As a guest, it's your job to display all your positive qualities: enthusiasm, congeniality, consideration, and thoughtfulness. You won't go wrong as long as you practice the following party manners basics:

Arrive on time.

Anywhere between five and fifteen minutes after the designated start time is okay- but *never* sh ow up early. If you're going to be more than fifteen minutes late, call your hosts with an estimated time of arrival so they can decide if they should start without you. (And no, texting doesn't count! You don't know that they'll see it.)

Turn off your cell phone.

While you're at a party, consider yourself unavailable. If you're expecting a call or must be reachable, put your phone on vibrate and excuse yourself to another room to take the call. Never use or answer a host's phone without permission. If you are asked to answer the phone, say, "Scherr residence."

Be a willing participant.

Take part in- or at least try- whatever your host offers, whether it's charades, mushroom souffle, or the opportunity to chat with new people. At a seated dinner, be an active- but not dominant- participant in the conversation, and be sure to spend time chatting with the people on both your left and your right.

Practice moderation.

Try not to overindulge, whether in the shrimp cocktail or the Pinot Noir. You don't want to imply that the food or drinks are more important to you than the people present.

Unless invited in, keep clear of the kitchen.

Some people love to cook with an audience; others really can't concentrate. If your host says no, go enjoy yourself at the party.

Offer to help when you can.

Obviously this depends on the circumstances of the party, but where assistance is welcome there are lots of things guests can do to help out: pass hors d'oeuvres, light candles, help serve dessert. If your offer is turned down, don't insist- just enjoy yourself, knowing you did your best to pitch in.

Don't switch place cards.

Your host has gone to the trouble to come up with a seating plan. Your spot was chosen especially for you, so enjoy it!

Be considerate.

Wipe your feet before entering. Don't put your feet on furniture. Use a coaster for drinks. Leave the bathroom neat for the next person. If you're a smoker and there are no ashtrays, go outside to smoke. If you have a cold or other spreadable illness, call with your regrets and stay home.

Be complimentary.

About the food, the decor, the garden, the company. You don't have to gush- just be gracious and sincere.

Respect your host's trust.

Don't snoop in medicine cabinets, closets, or desks. Take care with your host's belongings. If you break something, let your host know immediately- and offer to pay for the repair.

Leave with the pack.

Don't settle in as others are saying farewell, unless you've been invited to stay. In general, dinner guests are expected to stay for about an hour after dinner. If you need to leave early, let your host know before the party or when you arrive so they aren't surprised (or worse, insulted) by your early departure.

Thank your hosts on the way out.

As you're leaving, make sure to say good-bye and thank you to each of your hosts. If they're not by the door, seek them out and thank them personally before you go.

{The thoughtful afterthought}

The really thoughtful guest thanks her host twice: once as she's leaving the party and again the next day. The written thank-you note is always, always appreciated, but is only expected after a formal dinner party or an overnight visit. If you don't send a note, do call or send an e-mail expressing your thanks within a day or two of the party. If someone hosted a party in your honor, or you were a houseguest, or you had an especially enjoyable time, now's the time to send flowers or a thank-you gift (if you didn't arrive with a gift in hand).