made Easy

*Stress-free steps for a holiday party at your place*

BY JEANINE MATLOW

Hosting a holiday gathering shouldn't make your hair stand on end. Take it from two entertaining experts: A few simple shortcuts can mean smooth sailing for you and your guests.

"Keep the menu within your culinary comfort zone and skills," suggests Margaret Fleming, director of sales for holiday catering at Royal Oak's Holiday Market.

She recommends staging a test run prior to the party and making foods that can be prepared in advance. For something new, she says, "Small plate presentations are very popular right now." Since they allow guests to try a sample size portion, you can offer seafood, meat and vegetarian courses.

For a casual gathering, try to avoid food items that need to be cut with a knife, says Fleming. Set your buffet table with serving equipment, china, utensils and glassware the day before the event.

While hiring a caterer will certainly lighten your load, so will asking your guests to bring a dish. "Themed menus are always so much fun and they allow for a wonderful time to share recipes," says Fleming.

Carolyn R. Hefner, owner of The China Closet in Birmingham, says entertaining should be as fun for the hostess as it is for the guests. The key is to plan ahead and avoid getting caught up in the little details.

"No one wants an MIA [missing in action] hostess who is in the kitchen preparing food and bev-



Find a new use for serving pieces.

verages," says Hefner, a full-service event planner. "This is why we gather at this time of year, to be with one another and celebrate our friendships."

If you don't have the budget for professional services, Hefner suggests plotting projects on a calendar to accomplish a small task each day. "By the end of the week," she says, "you will find that you have accomplished a lot."

Getting creative also can mean less work for the host. From interesting china and stemware to funky cocktail tables that light up, rentals are a great way to set a party. They are also delivered to your door and picked up. "It doesn't get easier than that," Hefner says.

Use serving pieces as vessels for flowers or fill them with ornaments or chocolates. "Sometimes the pattern and shape of serving pieces are so charming, it's fun to use them in untraditional ways," Hefner says. "Typically, no one would think of using a gravy bowl at a cocktail party, but filled with cocktail nuts and a ladle, it's a great way to enjoy and make the presentation interesting."

Be conscious of colors that work in your home, says Hefner, and balance them with traditional greenery and colorful ornaments. She suggests going with hues that make you happy, as they will inspire your creativity.

Keep great munchies and beverages on hand for a spur-of-the-moment party. If space is limited, consider arranging your buffet on your bookshelves. "The list of possibilities for easy entertaining is endless," Hefner says. "Just stand back and look at your surroundings with an open mind."



Bite-size servings keep things simple.