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Planning the perfect holiday party

With Thanksgiving just days away, now is the perfect time to start planning that big holiday event. But with a busy household to run, work to do and other seasonal events to attend, who has time to plan and execute their own spectacular event?

The good news: you don't have to. With the able services of caterers and party planners, you can pull off a holiday cocktail event, Christmas brunch or decked-out dinner party — and still have time to enjoy the festivities and engage with your guests.

The recipe for the perfect party has several basic ingredients, but the most important is planning. An experienced caterer or party planner can help you conceive a vision for your event.

"Other than the obvious queries like the number of guests, time, style of food and service, etc., I ask my clients to give me their overall vision and objective for their event," says Jim Hagy, owner of the Chef's Market in Goodlettsville. "Perhaps it's an employee appreciation holiday party, an open house to welcome new neighbors, or a Yuletide cocktail celebration for a newly engaged couple. As a caterer, knowing the client's end objective helps us stay on track with our planning."

Angela Proffitt, who runs Events by AP,

a full-service event planning business in Nashville, helps clients set a theme and consider what their priorities are.

"How do you want your guests to feel when they leave," asks Proffitt. "What are the top three adjectives you want your guests to think of when they leave your party?"

There are many options for a holiday gathering, from a Christmas breakfast or holiday brunch to a formal seated dinner or cocktail party.

"Afternoon cocktail parties are typically just a couple of hours, so they are a great way to entertain," says Hagy. "They are a great last-minute

option, because guests may have other holiday commitments on the same day but can begin a great holiday evening with you."

"A seated dinner will be the most expensive of these," says Hagy.

And that's not necessarily for the cost of the food; a seated dinner requires additional service and culinary staff, plus the cost of renting dishes and tables.

While food is important, it isn't the most important ingredient in your party. We asked several professionals for suggestions on creating a memorable experience for party guests; they offered the following ideas.



COURTESY OF JOE BUISSINK

Child care: Proffitt suggests a babysitter to look after kids and entertain them with activities like a Wii or PlayStation. "They can have their own little menu and specialty drinks," she says. "If you don't want kids to attend, communicate to the guests that this is an adult party."

Valet parking: Murphy Thomas of Valet 1 in Nashville says offering valet service will "add that extra flair" to your event.

Coat check: Proffitt generally uses members of her staff to oversee the collection of coats and purses.

Shoe valet: Proffitt admits it "might sound crazy," but she notes that ladies who spend an evening dancing in their expensive high heels are prone to want to kick them off. A shoe valet ensures that a guest knows exactly where to find her shoes when she's ready to re-heel.

Music & entertainment: Whether you choose live music, a DJ to "spin" tunes or just pipe in a playlist via your home sound system, music adds another layer of extravagance to your event. For a truly upscale affair, Proffitt recommends live music over the iPod.

Activities: Hagy cites an intimate dinner party hosted by a local celebrity couple. "There were retro games, like Pin the Tail on the Donkey and musical chairs, and over-the-top prizes," he says. For a holiday event, Proffitt suggests a tree-trimming event (good for those who've just moved into a new home) or photos with Santa.

Over-the-top: Proffitt recalls a party where the hosts installed an ice skating rink in the backyard. Other options for a winter dinner party include a snow machine or the use of a projector to give the appearance of snow falling.

Other luxury options: Send a paper invitation instead of an e-vite, says Proffitt, and opt for china and silver over disposable tableware and cutlery. "An open bar versus a limited bar is a bit more upscale," says Proffitt, who also recommends greeting guests with a specialty drink.

Whether you host a sit-down dinner or a buffet-style event, Hagy says a bigger party doesn't necessarily mean a better one.

"Some of the most rocking parties are intimate holiday impromptu soirées," says Hagy.

In fact, Hagy adds, some of his customers don't want the formality of a staffed event; they simply order from his take-away menu.

"The key is to make it easy. Do as much as possible the day before or sooner. Ideally, arrange to pick up your favorite fare from your caterer the day of," says Hagy.

Hagy says the biggest mistake people make when hosting an event is taking on too much of the work themselves.

"Your guests will sense when you're stressed, because orchestrating the details of even a small affair can be overwhelming," says Hagy.

The most important thing, he says, is to have fun.

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Chef's Market Café & Takeaway
 615-851-2433
www.chefsmarket.com

Events by AP
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www.angelaproffitt.com

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