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# AARP Smart Guide to Hosting a Party

47 essential steps for planning a successful soiree

By Jill Schildhouse, Members Only Access

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Planning and hosting an event can be a stressful process, but there are steps you can take to make sure all goes as smoothly as possible. We've compiled a step-by-step guide that walks you through

the entire party-planning timeline. With these helpful tips, hopefully both you and your guests can mix, mingle and ultimately raise a toast to a successful soiree.



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## FORM YOUR PLAN WITH PLENTY OF TIME

### 1. Determine your guest list

Narrowing down a guest list is crucial, especially when it comes to your bandwidth as a host, says L.A.-based entertaining pro Paul Zahn. “Is this a smaller and more intimate affair? Are you allowing plus-ones?” The decision affects your budget and overall plan for your event, so this is step one.

### 2. Set an overall budget

Phoenix-based Dawna Pitts, author of *Entertaining Is My Love Language*, suggests determining your budget by assessing the scale of the party (number of guests, whether you want it to be casual or more elevated, and the general menu); the location (at your home or an alternative venue, and if the latter, be sure to check rates for your specific date); what rentals may be needed (tables, lighting, decor, seating, tents, etc.); and entertainment costs. Zahn says to decide on your “saves” and “splurges” in advance and to create a spreadsheet to track costs.

### 3. Calculate food and beverage costs

When budgeting for alcohol, “Generally, we estimate one drink per person per hour, give or take,” says mixology specialist Jonathan Pogash, founder and president of the Cocktail Guru and cohost

of *The Cocktail Guru Podcast*. “We usually take into account the total number of guests, and then purchase a variety of alcoholic and nonalcoholic products based on that number.” For example, if you expect 20 guests, and they have a very wide variety of drinking habits, he suggests purchasing one bottle of each of your “base” spirits (vodka, gin, whiskey, tequila), a case of domestic or imported beer, and a few bottles of red, white and sparkling wines. This ends up being about \$15 to \$20 per guest for drinks. When it comes to food, celebrity caterer and TV personality Chris Valdes says the general budgeting guideline is \$20 to \$40 per person, explaining that this range allows for a decent variety of dishes and quality ingredients.

#### **4. Lock in the date and time**

Double check to ensure that your party date doesn’t coincide with other main events happening in your area or with big holidays — not only will attendance suffer but, Pitts says, it also affects the availability of high-demand event planners, chefs, catering companies, DJ services, private valet parking companies, and more. For lower-key parties, let your guest list dictate the time of day. “Are they late-nighters or more of a happy hour group?” asks Zahn. “Do they have big families that occupy most of their weekends?” If your group is older, starting at 8 or 9 p.m., for instance, won’t work.

#### **5. Consider a theme**

Although a theme certainly isn’t required, it can add some fun and cohesion to the event. “The theme will lay the groundwork for you to build every other aspect of your event around — from your food and beverage menu to your decor and even the soundtrack to your party,” says Zahn.

#### **6. Plan your entertainment**

Whether you are interested in hiring a photo booth company or featuring a mechanical bull for your country-western themed party, Zahn says to book these services far in advance so you have your pick of vendors. This piece of your party can be a “splurge” or “save” depending on your budget. “Instead of hiring an expensive professional photographer or photo booth company, ask your tech-savvy granddaughter who is always glued to her iPhone to set up a DIY photo booth,” he says. “Grab some country-western items from the dollar store and voila — instant DIY photo booth. Pay her \$50 instead of splurging on that expensive photographer.”

#### **7. Order decor and supplies**

Plan ahead if you want to include customized or monogrammed party supplies, gift bag items or decorations. “Planning and ordering in advance allows you to get that extra special touch, and a lot of times it saves money from not having to expedite the shipping,” says Pitts. “I invest more in decoration pieces that I know I will be able to use many more times than just the one-time theme-related ones. White, black, metallic and clear pieces typically give me longer mileage.” This is also the time to either order or rent larger items such as portable bars, buffet tables, chairs and other essentials.

## 8. Do your research when considering a chef or catering team

If you're outsourcing food and beverages to the pros, start by asking for recommendations from friends and family, or scouring online reviews. "Personally, I love reading reviews, seeing some of their latest work on social media, and seeing if their menu excites my hunger," says Valdes, who then suggests scheduling tastings to sample their food, discuss your needs and align on menu preferences and dietary restrictions. "Ultimately, choose a chef or caterer who not only offers delicious food but also understands your party's atmosphere, has a good track record, and is willing to work closely with you to bring your vision to life," he says.



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## DRILL DOWN ON SPECIFICS

### 9. Send invitations

There's no need to get verbose; invitations should include only the date, time, location, reason for the celebration and party details. "When you receive RSVPs, ask about dietary restrictions and food allergies, and also let them know what to expect regarding the parking situation," says Pitts. Keep costs low by using digital invitations like Evite, Paperless Post or Punchbowl.

### 10. Plan the menu

The key to planning a menu is keeping every guest in mind. "Planning a dinner party and have two vegans on your guest list? Perhaps include two plant-based items and notate that on the dinner menu you craft," says Zahn. From there, focus on cohesion and variety. "Create a balanced menu that includes appetizers, main courses, side dishes and desserts, taking into account variety in



flavors, textures and presentation, and how much of it you can make ahead of time,” says Valdes. Pitts suggests keeping seasonal ingredients in mind and planning a weather-appropriate menu as well (for instance, Vietnamese summer rolls when it’s hot out or fondue when it’s colder). Finally, now is the time to decide if it will be a seated and plated dinner, buffet style or passed on trays.

### **11. Keep food allergies and dietary restrictions in mind**

If you are serving a meal, keep your guest’s dietary restrictions and food allergies in mind. “You don’t have to make the entire meal allergen-free,” says Liz Fetchin, owner and content creator of Octofree, a food blog featuring recipes, tips and product recommendations for people with food allergies, intolerances and other dietary restrictions, and author of e-cookbook, *An Octofree Thanksgiving*. “Just make sure each guest has enough safe options to eat, clearly label everything, and if anyone has a severe allergy, omit that ingredient from the menu entirely.”

### **12. Decide on drinks**

“If you’re unsure of what to expect from your guests, then the trick is to have a wide but limited variety of beer, wine, spirits, specialty cocktails, and non-alcoholic ingredients — don’t forget those,” Pogash says. “I believe that theme is an important factor to keep in mind, and may well dictate the types and styles of beverages on offer.”

### **13. Hire a bartender, if possible**

If you’re hosting a larger event, Pogash suggests hiring a bartender. Not only does it take the pressure off you so you can enjoy the event with your guests but, Pogash says, a professional bartender will produce and serve alcoholic beverage products with your guests’ care and well-being in mind. “We never want to overserve,” he notes.

### **14. Consider hiring a photographer**

So often an event happens without good photos to memorialize it. Consider hiring a photographer or asking a friend to commit to taking some candid or posed shots that can be shared with the group later. Make sure attendees are comfortable with photos or video being taken and always ask before posting on social media.

### **15. Plan engaging activities**

“Planning a 70th-birthday party for your husband? Ask guests to think of one word to describe the special guy, and during the dessert course, have everyone go around and say the word,” says Zahn. New Year’s Eve parties are usually in need of more planned activities that’ll carry the party through until midnight, says Pitts. “I asked my guests to bring the gifts they received for Christmas — but did not love — to the NYE party to play a gift-swap game ... it was a blast.”

### **16. Order baked goods**

If you're in need of large quantities of baked goods or have your heart set on special colors or decorations, now is the time to preorder them to ensure they'll be ready on the correct date. Leave yourself a reminder to follow up the day before pickup/delivery.

## 17. Enlist helpers

It is always a good idea to enlist some help when hosting a party, whether that is a paid staff or simply calling on family or friends. Zahn says booking staff at least a month out is key – and important positions include a bartender and server to craft drinks and pass food, and someone to work the room making sure used plates and glasses get back to the kitchen. “Asking your kids to pitch in isn’t a bad idea if this is an informal gathering,” he says. “Asking a close friend to help you assemble gift bags the morning of an event is also a reasonable ask for a smaller affair.”

## 18. Prepare a detailed timeline

“I actually type out my entire day of the party in detail, hour by hour, when I host parties that are 30-plus guests,” says Pitts. Her list includes exactly what time everything is happening, including rental delivery, and chefs and crew arrival. She also includes each vendor’s phone number on this list, so she has them handy if needed.

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## ESSENTIAL PARTY PREP

### 19. Clean your home

“What better time for a major spring clean?” asks Sydney-based culinary expert Martin Benn, who along with his wife, Vicki Wild, wrote *The Dinner Party: A Chef's Guide to Home Entertaining*. “Or, if you are flush with funds and are time-poor — get a cleaner.” If it’s a dinner party, be sure to focus your efforts on the dining room. The duo suggests oiling a wooden table, washing your favorite tablecloth, and making sure your dining chairs are equally clean. Guests likely won’t be inspecting your bedrooms or office, but do double check that your front porch looks inviting, your entryway is clutter-free, the floors have been mopped, the guest bathroom is well stocked and sparkling, and high traffic areas have been dusted and vacuumed.

## **20. Follow up on RSVPs**

Circle back to anyone who received an invitation but hasn’t yet responded to see if they’ll be coming to your party — you don’t want to make assumptions about their attendance unless it’s a very casual affair. According to Emily Post Etiquette, “It is perfectly polite, however, for hosts to call friends to ask if they plan to attend. ... Be friendly, but not accusatory.” Digital invitations typically nudge, which takes the task off your plate.

## **21. Assess and clean your glasses, dinnerware, silverware and serving dishes**

Now’s the perfect time to take inventory of your rarely used stemware and tableware, to ensure everything is clean and in good shape. “Check you have enough chip-free glassware to suit the wine styles and same with water glasses,” says Benn. “Plan which plateware you will be using for each dish so that you don’t have to stress on the day — set them aside in another room so you are ready to go.” He suggests placing cutlery into boiling-hot water with a couple of drops of vinegar and then using a polishing cloth to make them shine. For glassware, use a glass polishing cloth when just out of the dishwasher. When it comes to stemware, consider using different colored or mismatched glasses to prevent accidental swaps among guests (or use wine glass charms).

## **22. Take care of landscaping, outdoor lighting and creating an inviting entryway**

This is a good time to spruce things up and ensure your guests feel welcome from the moment they pull up to your home. “Lighting can cover a multitude of sins, so line the pathway with solar lamps or candles — it always looks so warm and inviting,” says Benn. “Fairy lights are also a great way to create a mood, whether inside or outside.” For daytime and outdoor events, make sure the lawn is mowed, hedges trimmed, flower beds in order and leaves swept.

## **23. Think through the ambiance**

You’ll rely on a couple of things to set the mood. First set flameless candles around the main gathering spots and on your dining table to help create a candlelit vibe without the fire hazard. Next, music can make or break your event, so if you don’t have a band or DJ, carefully curate a playlist. “Make the music eclectic enough to suit all tastes, [and make sure] that you have at least eight hours of different music, since there’s nothing worse than hearing the first track again,” says Benn. If you’re ordering flowers, now is the time to make sure they’ll have what you’d like.

## **24. Map out where everything will go**

Create a schematic (in your head or on paper) of where necessary party furniture — including tables and chairs — will be placed. For instance, your drink station or bar should be centrally located but not in the way of anything else should a crowd form there. Benn recommends using a sideboard or table to set up glassware, dinnerware and serving utensils. It's also a good time to move any smaller furniture you want to temporarily relocate to make room for people to roam about and to ensure a good flow in your space.

## **25. Prepare food that can be frozen**

"If you can prepare food in advance and freeze it without compromising the product, it will make your life so much easier," says Benn, noting that things like stocks, sauces, vegetable purees and flavored oils work well in advance. Some entire dishes and desserts — like lasagna or baked ziti, casseroles, soups, sheet cakes and cookies — freeze beautifully, too. "Just be sure to follow proper freezing and thawing guidelines to maintain the quality and safety of the food," reminds Valdes.

## **26. Buy nonperishable items and stock the bar**

Plan ahead for pantry items you'll need for your menu and the bar, and for paper goods. When it comes to stocking the bar, the sooner the better (spirits last forever). "Also, remember the mixers like tonic or soda if someone wants a gin and tonic or an Aperol Spritz," says Benn. If you're offering a full bar, aside from various liquors and liqueurs, bitters, juices and carbonation, don't forget precut garnishes, ice and key tools, such as a jigger measure, cocktail shaker, bottle opener, cocktail stirrers and cocktail napkins. And consider offering a fun signature cocktail, too, which Benn says you can batch-prepare.

## **27. Notify your neighbors**

Whether due to HOA rules or just to be a nice neighbor, it's a good idea to notify the houses around yours of the date of your party and the hours it will run. This helps set expectations of a little extra noise (be sure to abide by local ordinances) and some extra cars on the street. You aren't asking permission, just being courteous.

## **28. Confirm all vendors**

Contact every vendor you hired — from chefs and caterers to a tent rental company and waitstaff — to ensure everything is confirmed for the delivery/arrival times and access to your home or venue is explained. This will make for a smoother day and reduce the chance of last-minute surprises.

## **TO-DO LIST**

### **29. Prep your event space and set up decor**





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Handle all final layout decisions, complete the arrangement of any extra furniture and put up the decorations. Set up the bar in an organized fashion so guests can easily find what they're looking for. Finalize the decor and any centerpieces. "It always looks great to have tiny flowers in small vases or low greenery from the garden arranged in the center of the table," says Benn. "The simpler the better." Buying flowers now gives them a couple days to open up and fully blossom in their vases.

### **30. Go grocery shopping**

Double check your recipes and your refrigerator, then hit the stores. Benn warns that an overcrowded refrigerator doesn't circulate cold air as well, so now isn't the time to *also* do your regular weekly shopping. And if you need certain cuts or types of meat and fish, Benn says to call ahead and order those so you don't risk showing up only to find they are sold out.

### **31. Take measures to prevent accidents**

Relocate small rugs or anything else that could cause a guest to lose their balance. Likewise, clear walkways of clutter and reroute any cords or wires that someone could trip over. Ensure your house will be well-lit so that guests can find their way to the bathroom or navigate stairs to various floors or outdoor spaces where people are gathering. Make quick cleanup items and a first-aid kit accessible just in case.

### **32. Decide where coats and bags will be stored**

If you don't have room in your own coat closet, Benn suggests a collapsible coat rack with enough hangers to set up in a room near the entryway that isn't being used for the party. Be sure to hang the correct bag with its corresponding coat and let the guests know where they can find their

items should they need to touch up their lipstick or grab something. You can always use a spare bedroom as a holding spot as well.

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## FINAL CHECKLIST

### 33. Set the table

Pinto says seeing the festive and orderly table ready to go will make you feel calmer and more in control. “Don’t forget to iron or steam the tablecloth,” he says, “as the window-pane ridges of a tablecloth that has been folded can create a precarious surface for wine glasses.” If you’re having a buffet-style affair, stock the table that will hold all the supplies (glassware, silverware, tableware).

### 34. Cook anything that’ll keep well

There’s a reason people start cooking Thanksgiving dinner days beforehand, and the same goes for dinner parties. “Prepping as much food as possible the day before your event saves precious time and energy and lets you maximize your time with friends,” says Russell Pinto Jr., founder and CEO of Little Red Bean Productions, a full-service event planning and design firm. “If something absolutely has to be prepared on the day of the party, do as much prep beforehand as you can: Dice or sauté vegetables, clean the herbs, prepare marinades.” To reduce dirty dishes and

streamline steps, store prepared foods in the dishes they will be served or reheated in when possible.

### **35. Outsource last-minute deliveries**

Running last-minute errands the day before a party can be inevitable but draining. “Consider turning to technology to help with deliveries by downloading a few popular apps like Drizly, DoorDash and Instacart,” says Pinto Jr. “Between these three apps, you can have almost anything delivered to your home within an hour: alcohol, ice, flowers, produce, prepared foods, takeout.”

### **36. Don't shy away from asking for (and accepting!) last-minute help**

“Guests love to feel helpful, especially when they know how much effort their host is putting into a party,” says Pinto Jr, noting it's OK to ask a friend to pick up the cake, bread, wine or other prepared items. “If paying for everything is important to you, call the bakery or liquor store and prepay for the items so your guest can just grab it and go.” Now is also a good time to remind any helpers you reached out to earlier in the planning process about their day-of duties.

### **37. Spot clean the house and guest bathroom**

Hit the guest bathroom once again, freshening up the linens and removing streaks and water stains from the faucet, countertops and mirror — and remove from your medicine cabinet anything you don't want guests to see. Also, make sure your kitchen is clean and ready for party day. Finally, double check that the areas where guests will be mingling are clutter-free, says Pinto Jr., especially surfaces that might be used for drinks and plates.

### **38. Buy plenty of ice**

Pinto Jr. says to plan for 2 to 4 pounds of ice per guest, and an additional 2 to 4 pounds of ice per guest for chilling beverages in coolers and beverage tubs. “The last thing you want to do is run out of ice, so it's always recommended to keep an extra cooler full of ice off to the side,” he says. In colder months when the temperature is at or below freezing, placing bags of ice directly outside can free up a lot of space in your home and freezer.

## **THE BIG DAY IS HERE**

### **39. Display food**

The art of food presentation and serving revolves around creating an inviting and organized display, says Valdes. Start by using a variety of stylish serveware to showcase your dishes, considering the party's theme. Next, arrange the food into stations or sections to ensure easy navigation for guests. Then, add visual interest by using risers or decorative elements to elevate dishes, and garnish thoughtfully for a pop of color and flavor. Clearly label each dish, especially noting ingredients for those with dietary restrictions (for example, “contains dairy” or “gluten-





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free”). Finally, maintain proper food temperatures with warming trays or cooling platters, and regularly replenish dishes to keep the presentation fresh.

#### **40. Finish last-minute cooking**

Have some dishes that couldn’t be prepared in advance? Now is the time to knock them out. Keep an eye on timing, so that you properly factor in both prep work *and* cook time, working backwards from when your guests are scheduled to arrive (and allowing for time to clean up the kitchen). Also, think through oven space needed for this cooking while also reheating your frozen dishes, and group items with similar cooking temperatures together when possible.

#### **41. Corral your pets**

As the party host, you have enough to worry about — don’t add pet stress to the equation. Whether your dog might try to escape out the front door when guests arrive or eat something toxic someone accidentally dropped, it’s just not worth letting them roam free no matter how cute and friendly. “If you are exiling your pets into a specific room for the duration of the party, be sure that they have everything they need to feel safe and comfortable: litter box, water, food and toys,” says Pinto.

#### **42. Consider instituting a no-shoes policy**

If the extra carpet and floor cleaning after the party doesn’t convince you, maybe the germ aspect will: A study by microbiologist Charles Gerba of the University of Arizona discovered high bacterial levels on footwear — and 96 percent of shoes bore traces of coliform bacteria and 27 percent of the shoe bottoms had fecal bacteria *E. coli*. Either give guests a heads-up (so they aren’t



embarrassed by socks with holes or caught off guard without a pedicure) or supply slippers or socks at the door.

### **43. Greet guests**

Ideally, you will be ready when your guests arrive so that you can take the time to warmly welcome each person to your home. “Setting guests at ease, ensuring their comfort and making introductions to other guests is all a part of hosting, just as, if not more, important than anything else,” says Pinto. “Set out something easy for guests to nibble on right away, like cheese, chips and dips, nuts or crudites. Don’t forget self-serve wine, beer and premade cocktails.”

### **44. Replenish food and drinks**

If you didn’t hire waitstaff or a bartender, then it’s the host’s responsibility to maintain the general cleanliness and stock of food and drinks. “If anything is running low, replenish,” says Pogash. “Make sure your ice display is fresh.” And if you notice dirty plates or glasses piling up, take those into the kitchen. Keep the bathroom in mind as well, and notice if it’s time for toilet paper refills or fresh towels.

### **45. Watch for tipsy guests**

It’s important to maintain control of your guests’ alcohol consumption by offering plenty of water and food, says Pogash. Keep an eye on anyone who may have had a bit too much to drink, and call a taxi or car service to make sure they get home safely.

### **46. Let go of perfection**

Even events with professional planners and vendors galore experience a few hiccups on the big day, so cut yourself some slack when it comes to your own party. Someone may spill on your carpet, a dish could turn out a bit flat, or you run out of red wine. It’s OK. At the end of the day, your guests will remember how you made them *feel*, not whether your turkey was a tad dry. It’s your day, too, so have fun.

### **47. Clean up and tear down**

There are mixed thoughts on whether it’s appropriate to begin cleaning while your guests are still there — some may take it as a hint to leave even if that’s not your intention. So perhaps the safest bet is to just tidy up a bit. For instance, when everyone’s done eating, stack their dishes in the kitchen and put away any food you’d like to keep so it doesn’t go bad. If your guests like or want leftovers, sort into cheap take-home dishes so it’s easy for them to grab and go. Once everyone has left, you can do the bulk of the cleaning: wash the dishes or load the dishwasher, wipe down surfaces, spot-treat any spills, sweep up crumbs and take out the trash. You can remove the decor and replace furniture the next day, if you’re pooped!

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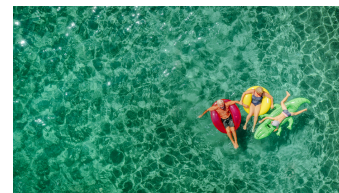
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