

STEPHANIE NASS

Swing By!

ENTERTAINING RECIPES
& THE NEW ART
OF GATHERING



RIZZOLI
NEW YORK

The Checklist

Now that the principles are established, it's time for the checklist. The checklist will keep you organized and prevent overlooking any important details. Embellish yours by mentally strolling through the evening—attuned to the smells, sights, tastes, sounds, and textures at each stage. Different parties will vary in their needs. Make sure that all elements connect back with the initial fantasy. The checklist will bring the North Star down to Earth, and it is where things become realistic.

Here are things to consider when creating your checklist, in the order that I've found makes the most sense:

1. Budget

Identify the amount (or range) you are able to spend in order to stretch and creatively work within it.

2. Venue

If your budget is limited, the event can be held somewhere with free access (a home, a public park, a friend's yard); if your budget is more expansive, the venue can be inspired more directly by the fantasy (a hotel ballroom, a museum, a bowling alley). If the former, you will need to consider weather, the capacity, and how the event can be decorated to tie back to the North Star.

3. Date

Consider the soonest you can host the event, or plan around an unmovable milestone like a birthday. Target a realistic date in which everything needed for the party can be acquired. Don't drag it out, though, or momentum will be lost.

4. Guest List

When you're determining the guest list, think carefully about the connections you would like to build among your guests and who will get along. I like to invite a mix of people I know well and those who I wish to know better, and I include some outsize personalities with good listeners. Your guest count depends on the vibe of your party fantasy and the size of the venue you select, which depends on the budget you have available.

5. Invitations

The invitation is the first impression guests will have of the party. It sets the tone in terms of formality. It should explicitly outline the host, date, time, place, occasion, dress code, and RSVP deadline. It should make reference to the food that will be provided, such as "Join us for dinner" or "Stop by for nibbles."

It should be personalized to some extent—even if it's merely a name typed onto a Paperless Post envelope. My favorite way to personalize is by

Long Languid Lunch



- Summer Quiche
- Zucchini Carpaccio
- Chicken Paillard
- Corn Salad
- Tomato Salad
- Havicots Verts
- Blueberry Pie



- Roasted Potatoes
- Rainbow Asparagus
- Heirloom Carrots
- Chimurrie Cakes
- Richmond, Virginia

- Martini Menu
- Martini Menu
- Martini Menu
- Martini Menu

MENU

- Chestnut Soup
- Roast Potatoes
- Havicots Verts
- Braised Cipollini Onions
- Beef Tenderloin
- Duck Confit
- Dessert Buffet



Menu

- Caprese Cooler
- Sicilian Slice (with assorted toppings)
- King Midas Slice
- Roasted Broccolini
- Rainbow Cookies
- Red Gingham Cake



Menu

- Cupid's Kiss Cocktail
- It Girl Salad
- Steak with Herbs
- Chocolate



Menu

- STARBOARD
- JAR-CUTERIE
- AVOCADO BOATS
- CUCUMBER SANDWICHES
- EVER COOKIES



MENU

REATH



- Follow The Sun
- Grilled Sunflower
- Roasted Vegetables
- Seed-Enhanced Tuna
- Sautéed Sunflower Leaves
- Almond Cake



MENU

- Gardener's Spritz
- Spring Roll
- Harvest Salad
- Chicken Paillard
- Cookie Cake



PASTA NIGHT

- Farfalle with meat
- Ravioli and Pesto
- Cacio e Pepe
- Sautéed Greens
- Rigatoni Cannolis





Always have enough appetizers so that someone could feel totally satisfied with just hors d'oeuvres. At a minimum, plan for three hors d'oeuvres per person.

Dietary restrictions are very common these days. If you are serving a buffet or family style, have enough dishes so that any guests who are gluten- or dairy-free or vegan won't leave hungry or dissatisfied. For a party of twelve, I might serve a vegan soup, two proteins, two vegetables roasted in olive oil, and one gluten-free starch.

If you are plating everything, make it appealing to as many diets as possible, and be careful to note each guest's dietary restrictions as they RSVP.

Be cognizant of how many ovens, pans, and pots you have.

handwriting each name, but if you hate your handwriting, you can hire a calligrapher.

Invite the most outgoing, entertaining guests to come ten minutes early to get the party started and set the tone.

As you begin collecting confirmations, you can start abstractly thinking about seat assignments and dietary restrictions. Seating is very important for all types of "matchmaking," whether it be related to romance, friendship, or business.

6. Menu

As you create your menu, be sure you will make maximum use of your oven: it is more forgiving than the stovetop and really does so much of the work for you.



I take advantage of my many kitchen appliances. My Thermomix multicooker is really the Rolls-Royce of appliances because it makes perfect saffron risotto at the touch of a button! In addition, it blends pesto and soups to velvety smoothness. Good appliances are investments in many ways, for example eliminating the need for extra helpers.

Fastidious preparation can also obviate the need for additional help: many dishes can be made ahead and reheated beautifully.

To gain familiarity with recipe nuances and timing, make each recipe at least twice before showtime. Practice makes perfect.

The menu should be tied back to the North Star and fantasy and, most important, it should be delicious.

7. Dessert

Some people might consider this part of the menu, but for me, dessert needs to be its own category. In choosing a dessert, you determine the taste that guests will have on their tongue when they depart your transportive fantasy event. When you host, desserts can be the pinnacle zhuzh.

Do you have the capacity to bake a dessert? A standard cake can be made a few days in advance of the event if properly stored; sugar is a preservative.

Store-bought and homemade cakes alike can be elevated in minutes with a sprinkle of gold leaf, addition of edible flowers (dried or fresh), or the application of Chefanie Sheets.

Are there any birthdays among the guests? You'll need candles (and matches).

At the end of dinner, I always come around with warm cookies on a tray to surprise and delight—a guaranteed crowd-pleaser that I learned from Shelly Fireman at Café Fiorello. Cookie dough is easy to prepare in advance, and my quarter-size cookies take only minutes to bake. Beyond the cookies, I put out little bowls of pretty sweets to encourage guests to linger.

8. Source Ingredients

Seasonal vegetables are more sustainable and often less expensive.

Fish should be purchased no more than one day before the event. Always buy from a trusted fishmonger and smell it; fresh fish should be virtually odorless.

Butchers are magicians and can facilitate the cooking of meat at your party. Have the meats butchered for you whenever possible. For example, if you are making chicken schnitzel,





let the butcher pound the meat to the desired thickness; if you are making tenderloin, let the butcher trim any excess fat. When it comes to roasting chicken or turkey, individual pieces cook faster and more evenly. They also make for a more elegant presentation and require less work in the kitchen at the time of serving. Ask the butcher to break down the bird for you.

Buy what is within your budget, but “splurge” on the most expensive ingredients that you can afford. If your budget is limited, splurging on items such as high-quality eggs and butter can make an enormous difference in the quality of your dishes without breaking the bank. If you have a bigger budget, a splurge on white truffles can take a dish to a whole other level of luxury that your guests won't forget. Ingredients are critical to the enjoyment of food.

Most of the time, don't bother with fresh pastas. Many chefs agree they are finicky and not as consistent as dry pastas, though stuffed pastas like ravioli and tortellini are the exception. If you make your own pasta, use a decorative mold or shape that relates to the North Star.

In general, always keep a stocked freezer (puff pastry, piecrust, croissants, cookie dough) and a stocked pantry (nuts, dried fruits, chocolates, preserves) in case of unexpected guests.

9. Drinks

A full bar for cocktails is lovely but requires a constant pair of attentive hands. If you have a cohost, this job might be delegated to him or her, or, if budget allows, hiring a bartender would make sense. Original cocktail names, garnishes, and glasses should be contemplated as a no-cost whimsical detail.



There are so many directions for a cocktail garnish, and many can be prepared in advance: ice cubes with edible flowers, made from frozen fruit juice, or made in uniquely shaped molds; toothpicks of olives, maraschino cherries, or colorful gummy candy like sour lips; and citrus or other fruit/vegetable slice garnishes. If I have enough bandwidth, I might do a more involved garnish like smoke!

Most of the time, I prefer to keep drinks simple with a pre-batched cocktail or a wine plan: sparkling wine on arrival, white wine with the first course, red wine with the second course, and a return to champagne at the end. Waters and non-alcoholic options are imperative too; sparkling and still waters should be your baseline.



10. Music

Event music should tie back to the North Star too. Music is felt before any food or beverage is even consumed. The volume, message, speed, or era of what you play communicates the vibe of your event earlier than, and as much as, the provisions.

Holiday parties can go in all kinds of directions. Pop-star renditions of holiday ballads will create a different tone than Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker*. The former feels younger and looser, the latter more traditional. Both can be used in irony as well, depending on the rest of the party. For example, at an "ugly sweater party" among college friends in NoLiTa, playing *The Nutcracker* is cooler than someone playing the same in a staid apartment uptown.

When planning a recent backyard birthday party, where the North Star was a scrapbook of the guest of honor's life to date, I hired a Beatles cover band. Sure, they were dressed in chintz blazers on an April afternoon, but the familiar sounds put guests at ease. Some guests sang along and danced. It was comfort music, matching the era of the scrapbook as well as the food and guest list.

TIP: WHICH MUSIC IS BEST?

Live music is the best, but if that's not an option, music played on a vinyl record player is superior to what comes out of your Bluetooth speakers. That said, vinyl records have to be flipped or switched, which requires attention. A cell phone playlist is easiest.

11. Home Decoration

What differentiates a space from ordinary to a party venue is accomplished with some work. When hosting at home, think about ways to make your exterior sing "welcome." Whether it is your front door or gates to a long driveway, the entrance should be dressed in party attire. It's the absolute first impression upon arrival. A wreath or balloons connote celebration and, on a practical level, identify the venue for guests who have not previously visited. There is a wide range of options for this—from a beautifully handwritten sign that says "party here" to a full-on fresh flower frame around a door.

12. Table Decoration

A very important part. Much more on this on page 27.

13. Smells

Often an overlooked aspect of a party's ambiance, smells are important and are something to consider carefully ahead of an event. Are you



preparing fish or frying chicken? Those are generally considered unpleasant smells. Will you use lemon juice, fresh air, and scented candles to eliminate the odor? Do you want the space to smell like sautéed onions, freshly baked bread, mulled wine? I prefer these natural smells to any scented candles. If you don't want food smells, utilize fresh flowers, incense, potpourris, scented candles, diffusers, and open windows.

Do you have pets? Make sure they are freshly brushed, groomed, and smell-free, and be sure that hair is removed from all surfaces and seating.

14. Chairs

Especially important for seated dinner parties. Before you host guests, make sure you yourself can withstand at least ninety minutes in your dining chairs. If they would benefit from additional cushioning, procure pillows. The

only scenario in which I would not prioritize comfortable chairs is for a dance party.

15. Temperature

Many people are very sensitive to temperature and guests should be comfortable enough not to notice. Anticipate the outdoor temperature and solutions to deal with it. If it's hot and muggy, turn on the air-conditioning hours before the party. If it's a winter party where late-night dancing will ensue, heat the room and then remember to lower the temperature.

16. Personalized Elements

Every guest's name should appear in at least one place at the event, most typically on place cards and most charmingly if written by hand.

17. Outfit

This always ends up last on my list, but don't forget to rise to the occasion through your own garments and accessories. Do not be a martyr and sacrifice your own appearance after you put so much effort into the affair.

