



By Terry Matthews-Lombardo

Terry is a Certified Meeting Professional and industry veteran who has worked her way around a special event "or two" ranging from minor meetings to groups of over 10,000. Over the years, Terry has found success by learning to always sweat the small stuff, while never letting the guests actually see that sweat!

ARE YOU ENTERTAINING THIS HOLIDAY SEASON?



Take these tips to heart, and your event will be memorable... in a good way!

This is the time of year when many of us turn very social, as in "Sure, let's have the family dinner at our house for the holidays!" or "Of course, we'd love to host the annual office party in our home this year!" And sometimes we genuinely mean it when we offer to open our hearts and homes to groups of people who we secretly fear might be inspecting the toilet for cleanliness and passing judgment on our family recipe for spiked eggnog, all the while partaking in the carefully crafted, elaborate

spread of food and beverages we've taken great pains to pull together just so.

If this describes what's lurking ahead for you, here are some simple planning tips to create an exceptional special event that even a nervous hostess can actually enjoy:

- **CREATE A STORY WITH YOUR MENU PLANNING.** It's not always the variety of food on the menu that's important as much as it is the quality and meaning of each item. If you're preparing a favorite family

menu, explain why it's important to you or provide the brief family history as you present it. Buffet items can be labeled with informative place cards, or this can be a conversation starter at a seated meal. Also pay attention to make sure every dish works together to make a colorful and cohesive presentation centered on your overall theme.

- **KEEP TO YOUR TIME FRAME.** The key is to state the scheduled flow of

the event in your invitations. Don't make those who arrived on time start checking their watches or asking for more cocktails and appetizers because they have no idea when dinner is coming. If you said the meal would be served at 8:00 p.m., then take responsibility for staying on track with what was promised. Latecomers can adjust.

- **TAKE CARE OF DETAILS** like seating cards (when appropriate) placed ahead of time to help avoid that awkward, last-minute shuffle at the table, and provide convenient places to store coats and gifts. As the host or hostess, you want to control as much of the flow as possible, so thinking about everything from the minute guests walk in your front door until the time they leave will help you visualize and anticipate needs. Even if you disapprove of Uncle Harry smoking an after-dinner cigar, make sure you designate a place for him to do so, or

else run the risk of him lighting up in your pristine, odor-free living room.

- **PROVIDE ENOUGH LIGHT TO SEE WHAT NEEDS TO BE SEEN.** This is where advance planning is very important to test out both your regular lighting and those strategically-placed ambience candles and accent lights hostesses love to scatter around. Make sure to test everything during the same timeframe in which your event will be held, and do it several days in advance to allow time for necessary adjustments. It's always best to avoid scented candles, especially around the areas of food service. But you already knew that, *right?*
- **TABLESCAPES SHOULD BE KEPT SIMPLE** and should not block views or impact guests' ability to interact with each other and/or place passed dishes. Save the elaborate décor and arrangements for side bars or additional buffet stations.

- **KEEP THE FOCUS ON THE MEAL, BUT DON'T FORGET ALL THAT GOES WITH IT.** That includes beverages, both alcoholic and non (as well as water and coffee). Address special dietary concerns ahead of time. Think about background music or entertainment, including what you may or may not want to see on the TV (if that's part of your entertainment plan). Provide ample seating in multiple locations, and think about the flow of guests from room to room. All this and so much more combines to make your event memorable... in a good way, of course!

Finally, if you're the type that worries about shy or quiet guests not mixing in, take a cue from one of the best talkers in the world: Barbara Walters. She was known to have index cards with conversation starters at each table, and while this might be laughable at family gatherings, it could be a lifesaver when entertaining many people who haven't met before.