



Let's face it: The secret to successful entertaining is hardly classified information. In fact, anyone can throw a great party- even raw beginners- as long as you follow some basic advice: Stick with what you know, then build on your knowledge base. Even if your only party-giving experience is inviting friends over for pizza and beer, you can take it up a notch by throwing a make-your-own pizza evening, using store-bought dough, sauce, and toppings. Add a bottle of wine, toss a salad with your own vinaigrette, light some candles, and you're in business. The quickest way to trip yourself up? Making the leap from take-out pizza and beer to a full-blown multicourse dinner requiring dazzling culinary skills, exotic ingredients, pricey equipment, and all the pots and pans you own- especially if you're not really much of a cook. At least not yet!

This, then, should be your mantra: Start simple and grow with experience. Every time you throw a party, give yourself a couple of new challenges: a more complicated dish from your repertoire perhaps, or a serious centerpiece. Over time you'll gain the confidence and know-how to pull off that twelve-person five-course extravaganza. And most important, you'll have fun doing it.

The Impromptu Party

Not every party is a planned event. In fact, some of the best, most memorable parties are those that happen on the spur of the moment. You can be party ready anytime simply by having some basic items on hand. While this may seem like a lot, you don't have to run out and buy everything at once. Over time, here are some items to collect:

What to have on hand:

- **In the pantry:** prepared tapenades; nuts; a variety of chips and crackers; salsa or your favorite bottle dip; various pastas and a good sauce; imported tuna and anchovies; olive oil and a good vinegar; Dijon mustard; great pickles; onions and garlic; dates, apricots, or other dried fruit; simple cookies.

- **In the fridge:** olives; cheese (including real Parmesan for grating or shaving); bacon or cured meats like salami or sopresssata; pesto; lemons and limes.
- **In the freezer:** homemade or organic chicken stock; ice cream or sorbet; frozen pasta sauces
- **In the bar:** seltzer and tonic water; sparkling or mineral water; fruit and tomato juices; wine, beer, and a bottle of Champagne or sparkling wine.
- **By the phone:** a stash of take-out menus
- **Extras:** cocktail or dinner napkins, candles, coasters, cocktail picks

Certainly if you're just having one or two friends over for dinner, the prep and planning is fairly simple. But for something a little grander you'll need to take stock of what you have and what you can do: for example, how many people your party space can accommodate; what "party stuff" you already have, such as dishes and glassware; how much you can spend; and where to find party help and supplies. The good thing is that once you've completed your inventory, you'll know just what you have or need for any party in the future. You only have to do this once!