

FOOD + DRINK

THE ART OF THE TABLE

From quiet dinners for two to big, boisterous parties, here's how to create an eye-catching and memorable presentation.

BY CAITLIN KELLY



Remember the opening shot from “Downton Abbey”: a pair of gloved hands carefully measuring every setting’s placement? While few of us have a full complement of footmen, creating a welcoming table needn’t prove overwhelming or complicated.

The French, devoted to elegance, call it “les arts de la table,” which means paying meticulous attention to setting a beautiful table, from selecting linens and candles to china, crystal and flatware.

CASUAL AFFAIRS

For everyday dining, “white on white is the most practical,” advises Julia Berger, whose 14-year-old Connecticut-based firm manufactures embroidered and monogrammed linens. “It’s a universal look, and

it goes with anything.” White napkins, preferably 22 to 24 inches wide, in linen or cotton, and a luxuriously large tablecloth, easily dress up the simplest meal. Hunt them down at thrift and consignment shops, flea markets and online.

Even simple cloth napkins can be monogrammed, adding a personal touch. And pay attention to size and quality. “It’s important that the napkin feels good, regardless of price,” Berger says. “A good linen will age and become even more luscious and buttery. It can last an entire lifetime.”

Interior designer Bunny Williams — who recently introduced a line of tableware for Ballard Designs — often uses bright hues in her table settings, tossing a colored or patterned Indian bedspread over a table. A printed cloth also makes spills less obvious. She finds

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her linens everywhere, from Pier 1 to tag sales and antique shops.

Instead of choosing the obvious stainless-steel flatware, why not collect flea market silver, either sterling or silver plate? “It’s heavy. It’s beautiful,” says Williams, who happily uses mismatched silver. “I love the way it feels and the more you use it, the less care you have to take of it. It polishes itself.” She also favors coin silver, a lighter, thinner version, which fell out of production after 1850.

Don’t forget flowers. “As you might imagine, there are always flowers in my home and always adorning the dining table, even when it’s not in use,” says Gary Wallis, husband of the late Jane Packer, who in 1982 created Jane Packer Flowers, where he is now CEO, in London. Her work, admired worldwide, was groundbreaking; she was the author of nine books on working with flowers, and her clients included Madonna, Kate Moss, and Sarah Ferguson and the Duke of York.

“A single bloom in a simple vase can say as much as a surfeit of flowers that are not treated sympathetically,” Wallis says. Keep it simple: “Use no more than three varieties, and ensure they complement each other tonally.

“The container is also important and, again, should balance with the flowers and the interior of one’s home,” he adds. “At the moment I am using recycled glass bottles and vases in which I place only two or three stems. By building these up using different-sized containers, in height and width, it is possible to create an effective display.”

SMALL DINNERS

For an intimate party, say a dinner for four to eight, dimming the lights and using candles



creates an immediate and powerful effect. “Adding votives takes it to an atmospheric level,” says Williams. “It’s soft. It’s special.” Use lots of hurricane lanterns or consider using non-wax (battery-powered) versions. Mix simple glassware with a few crystal goblets and enjoy how it all sparkles. “Everything doesn’t have to be so grand,” advises Williams, who routinely seats 12 for dinner.

At small parties, “people pay attention to what’s placed in front of them,” says Berger. “The first things they notice are the china and napkin.” If you’ve picked up textiles while traveling, like Indonesian batiks or printed African cottons, use them as table linens. “We all have different life experiences,” Berger says. “Why not let your table reflect that?”

Whatever tablecloth you use, a 9- to 11-inch drop is ideal, so it just grazes the tops of your chairs, Berger says. Stand back to see how the table relates, in color and scale, to the rest of the room. “The guest experience will not just

be focused on the table itself,” adds Wallis. “This is where one can be a little more extravagant in terms of the size of the floral arrangements.”

For the table itself, simple is best, Wallis advises. “An impressive floral display can be achieved by using an array of small containers grouped together or in a line along the center of the table. The arrangements should never be so tall as to obstruct eye contact between one’s guests.” And, Wallis adds, the meal is paramount. “Heavily scented flowers such as lilies, narcissus and hyacinths will interfere with the enjoyment of food.”

BIG CELEBRATIONS

For a grand affair — a wedding, engagement or retirement party — “the people become the focal point,” says Berger, adding that flowers, candles and linens can “get lost in the mix.” If you don’t want to rent linens, consider using thin patchwork quilts. And even if your feasts have left a few indelible stains, the visual reminder “can give life and character to the cloth,” says Berger. “It becomes part of its history and your memories.”

“I had 150 people for my birthday,” recalls Williams, who discovered it was less costly to buy than to rent her linens. She also suggests buying a set of ballroom or folding chairs and sharing them with friends who also entertain frequently.

Wallis organizes an annual “Flower Ball” for charity. “For this event I can really go to town. Guests are sent corsages or flowers for their hair in advance, or they can pick them up at the door. Edible flowers are encased in ice cubes for reception cocktails, place names are handwritten on cards impregnated with wild flower seeds to take home for planting in pots, edible flowers are encased in panna cotta as a dessert and the table is sprinkled with rose leaves.”

Creating such beautiful moments — even when setting a table for one — really does make a difference, says Williams, whose style has graced many clients’ homes. “It sets the tone for the way you live and the way you think.” □