

KEITH FERRAZZI'S

**HOLIDAY
PARTY GUIDE**

HOLIDAY PARTY GUIDE

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INTRODUCTION

Dinner parties, especially during the holidays, create wonderful memories and strengthen relationships in the process.

When I was an insolvent student working my way through business school, my apartment wasn't what you'd call a spotless designer residence. Minimal, yes. A bit grungy, definitely. Still, it never stopped me from throwing outrageously fun dinner parties where I enjoyed the company of good friends—and a few strangers.

It was in those days that I learned how powerful the art of throwing dinner parties, especially during the holidays, could be in creating wonderful memories and strengthening relationships in the process. Today I can safely say my strongest links have been forged at the table. The companionable effects of breaking bread—not to mention drinking a few glasses of wine—bring people together.

But for all the sheer delight and good times a dinner party can impart, some people still seem to think it's too hard, too time-consuming. The only image they have of a dinner party is of those grandly ornate occasions glamorized by Martha Stewart. Maybe those female-hosted TV shows are, perhaps, another reason why men, in particular, have forgotten the virtues of hosting a simple dinner gathering. They think it's feminine. But trust me, guys, you can serve a fine meal in your home and still be masculine—and, if you're single, it will do a world of good for your dating lives.

You see, there's only one real rule to these get-togethers: Have fun.

—Keith Ferrazzi

NINE STEPS

TO A HOLIDAY DINNER THAT WILL PUT YOU ON THE MAP

**If people can't
make it for
dinner,
encourage
them to come
for dessert.**

1. Create a theme.

There is no reason that even a small holiday dinner party should not have a theme. One simple idea can help you pull the food and atmosphere together. You can build a party around anything, really. It could be your mother's meatloaf recipe, black tie (used rarely, as we want people to be totally comfortable), vegan food, specific music—whatever you like. People will get jazzed when they know you're being creative.

Yes, "holiday party" can be a theme of its own, and often is. But why not get more specific so that your event and invite are the most unique and intriguing of the season?

2. Make the list manageable.

For a dinner party, shoot for 6-10 guests – which means inviting more like 8-12 because generally a good third have scheduling conflicts. If people can't make it for dinner, encourage them to stop by before or after for drinks or dessert. "Bonus guests" who show up as the meal closes is a terrific way to keep the energy of the evening going.

3. Mix the old with the new.

Don't invite more than one or two people you don't know that well. By dinner's end, you want those people leaving your home feeling as if they've made a whole new set of friends, and that's hard to do if it's a dinner filled with strangers.

NINE STEPS

TO A HOLIDAY DINNER THAT WILL PUT YOU ON THE MAP

The key to low-budget dinner parties is to keep it simple. Make one large dish.

4. Use invitations.

While there's nothing wrong with slapdash impromptu parties, the dinner parties that will be most successful will be those you've devoted some time and energy to. Whether by phone, e-mail, a web site like Punchbowl.com or Facebook, or handwritten note, be sure to get your invites out early—at least a month in advance—so people can have a chance to plan accordingly—and so you'll know who is and who is not coming.

5. Don't be a kitchen slave.

There's no sense in a party being all work. If you can't hire a caterer, either cook all the food ahead of time or just use takeout. If the food is good and the presentation snazzy, your guests will be impressed. The key to low-budget dinner parties is to keep it simple. Make one large dish, like a stew or chili that can be prepared a day or two ahead of time. Serve it with great bread and salad. That's all you need.

6. Create atmosphere.

Make sure to spend an hour or two gussying up your place. Nothing expensive or out of the ordinary, mind you. Candles, flowers, dim lighting, and music set a good mood. Add a nice centerpiece to the dinner table. Get a young family member to walk around serving drinks if you don't have a bartender or waiter. The point is to give your guests all the signals they need to understand that it's time to enjoy.

NINE STEPS

TO A HOLIDAY DINNER THAT WILL PUT YOU ON THE MAP

Guests take their cues from the host—if you're having fun, odds are that they will, too.

7. Forget being formal.

Most dinner parties don't call for anything fancy. Follow the KISS principle (Keep It Simple, Silly). Good food. Good people. Lots of wine. Good conversation. That's a successful dinner party. As a host, why not underdress just so no one else feels they did? Jeans and a jacket usually work great, but you judge for yourself.

8. Don't seat couples together.

The essence of a good dinner party lies in seating everyone properly. If you seat couples together, things can get boring. Mix and match, putting people together who don't know each other but perhaps share an interest of some kind. I like to set placeholders where I want people to sit. Each placeholder is a simple card with the guest's name on it. If you have the put an interesting question or joke on the back of the card that guests can use to break the ice with one another. Or you can go out and buy funny greeting cards just to make things interesting.

9. Relax.

Guests take their cues from the host—if you're having fun, odds are that they will, too. The night of the party, your job is to enjoy all the fruits of your labor. That's an order.

HOW TO GET VIPS AND NEW FRIENDS AT YOUR DINNER

To pull people into your dinner parties that would otherwise not come, find an anchor tenant.

We all have an established peer set. But if you only have dinner parties with the same people, your circle of relationships will never grow. At the same time, we're confronted with a small obstacle. Randomly inviting strangers, especially strangers who hold a level of prestige and experience above your own peer set, is rarely effective. These people want to hang around people of their own background, experience, or social status.

Parents tend to stay away from their children's gatherings unless they expect other parents to be in attendance as well. In college, juniors and seniors avoid the parties populated solely by freshmen and sophomores. In the adult world, it's no different. Go to any cafeteria at any major corporation in the country. You'll generally find each strata of the organization—from the administrative staff on up to the executive suite—congregating in their own cliques to eat their lunches.

To overcome this herd mentality and pull people into your dinner parties that would otherwise not come, make use of a helpful little concept called the "anchor tenant."

HOW TO GET VIPS AND NEW FRIENDS AT YOUR DINNER

Identifying and inviting an anchor tenant to your dinner party isn't hard. Someone you know probably has access and is close enough to such an individual that an invitation will be well received.

Anyone who can add a little electricity to your dinner party is an anchor tenant.

You'll discover who these people are by paying attention to your friends' stories and taking notice of the one or two names that continually pop up. They tend to be the names of people who have had a positive influence on your friends' lives. And it stands to reason that they can have the same effect on you.

Once you've identified a person outside your social circle and successfully invited him or her to a dinner, here's an added little nuance that pays terrific dividends. Landing an anchor tenant isn't about entertaining your dinner-party regulars. They'll come no matter what. But an anchor allows you to reach out beyond your circle in subsequent invitations and pull in people who wouldn't otherwise attend. To put it in terms of the company cafeteria, now that you have the CEO eating lunch at the manager's table, other executives will jump at the opportunity to eat at the table, too.

Frankly, anyone who can add a little electricity to your dinner party is an anchor tenant. Media, for example, are among my favorite anchors. They're knowledgeable and interesting, and best of all – they rarely turn down a free meal.

HOW TO

EXPAND YOUR GUEST LIST WITH A CO-HOST

The most efficient way to enlarge and tap the full potential of your circle of friends is, quite simply, to connect your circle with someone else's. Politicians, the inveterate masters of networking, have exchanged their networks in this fashion for years. They have what are called "host committees," groups of people hailing from different social worlds who are loyal to a specific politician and charged with introducing their candidate to their respective circle of friends. It offers a great template for people looking to expand their own network.

Politicians, the inveterate masters of networking, have host committees – a great template.

Are there worlds you want more access to? If so, see if you can find a central figure within that world to act as your own one-person host committee. In a business context, say you plan on selling a new product that your company is introducing several months down the line, and most of your customers will be lawyers. Go to your personal lawyer, tell him about the product, and ask him or her if they'd be willing to come to a dinner with a few of their lawyer friends that you'd like to host. Tell them that not only will they get an early look at this fabulous new product, but they'll have an opportunity to meet your friends, who could become potential clients. They'll become responsible for holding events that will usher you into their group of friends. You'll become responsible for doing the same for them.

This kind of partnering works wonderfully. But the underlying dynamic at work has to be mutual benefit. It should be a win-win for all involved.

If you are sharing someone else's circle of friends, be sure that you adequately acknowledge the person who ushered you into this new world, and do so in all the subsequent connections that they helped foster. Never forget the person who brought you to the dance. Trust is integral to an exchange of networks that demands treating the other person's contacts with the utmost respect.

HOW TO EXPAND YOUR GUEST LIST WITH A CO-HOST

As your community grows, partnering becomes more of a necessity. It becomes a matter of efficiency. One contact holds the key to maintaining all the other relationships in his or her network. He or she is the gatekeeper to a whole new world. You can meet dozens, even hundreds of other people through your relationship with one other key connector.

Never give any one person complete access to your entire list of contacts.

Two quick rules of thumb for network sharing:

1. You and the person you are sharing contacts with must be equal partners that give as much as they get.
2. You must be able to trust your partners because, after all, you're vouching for them and their behavior with your network is a reflection on you.

A word of caution—never give any one person complete access to your entire list of contacts. This is not a free-for-all. You should be aware of who in your network is interested in being contacted and how. Exchanging contacts should take place around specific events, functions, or causes. Consider carefully how your partner wants to use your network and how you expect to use his. In this way, you'll be more helpful to the other person, which is the kind of genuine reciprocity that makes partnering, and the world, work.

HOW TO

HOST AN INTIMATE TEAM DINNER

Creating an intimate team dinner is part art, part science. Make it too business-like and people won't relax and open up. Turn it into a free-for-all party, and things can get out of hand. To take advantage of the holidays for team building, the secret is careful planning. Here's how:

Pack 'em in. If the table seats four, set it for six. If it seats six, set it for eight.

Scout the Location

Try to book a private dining room to create a warm, inviting aura. Find restaurants and rooms that create a sense of cachet – something memorable, or even theatrical. Think about a great wine cellar with history, the roof of a building with a panoramic view, or an actual theater stage. Get creative and have the location tell a story or at least be a special element.

Size Up the Room

The size and spacing of tables is the single most important factor you can control to build intimacy. Unfortunately, restaurant owners don't always know what makes for an ideal set-up to facilitate conversation, so you may need to take over. Best is a long table, literally no more than thirty to thirty-two inches wide – a size that allows conversation to comfortably include multiple people on either side of the table. I've been known to bring in rentals when the proprietor can't accommodate my needs. But whatever tables you go with, the trick is to pack 'em in. If the table seats four, set it for six. If it seats six, set it for eight. Don't let the restaurant tell you otherwise.

When Is a Chair Not a Chair?

When it has arms, which you definitely don't want. Armchairs make it difficult for your guests to get close. Look for narrow chairs and squeeze them together like chairs at an Italian family dinner that found out an hour before mealtime that Uncle Louie is bringing six friends. If it seems uncomfortable or intrusive, apologize up front, but tell people why you are doing it! They'll see the situation differently if they understand it's in the service of intimacy.

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HOW TO

HOST AN INTIMATE TEAM DINNER

The intimacy of passing plates and sharing food inspires conversation and brings people together.

Sit Here, Please

Use your seating plan to create intentional alliances that benefit team building. Make place cards. Don't worry that people will think it's overly formal. People appreciate that you've gone to the trouble of assigning seats—plus it saves them from that uncomfortable “where shall I sit?” pre-dinner waltz.

Set the Mood, Dimly

A brightly lit room will undo all your efforts. Minimize overhead lighting and place as many candles as possible on the table and around the room to create a soft glow. Go easy on the flowers: they get in the way of conversation and take up space better used for candles. At the same time, be careful not to make the room too dark. Think energized but soft and comfortable.

Please Pass the Peas

Serving dinner family-style, with a variety of dishes to appeal to all diets and tastes, helps replicate the natural interaction of a family meal and breaks down the physical division between people. The intimacy of passing plates and sharing food inspires conversation and brings people together, creating the opportunity for more substantial conversation.

Conversational Cuisine

Have something unique on the menu that gets people talking – a local specialty or an “I can't believe it's not meat!” vegan dish.

HOW TO

HOST AN INTIMATE TEAM DINNER

There's nothing like wine to inspire conversation. Leave the bottles on the table.

Pass the Vino

There's nothing like wine to inspire conversation. You can use interesting varietals as another form of “conversational cuisine.” Have fun letting people taste and learn, without getting too involved in sommelier-talk. Leave the bottles on the table so people can help themselves. Not a wine crowd? Create a drink to fit your team's personality. Keith loves to serve the Ferrazerita, a no-carb margarita made with Crystal Light TM. Always respect those who don't drink by having nonalcoholic options – and be responsible with your guests who do imbibe.

Check the Sound

Throughout the night, control the noise level like the conductor that you are. Music is only needed when the conversation is still heating up. Never have your guests struggling to compete with the ambient noise of the restaurant or the music. Music should be louder at the beginning; Maybe switch it off altogether if a full-table conversation emerges at some point.

Bon appetite and happy holidays!

HOLIDAY PARTY GUIDE

NO MORE “BUTS”

We hear the “butts” coming. Here, Keith addresses some of the most common.

Anyone can throw a dinner party. Buy a foldable round tabletop and place it on the coffee table. Voila!

“But my apartment’s too small.”

Wrong! Anyone can throw a dinner party. Let me give you an example—my former business manager, Mark Ramsay. I first met Mark when he was an accountant for another business manager who specialized in entertainment clients. He was an unhappy camper back then, and he wanted to break out on his own. After mustering enough courage, at the age of twenty-five, he opened his own operation.

Mark became a regular at my dinner parties in New York. As a client and a friend, Mark would return the favor with an invitation to a dinner or to see a show. After a few years, however, I asked him, “So what’s up with not having me over to your home for dinner?” A meal at someone’s home, after all, is what I enjoy most.

His answer was all too common, especially among young people: “I could never do a dinner party like yours. I don’t have that kind of money and I live in a run-down studio. I don’t even have a dining table.”

HOLIDAY PARTY GUIDE

NO MORE “BUTS”

Forget about cooking. Get some salads and roasted chicken from the deli – and keep the wine flowing.

I convinced Mark to give it a try. I'd be his anchor guest and he had to invite three or four others for dinner. I told him to get some simple wine, but plenty of it. For appetizers, set out chips and salsa, or dip with vegetables. Buy a foldable round tabletop and place it on the coffee table. Voilà!—you've got yourself a grand dining table. For food, forget about cooking. Get some salads and a roasted chicken from the deli. For dessert, buy some cookies and ice cream, and keep the wine flowing.

The party was a huge success. Mark invited a potential client and me, and I brought a friend. They both became Mark's clients.

“But I can't afford it.”

Nonsense! For \$25, you can serve 4-8 people an elegant pasta dinner with a crusty baguette and/or green salad. Buy an inexpensive bottle of wine and when a guest offers to bring one themselves, say yes! You can also curate a potluck.

“But I can't cook!”

Who cares? Buy a roast chicken, a few deli salads, and if you want to splurge, a bunch of tubs of Haagen-Daaz. If you really want to splurge, hire a caterer, or a caterer-in-training from a local cooking school.

Or ask a friend who's a good cook for a simple, tried and true recipe – maybe they'll even offer to come over and help you cook it!

HOLIDAY PARTY GUIDE

NO MORE “BUTS”

Here's one recipe you could try, supplied by a KF.com reader:

Lamb Ragu

This lamb ragu recipe is simple, foolproof, and tastes even better if you make it a day ahead and reheat for guests. Double or triple it if you're expecting a crowd. Note that it also works great with beef and with pork shoulder.

- 6 TBSP olive oil
- 2 peeled cloves garlic
- 6" sprig fresh rosemary (go ahead and use ½ – 1 tsp dried)
- Bay leaf (I used 2)
- 2 lbs meat (lamb stew meat recommended if you can get it; beef or pork works well too), chopped in ¾" chunks
- 1 lb coarsely chopped plum tomatoes
- ½ cup white wine
- 1 cup water

This lamb ragu recipe is simple, foolproof, and tastes even better if you make it a day ahead.

Heat the oil on medium heat in a big pot and brown the garlic and rosemary and bay in it, about 1 minute. Salt and pepper the meat and add. Brown it well, stirring often, about 8 minutes. Add wine and 'deglaze' the pan (scrape up any burned bits from the bottom). Add tomatoes and water, stirring, and salt and pepper. Bring to a boil and then reduce heat, cover, and simmer for 90 minutes. Add more water if necessary—you probably won't have to. You can probably let it go for 2 ½ hours if you want, but add a little water after 2. It shouldn't need much stirring, if any.

Serve over rice or couscous (preferred) or pasta—"tube" kinds like rigatoni work well. Add a nice green salad and you're good to go. Good wines to accompany the dish include Shiraz, Chianti, and village or table-level French Burgundy.

HOLIDAY PARTY GUIDE

NO MORE “BUTS”

“But who would I invite?”

Come on!! This is fear talking. You’re surrounded by potential dinner guests – your colleagues at the office, your neighbors, the cute guy/girl you met in the check out at the grocery store. So get some fire in your belly – then ask!