

Entertaining Ideas

How to Make Your Next Party Memorable.
Plus, Caterers Who Can Help.

By Carrie Harper

"People have forgotten how terrific it is to have just a few people for dinner," says Amber Scholtz, a former congressional staff director who entertains about twice a week. "I put a lot of effort into special themes, menus, and presentations. What I get back is great conversation."

Scholtz once hosted a croquet party where guests wore white and drank sangria. A party for white-water rafters was decorated with rafts and rubber snakes.

Julie Myer, a former fashion consultant and wife of a retired Army general, prefers a homier party atmosphere: After dinner, her husband begins the entertainment with down-home guitar playing and singing. Myer likes to prepare the food and table settings for small parties herself, but hires servers to leave herself free to enjoy her company.

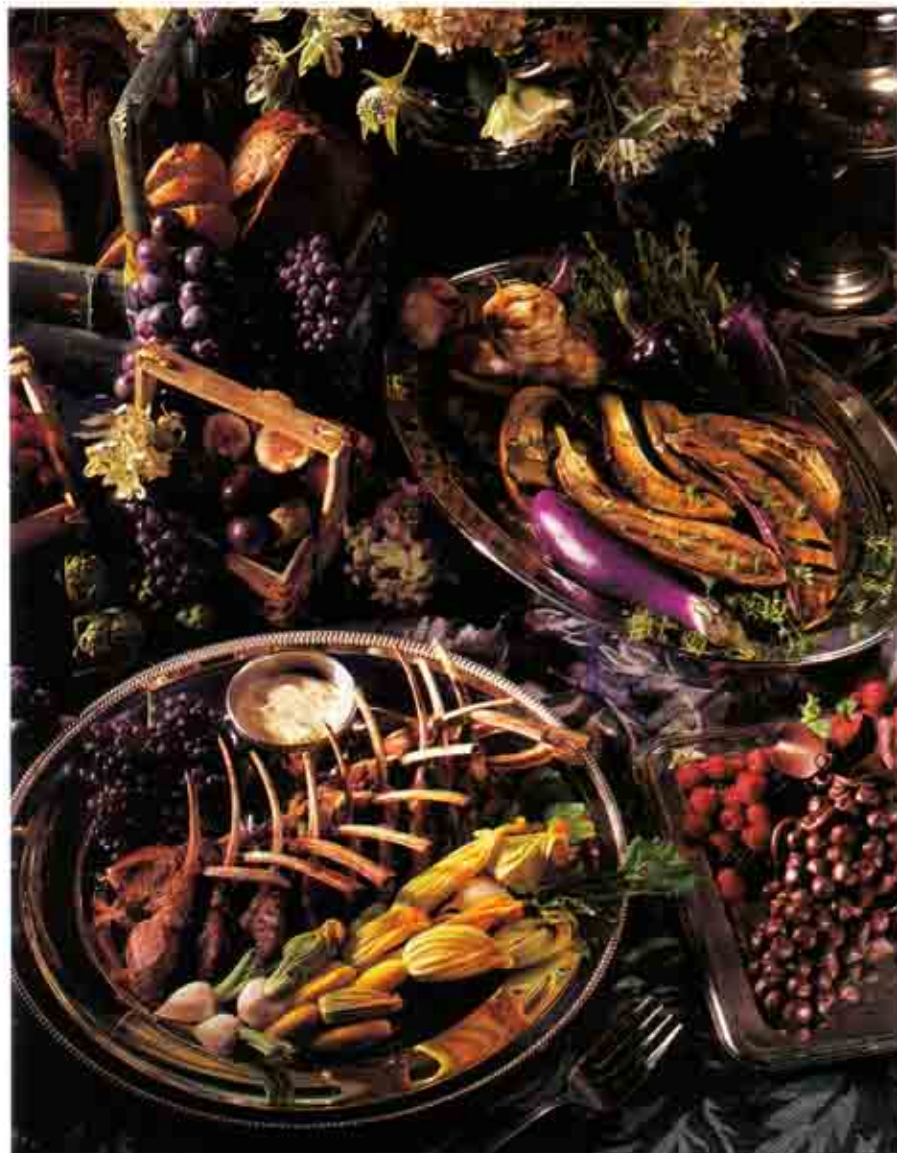
Joel Wolke, owner of Designing Parties, an event-planning firm, says it is the host's responsibility when hiring servers to make sure everything they need is laid out. They shouldn't have to search for the saucers to the teacups.

For larger events, Wolke points out, details like where to park cars and put coats should be taken care of ahead of time. He adds that the old-fashioned use of place cards is still the best preparation a host can make. "It's sloppy, almost inconsiderate, not to plan where your guests are sitting," he says.

The menu should make allowances for finicky eaters. If you plan to do something exotic—whether with the main course or just the hors d'oeuvres—there should be some traditional alternatives. And finger foods should be planned and prepared in ways that make second dips and the common use of utensils unnecessary.

With a little effort, you can get full service from a caterer and cut costs. Using your own serving dishes, for example, will save on rental charges. You can buy flowers yourself or use your own plants.

Editorial interns Marie Nash and Todd Pruzan contributed research to this article.



When planning a dinner party, pay attention to presentation. Susan Gage Caterers in Oxon Hill prepared this feast for the eyes, clockwise from top right: grilled Japanese eggplant, chocolate-covered hazelnuts formed into a grape cluster, grilled baby lamb chops with peppercorn sauce, and baby white turnips and baby zucchini with blossoms.

In cutting costs, however, you might not want to cut service. "You can have all the food and beverages in the world, but if you don't have a competent person

there to serve, the host ends up doing all the work," says Mark Michael, co-owner of Occasions Caterers.

The best way to have the party you