

Dinner Party Tips from Night of 100 Dinners Top Chef Sponsor, Allison Ziefert:



1. Plan ahead. As you plan your menu, make a list of everything you'll need, from ingredients, condiments and beverages to paper goods and decorations. This will help you to avoid multiple trips to the store. Set the table the night before. Lay out the serving pieces and utensils you'll need as well as flatware, napkins, candles, dishes and glasses. (Check glasses for streaks or smudges.) Use sticky notes to label each serving piece for its dish. On the day of the party, it's wise to plan a step-by-step "game plan" to guide you, with times for each task, i.e. "2 pm defrost cheesecake, 5 pm put roast in the oven." This helps to ensure that everything is ready at the right time and nothing is forgotten. (You might want to ask in advance about guests' allergies or food requirements, e.g. vegetarian, etc.)

2. Keep it simple. Your guests are happiest when you can be part of the fun, so don't over-plan. No need to get fancy, if it's not your thing. A few nice appetizers, a great lasagna, a big salad and a yummy dessert will be well received. You don't want to be stuck in the kitchen cooking and missing the party, so the more you can do ahead of time, the better. Go with recipes you've made before. You know the ingredients you need, how long the dish takes to prepare, and how it should taste. Save new or complicated dishes for another time.



3. Don't do it all yourself. Rather than taking on all of the work, consider co-hosting with a friend. If guests ask, have them bring a favorite dessert or appetizer. Guests like to know what will be most appreciated. They'll be happy to contribute, and it will save you from doing everything. Having a few extra helping hands is a big plus, so get to entertain your guests. Whether it's a professional party helper, a few teenagers to serve the appetizers, or a bartender to make the drinks, the splurge may be well worth it.

4. Make it pretty. Pick simple and attractive service pieces, plates, etc. A festive table cloth, flowers, candles, music and some fun decorations will make it feel like a party. Make your selections colorful with a variety of foods that are nicely presented. It creates interest and makes for a beautiful table.



5. Make your guests comfortable. Be sure there's enough seating and ample food and drink and consider practicality. Should you serve from a buffet? Do you need to plan table seating for everyone? If you're using them, are your paper plates strong enough to hold all that you're serving? Do you have the right serving utensils? Are ribs too messy for this party? Do you have enough napkins, flatware, cups, so you won't run short?

6. Have fun!! Remember to relax and enjoy yourself. With proper planning, your dinner should go smoothly, but if the soufflé falls, make due and roll with the punches. (Got any Girl Scout cookies in the pantry?) More than anything else, your guests will remember the atmosphere and good company at your party.

