



The Party's Great, Now When Do We Eat?

Some questions to chew on while planning the food for your next party.

By Jason Capps

To cater or not to cater. That is the question, and chances are that sooner or later you'll have to come up with an answer. What will you do? Events like christenings, graduations, communions and anniversaries call for accurate planning, but not necessarily panic. In order to find the right answer to the catering question, it is best to spend a minute reviewing some of the variables involved in hosting parties.

The obvious: date, location, time of party, guest list, invitations and possible theme are all fundamental directives that need to be dictated from the earliest part of the planning phase. Breaking these down further is important. Have you chosen a date that could potentially conflict with neighbor's parties, vacationing family, holidays or remodeling projects? Is your location conducive to accommodating your anticipated number of guests, rain or shine? Is there ample parking and a level yard or driveway for a tent if needed? Are there enough bathrooms?

Do you intend to start the party at a normal mealtime like noon or 6 p.m. or off times like 2 p.m. or 7:30 p.m.? This has a dramatic effect on how much food (and what types) to provide.

Have you broken down your guest list into rough age and gender groups like: toddlers, 6-12 year olds, teens, adults, elderly? Will there be more women than men or vice versa? These dictate the number of food servings necessary. A graduation party may have an abundance of teens, who may or may not eat what's on the table, so a split menu can satisfy both your "core group" of family and friends and the graduates. A parent's anniversary may have a predominantly older crowd which often involves dietary restrictions and smaller appetites.

How have you worded your invitations? If you just indicate the place, time and occasion you leave plenty to the imagination. It's nice to get specific and use descriptive adjectives. Phrases like, "Dress Casual – BBQ Is the Order of the Day" or "Plenty of Heavy Hors d'oeuvres and Cocktails on the Patio" or "Slightly Casual Light Luncheon" all give the guest an idea of what to expect food-wise and how to dress.

Now for the big question: Do you realistically think you can prepare some or all of the foods needed for the party? Taking an inventory of the food preparation from a residential kitchen is critical. While making a fresh vegetable display with dips for 75 people may seem simple, this is just one item. If you decide to accept covered dish donations from family and friends, make sure they fully understand how much potato salad it will take to feed 75 people. Do you have enough refrigerator and oven space to hold the prepared foods safely until service time? Making meatballs and marinara sauce on Thursday is a good idea because it will hold up and be easy to reheat. Pan-searing crabcakes at noon for a 1 p.m. party isn't such a good idea, unless you don't plan to shower before your guests arrive.

Playing host is an engaging, age-old pastime and it cannot be done correctly from the kitchen or grill. While at first it may seem cost effective, it can often be more expensive and labor intensive. Mothers and sisters may rescue you, but before long, five or more of your guests are now working too. Even when you finally get to sit down, watching empty plates blow off the table and trying to eat the foods you just spent two days making can be daunting. Small tasks can consume enough time to make a five hour party be over in a flash and there is often more at stake. Missing the original purpose of the party, especially a once-in-a-lifetime occasion, can be a major disappointment for years to come.

If you want to enjoy a glass of iced tea in the shade, shoot video of the guest of honor and share time with relatives who traveled to get there, calling in a caterer might be an option worth considering, but be selective. If your caterer doesn't address the mentioned topics, will they be a positive reflection of you on party day?