

Dana Shortt has been a foodie all her life. She is an award-winning entrepreneur, a professionally trained chef, owner of her own gourmet food shop and one of the warmest, most passionate and driven people I know. I am proud to call her my friend and excited to share with you her *top 10 tips for entertaining like a caterer*. I will add, these are stress-reducing, happiness-enhancing, joy-sparking musts for your holiday entertaining. Take it away, Dana!

Top 10 Tips for Entertaining Like a Caterer:

1. Prepare Dishes That Can Be Made in Advance

Some great examples are dishes that taste better the day after they are made (coq au vin, beef bourguignon, chicken marsala, curries, pasta bake; often one dish meals and a salad are best). Serve cold hors d'oeuvres – cheese and crackers, dips and vegetables or one-bite cold appetizers.

2. Serve Buffet-style or Family-style Where Possible

Plated meals take a lot more time and fuss and the food can get cold easily. I love serving this way because everyone can take the right size portion for their appetite or take a small portion of something that they aren't as fond of...without feeling bad or embarrassing the host. You can take your platters and bowls and serving pieces out the day before or the night before so you have everything ready that you will need. Label the platters with sticky notes.

3. Do Everything That Can Be Done Ahead, Ahead

For example, have coffee totally ready to go, cream and milk already poured and in creamers, have your playlist ready, have the lighter or matches out and ready for the candles so you aren't running around trying to find them. I love setting the table so often find that my table is the inspiration for my meal – i.e. – if I use my tablecloth from Italy then I'll make an Italian meal or if I see my French onion soup bowls collecting dust then I will decide to invite a couple over for a French onion soup night. I do a few things every day, several days in advance because then it's not overwhelming and I'm not scrambling around at the last minute. Food tips – make your food ahead and keep warm in a slow oven, put your salad dressing at the bottom of the bowl, greens on top, veg on top and then toss all together just before hand.

4. Self-Serve Bar

Family – help yourselves. Friends - Maybe offer guests their first drink as they arrive and then let them know that it is self serve after that – again, people love this as they can control how much they drink and they don't feel pressured to have more. Offer some nice non-alcoholic options, too. It's often the little touches that people remember – for instance, that you took the time to put a few fresh raspberries in each signature drink glass. It can even be as simple as a simple lime or lemon garnish with the sparkling water.

5. Take Something “Basic” and Make it Exotic
For example, devilled eggs can be stuffed with crab or lobster and garnished with black sesame seeds or flavoured smoked salts. Quesadilla’s with mango and shrimp; chop fresh rosemary or other herbs on top of appetizers; use an interesting chutney with your baked brie.

6. Presentation is Everything (but, use things that you already own!):
 - Tea cups look beautiful with fresh fruit salad and a dollop of whipping cream or lemon curd. They also look wonderful with soup. Martini glasses are fab for shrimp cocktail or a “seafood martini” they are great for desserts as well. Little espresso cups for soup shots to start. Glasses are also great for flowers – small vases. I love finding another use for something.
 - Keep food to the centre of the plate – never on the rim of the plate – and try to build height. Your mashed potatoes piled high in the centre, top with a braised short rib, top that with a few carrots or veg and then a herb garnish
 - Easy garnishes; chives! Put two in an x-pattern on your main course, lay flat on a platter as a bed for hors d’oeuvres, put a sprig in a bowl of soup or into your tea cup with soup
 - Brandy sniffers are great for cheese straws or crackers
 - You want varying heights – vegetables look great in a variety of stemware – i.e. pilsner glass filled with grape tomatoes and then carrot sticks coming out, rock glass with spears of zucchini, etc
 - Wooden cutting board for cheese for rustic presentation
 - Chinese supermarkets for lime leaves which look great on cheese platters.
 - Banana leaves can be used to wrap food or they can also be used on platters
 - Kraft paper – then make banana leaves as placemats and to line trays, fresh flowers, coconuts – inexpensive, of course, all of this is a lot easier and fun
 - Invest in all white it looks good at any time of year and they all match and coordinate easily
 - Garnish the trays or platters with a fresh flower
 - Orange or lemon or lime –cut in half – then use for toothpicks
 - Coloured sugars for flowers

7. Don’t Forget the Music (have the music playing as your guests arrive)

8. Don’t Forget the Candles
Lighting is so important – in the dining area, the sitting area and the washroom

9. Assemble Food
And, you don’t have to make it – buy great sausages and cold cuts and breads and jars of roasted peppers and good cheese and have people make their own sandwiches or; pizza dough and good quality bought sauce and toppings and have people make their own pizza. Make a salad. Ice cream Sundaes etc. Or dress up good quality store bought food to make it look like your own – i.e.

drizzle hummus with olive oil and a handful of pine nuts, roll a log of goat cheese in chopped fresh herbs, add chopped cilantro to salsa.

And most importantly...

10. Your Mood Sets the Tone

Guests aren't going to have a good time if they see that you're exhausted from all of the preparation or if you're stressed by having them in your home. I firmly believe that you are much better off to do what you feel most comfortable with. For instance, if you hate cooking but love setting a nice table (as many of my clients do), consider choosing a theme – for instance – Indian. Set the table with some bright linens and candles and fresh flowers. Make a signature drink and then order in the appetizers and meal. Maybe make a dessert – even if it's something simple like ice cream with an Indian inspired mango sauce. People are going to remember the company and the overall “feel” of the party – they aren't going to care that you didn't slave over a hot stove all day.

Thank-you Dana, for sharing this amazing list and for all your love, support and help in making my community feel loved with your amazing treats and shares.

Want to get to know Dana? Check her out at www.DanaShortt.ca.