

Best of the Fete

Written by Written by Christina Caldwell

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The holiday hustle and bustle makes this season an exciting, albeit hectic, time. AFM can take at least one stressor—throwing that perfect holiday party—off your mind. As you were finalizing your guest list, we compiled the top tips for hosting your most sophisticated holiday soiree yet.

Pre-Party Prep

First Glimpse

These days, it's tempting to e-blast your invites to save paper, not to mention time and effort addressing envelopes. But electronic invites—even cute ones—are an upscale party don't, says Anne Bryan of Creative Events, L.L.C., in Tucson. "For a holiday party [this] elaborate, [the invitation] should be sent through traditional mail," Bryan says. Incorporate the theme of your party into the invites to give the guests a distinct first impression of the party to come. In keeping with the holidays, Bryan suggests sending invites in small gift boxes, lending them more importance and an anticipatory feel. A simple, thoughtful touch, like a cookie or a gourmet candy cane, can make all the difference.

Location Adoration

Choosing a venue for your upscale holiday bash can be a predicament—outdoors or in? At home or elsewhere? Bryan says, "[Hold the party] either at your home so it's really personalized or at an upscale resort." While home parties can create a warm and inviting environment, renting a party room at a resort can make your bash feel more like a night out. Plus, both out-of-town and local guests can reserve rooms at the resort, making getting home a non-issue.

Sylvia Drew, florist, event planner and owner of Creative Arrangements by Sylvia, says that outdoor parties, even at this time of year, are not off limits. Guests can easily weather chilly Tucson temperatures with the addition of outdoor heaters. To prevent food from getting cold, situating heaters under covered serving trays will keep food toasty and tasty. And prepare for unexpected gusts by tying down tablecloths and using heavy centerpieces to prevent the party from being gone with the wind.

'Twas the Night of the Party

Celebration Ornamentation

Whether it's a monochromatic white-on-white affair or one bedecked in jewel and metal tones, décor sets the scene for your bash. While hiring an event planner gives you an advantage, you can also achieve a unique look on your own with a dose of creativity. Both Bryan and Drew agree that candlelight is a savvy way to create a warm and inviting holiday atmosphere. Drew also stresses the importance of flowers. "You can really use them minimally and make a big impact," she says. If you're going to go all out, consider importing flowers from far-off destinations for a dramatic effect. "I love [getting] all of the exotic flowers that you can't find that season and having them shipped in from Israel [or other locations]," Bryan says.

Also, introduce edgier floral arrangements. Fill a tall vase with bulb ornaments and add flower stems at the top, Drew suggests. Similarly, experiment using an oversize classic bulb as a vase, removing the top and adding holiday stems and greens to form a unique centerpiece.

While the majority of party planning is a matter of personal preference, both Drew and Bryan agree you should leave passé greens and reds to the holiday parties of yore. To keep that traditional element but make it modern, use shades of burgundy and jade in combination with metals to create a sophisticated yet conservative look.

Finally, don't lose sight of the essentials while you're focusing on the details. Buying or renting chic china, tablecloths, tableware and drinkware should definitely be on your "to do" list.

Taste of the Holidays

Traditional holiday treats are to be expected at a holiday party, and Drew says hosts should give serious consideration to hiring a caterer. "The party does really go by very quickly, and it's a lot of work and money," Drew says. The cost of enlisting a catering company is a small expense considering it allows the host to spend as much time as possible with their guests. "We know how to set it up, when to get there, how to serve the food and how to make guests comfortable," says Jake Tweedy, owner of Petite Pea Catering & Fine Foods. "[Hiring us means] it's just so much easier for [hosts] to just sit back and enjoy." Some of Tweedy's favorite hors d'oeuvre and appetizer creations include parmesan-crusted chicken bites, roasted mini peppers stuffed with goat cheese and garlic, and steamed jumbo shrimp with cinnamon sticks and lime wedges. Tweedy says to make food and beverage service run smoothly, hosts should also hire servers and bartenders.

Keeping the Beat

Drew suggests hiring someone to provide background music that suits the style of your shindig. For a younger crowd, a DJ may play top 40 and other popular songs that accommodate dancing. For a slightly more mature crowd, a band that covers Frank Sinatra and other classics might be apropos. A classical pianist, harp player or string ensemble could also give the party the upscale and refined atmosphere you're seeking.

After the Blast

Take-Home Treats

A trademark of ultrasophisticated soirees, send-off bags are a trendy and tasteful way to wish your guests a merry holiday season. "You are doing a holiday party, and everyone wants a present," Bryan says. Everything from personalized crystal and pearl ornaments to gourmet sweet

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treats like gingerbread can be included. Bryan recommends wrapping each individual treat in a decorative bag or box, even if it's food. Specially scented candles like Helen Julia New York's line of soy candles is another lavish take-away, Bryan says. As with the invites that announced the party, each bag should reflect the décor and atmosphere guests experienced.

Clean Up and Clear Out

Aside from the obvious benefits of hiring a caterer, servers and bartenders, doing so also affords the added perk of cleanup, meaning you and your guests can continue mingling without feeling obligated to help tidy up. Resorts too will often have a cleanup crew at your disposal, allowing the host to head home happy.

Minor Details, Major Impact

Holiday parties are based in tradition—but sometimes “traditional” is just code for boring. So how can you break the tree-shaped mold? Here are a few great tips to make your party a departure from the norm and memorable for years to come.

Ice, Ice Baby

Why not transform your festivities into a winter wonderland? Ice sculptures are a great way to fancify your soiree. We're not just talking carvings of Ole Saint Nick and his elves, either. An ice-sculptured bar is an added touch of sophistication that is sure to make your party extra cool.

Very Merry Martini

Martinis are an upscale party must. But don't offer the same old standards. Ask your bartender to create holiday-inspired recipes with flavors and spices of the season. If you don't have a pro on hand, discover unique martini recipes online. (One of our fave resources is <http://www.swankmartini.com/>.) Peppermint martini, anyone? You can even create your own signature drink, and garnish the glass with edible gold and silver flecks.

Top It Off

How many Santa-shaped sugar cookies can one person take? Instead of serving the expected desserts of cookies and fudge, appeal to your guest's palate with a dessert bar. Dress drinkware with small bells or other holiday signifiers that guests can fill with cheesecake bites, fruit, walnuts, syrups and other sweet treats for an original, signature dessert.