

Garden Plate

FOOD AND DRINK AT EVERY EXIT

The PARTY issue



Elegant entertaining



BY MELISSA MEISEL

The holiday season goes hand-in-hand with festive soirees — lavish platters brimming with delicacies, fanciful decorations and artfully themed presentations.

Whatever kind of party you're planning, the New Jersey host has a lot of decisions to make, right down to the tiniest details.

"This year's top party planning trend has to be over-the-top details," says Maria Cucciniello, owner of Summit-based lifestyle marketing firm The Hip Event. "From outfitting your staff to fit the theme and décor of the event to making sure all elements of the tablescape seamlessly coalesce to match the event color theme and idea; from the invite and costumes to the décor and drink selection, it should all tell a story."

ON THE MENU

New Jersey's hosts have some very specific ideas that go way beyond cheese and crackers. Caterers can make pretty much any idea fly. Among the latest trends:

INTERNATIONAL: Asian, Moroccan, Thai and Cuban menus were hot last year, said Lindsay Sudel, catering coordinator for NJPAC's Theater Square Grill, and that should continue next year.

CREATIVE APPETIZERS: Smaller bites for passed hors d'oeuvres and healthier, low-sodium items also are big, Sudel said.

FUSION: Theme menus contain lots of unexpected combinations, such as Japanese and Cuban, Portuguese and Polish, says Morristown-based Sharon Naylor, author of "Renewing Your Wedding Vows — A Complete Guide to Saying 'I Still Do'."

GREEN CHOICES: Organic foods are making inroads, Naylor said.

THE RETURN OF DESSERT: Many hosts are making a statement with vast dessert buffets, she said.

POST-PARTY GOODIES: Ending occasions with "a bang" is more important than ever, said Jeanne Cretella of Landmark Developers, who co-owns Liberty House at Liberty State Park and Stirling Ridge in Warren. This may include sending guests home with a boxed breakfast (lox, bagel, cream cheese and specialty tea), having a Krispy Kreme truck outside or offering White Castle burgers to go.

BUFFET VS. SIT DOWN

The next key decision when you're planning a suave soiree is whether dinner will be a buffet or sit-down meal.

"Buffets do make the guests mix and mingle more, but make sure that the food

Eon Vieira, a banquet cook at the Theater Square Grill, prepares for an event at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center.

Photo by Tony Kurdzuk

is made to order, delivered and replenished fresh," Sudel says. "Also insist on having the buffet or food stations manned with servers, so your guests feel as though they are still being served."

Beyond the food, centerpieces also are essential for ambience.

"Work with your caterer and/or your floral designer to create table displays that incorporate both flowers and fresh foods into your tabletop displays," Cucciniello says. "This detail will quickly change your food table to a work of art."

And, of course, don't forget the option of buying locally for any special occasion, says Naylor: "Use plenty of New Jersey garden produce and dishes made with local cranberries and eggplant, lots of fresh tomatoes in salads and paired with cheeses. Tell your chef you really want to make the most of New Jersey farm products, and you'll learn all about the pickle specialists and New Jersey wineries where you can go for tastings and get your event liquor in bulk.

"We're so lucky to live here with so many great native options, and your chef can educate you on even more as you plan."

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

With so many gorgeous Garden State locales to choose from, where does a party planner start?

The basics — how many guests a venue

KEY QUESTIONS

Where to hold your party is perhaps the single most important consideration when planning an event.

Your venue — whether it is a restaurant, a catering hall or your backyard — makes a personal statement about you and your occasion. Debbie Gilmore, a party planner for Chakra Restaurant of Paramus, says you should ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you want an exotic, exciting venue or a more traditional, formal space?
- Will guests be listening to speeches?
- Will there be a cocktail hour?
- Will there be dancing?
- What is the age range of the guests?

The answers to these questions will help you narrow down your choices.

can accommodate, and where it's located — begin to narrow down your search.

Then there's the mood you're trying to set. The space you choose sends a message to guests about how they should behave, said Executive Chef Michael Haimowitz and General Manager John Woloshyn from

Arthur's Landing in Weehawken.

Don't choose a very formal space — with black-tie-wearing staff, heavy drapery and chandeliers — for an informal cocktail party. Nor should a black-tie wedding be held on a beach.

But not all events need to be held far away from home base. An at-home party can be wonderful, Naylor says, provided skillful valets, servers, bartenders and an event planner to handle unexpected needs are on hand.

"Personally, I love a raw space you can completely transform. This allows you to create your own feeling, atmosphere and design for your party that guests will enjoy," Cucciniello says. "So many people go with a traditional catering hall because that's all they know. New Jersey has so many beautiful resources, from spaces to caterers and floral designers, to throw an unforgettable party."

Finally, reputation is key when you are narrowing down your list of potential venues, Sudel says. Research other companies or private parties that have hosted events at such venues. After all: "Reliability is the main factor when deciding on a venue."

And just to be on the safe side, Naylor said, "Always make sure any site you consider has good, current insurance, and get an insurance rider on your home for at-home parties." ●