

Impromptu Party Panache

Life can be hectic these days. Whether you are at work or running a busy household, it can be challenging to keep up with it all. Would you like to feel pleased rather than panic-stricken when friends ring your doorbell unexpectedly? Do you secretly wish you were able to invite everyone over after the big game or recital? Are you worried that you might not be able to pull it off? The solution is, of course, advance preparation. You can plan for your “unplanned” entertaining in such a way your friends will think you were just waiting around for them to arrive. Most importantly, you will be more relaxed and able to enjoy your guests. With summer around the corner, there’s never been a better time to get organized.

OVER THE YEARS I’VE DEVELOPED a “Party Pantry” — staples to always have on hand to take the dread out of last minute entertaining as well as a few simple strategies. By following these guidelines, you can throw an impromptu party with panache.

Appetizers

Always have a few boxes of table water crackers ready and waiting in a kitchen cabinet. They are versatile whether you’re serving dips, cheeses, and/or spreads. Two spreads to keep on hand are bruschetta and pepper-onion relish. Both spreads are delicious and adaptable to crackers, veggies, and baguette slices. In addition, always have a selection of dips that can be heated up in the microwave.

Mixed nuts are a guaranteed pleaser along with dried fruits. Fancy pretzel dipping sticks with either a good grainy mustard or chocolate dip will accompany any type of cocktail. Ever notice those little, frozen quiches seem to disappear first? A freezer full of these tasty hors d’oeuvres is a must.

Desserts

Finding delectable treats is not difficult thanks to all the choices made available to us. A variety of chocolate candies kept in the freezer will help satisfy anyone’s sweet tooth. Refrigerator cookie or brownie dough allows you to serve fresh baked treats in less than 20 minutes.

Drinks

No one expects a chocolatinì or a Singapore sling.

Stick to the basics and keep a variety of mixers on hand and everyone will be happy. Vodka, gin, rum, bourbon, scotch, tequila, red and white wines, and a variety of beers are essential for any bar. Dark and light sodas and orange and cranberry juices will cover most requests. As a general rule of thumb, figure on two to three drinks per guest. A 750-milliliter bottle is good for about 16 cocktails and a 750-milliliter bottle of wine will serve five guests, depending on the size of your wine glasses. Keep the bar area simple.

Simple steps to a big turnout

Setting the stage

Not enough chairs for everyone? Perfect. Parties hit a dead end when everyone is sitting down. Start your party in the kitchen and then casually move into your family room. Remember to set your food stations in both rooms.

Staging the food

Gather the baskets you have won from your latest gala event and bring out the unmatched dinner plates, platters, and wine glasses. You’re about to use all this at your next gathering. The visual dynamic will set the mood. Imagine not feeling the pressure to purchase more useless platters and dinnerware.

Set the mood

Always keep the lighting and music low (everyone looks better in soft lighting and no one should have to shout to be heard over your latest soundtrack). Dimming the lights, lighting candles, and putting



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on music are the three magic touches. Stash at least a dozen votives and/or tea lights in the kitchen drawer. An added bonus to using candles is nobody will notice the dust bunnies!

Finishing touches

Cocktail napkins and small paper plates are effortless touches that can make a difference. Keep a kitchen drawer filled with both themed (such as seasonal) and generic colorful paper napkins. All the pantry items suggested can easily be found at local gourmet markets, gift, stationery, and grocery stores.

Keep in mind that your guests are coming to sip and mingle, not to gorge themselves on gourmet delicacies or tour the house.

A final friendly word of warning: If you do this too well, you may have friends stopping by spontaneously more often! U