

Ho, ho, hold the stress! These expert entertainers share their best tips for holiday hosting. **TEXT KARL LOHNES**

Sebastien & Sheila Centner



PHOTOGRAPH BY GREGORY FITZGERALD/DOUGLAS FREEMAN

lends itself to accommodating more standing guests than you can seat.

Sheila: Another option is to set up a buffet meal in the kitchen, where everyone can help themselves and then sit in smaller groups throughout. Apartment and condo buildings often have a common space that can be booked for a private event, or you can host in the private dining room of a local restaurant, small venue space or local hotel. Entertaining groups can get expensive, so don't be afraid to team up with friends or family. If your friend has the space and you're ready to do the heavy lifting on the rest, it's a match made in dinner party heaven!

KL: Sometimes hosts like to enjoy their parties without doing all the work involved. When is it smart to bring in catering, servers or bartenders?

Sebastien: Hiring a caterer or staff will make the host's job easier, but this can

'Tis the season for entertaining! Unfortunately, this time of the year can also usher in thoroughly unwelcome and uninvited seasonal stressors that come with pulling off a Santa-worthy cocktail party or dinner. Sebastien and Sheila Centner, the husband and wife behind the event planning company Eatertainment, walk the talk. In work and life, they create welcoming, spectacular events where guests and hosts can celebrate together. Who better to ask for holiday entertaining advice?

KL: Entertaining can be hard for people who live in small spaces. Any ideas for accommodating more guests than your home can comfortably hold?

Sebastien: We recommend adjusting the type of event you are hosting to fit the space. For example, if you can only seat four to six people at your kitchen or dining table and you plan on hosting more than this number, consider moving to a cocktail party format, which



PHOTOGRAPH BY BRUCE GIBSON



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"We always recommend starting with classic white dishes and simple contemporary silver."

increase your costs substantially. Keeping ease and budget in mind, hiring a single server who can help prep, serve, clear and clean can be a huge help. Even a single set of hands will make a huge difference. When your group is larger than six to eight people and you are hosting a cocktail party, consider hiring a single bartender to handle all the drinks. No budget for staff? Choose food that you can cook a day in advance, then warm or finish it off as guests arrive. Batch-make your cocktails so guests can help themselves. We like to use rental glassware and dishes – it's a luxury, as you can send it all back dirty.

KL: What holiday tabletop decor will last through the season, from mid-December to early January?

Sheila: A garland can last right through the winter season and is super versatile. Instead of using a traditional garland, use a magnolia garland and get it in smaller sections of three to four feet; you can use it on a larger area like a dining table centerpiece or mantel, or you can split it up and spread it around on two adjacent coffee tables. Accent with anything silver or gold – candlesticks, place card hold-

ers, mini floral vases that can be refilled. If you avoid traditional Christmas decor and stick to glamorous, elegant metallic pieces, your decor can take you right past New Year's Eve! To us, anything that sparkles says holiday and doesn't immediately go out of season, as reindeer or snowflakes might.

KL: Do you have favourite impressive hors d'oeuvres that are easy to prep and serve?

Sebastien: Every host should have an arsenal of go-to easy canapés they can throw together for any occasion. Some of our favourites include chèvre endive cups; blackberry bocconcini skewers with basil and balsamic glaze; and Emmental cheese cubes sprinkled with celery salt. Recipes for all of these are available in our new book, *Eatertainment*. [Editor's Note: see "Some Enchanted Evening," page 90, for a dinner menu from Sebastien and Sheila's new book.]

KL: Are classic white dishes the rule of thumb for serial entertainers?

Sheila: Absolutely! When it comes to building your portfolio of entertaining essentials, we always recommend starting with classic white

dishes and simple contemporary silverware. A classic white dish serves as a blank canvas where the food itself can be the pop of colour and stand out. When choosing a set, remember to plan for breakage, which will eventually happen if you entertain long enough. Buy extra (we always like to have two extras of each dish) or pick a pattern that you know you can get more of and is not just a seasonal or limited edition. White dishes make it easy to have fun with colour in other ways, like napkins and tablecloths, floral arrangements, centrepieces and charger plates. You can also add a pop of colour with smaller, less expensive coloured plates that you only need for one course.

KL: What does a holiday dinner at the Centner house look like?

Sheila: At our house, it's a special dinner we call "The Eve Before the Eve." It's as much a celebration of the holiday season as it is a homage to Sebastien's late French mother, Maryvonne, who passed down her passion for lavish entertaining – her Christmas Eve dinner was always legendary. Everyone is expected to dress to the nines, sip champagne, be 100 percent present for the entire evening – phones go away and everyone is together from the first cocktail right through the late evening hours!

We start by serving smoked salmon on toast with fresh lemon. Then, for the seated portion, we serve traditional French foie gras followed by whole poached lobster, served cold but with warm butter for dipping and French mayonnaise. Then we finish the meal with a beautiful cheese platter, simple green salad, and finally the classic French *bûche de Noël* with homemade whipped cream.

What is really touching to us is that it's our sons, Colsen and Logan, who are the driving forces behind us carrying on the tradition. Each year, they talk about how they plan to host the same dinner with their families one day. Small anecdote: it's called "The Eve Before the Eve" because although Maryvonne hosted the dinner on Christmas Eve, we now include our adult children and their partners, and our extended family and friends, so we host it on December 22 or 23, so everyone can be with their families on Christmas Eve and Christmas.

RECIPES SEBASTIEN & SHEILA CENTNER | PHOTOGRAPHY BRUCE GIBSON

Some Enchanted Evening

CUCUMBER SALAD ROLL WITH ORANGES, SUNFLOWER SEEDS & HONEY MUSTARD VINAIGRETTE

Sebastien and Sheila Centner have made a career out of their love of entertaining, building a hugely successful event and catering company. Their first book, *Eatertainment*, includes advice and recipes gleaned from years of experience. Here, they share recipes perfect for a holiday dinner party.

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BOURBON GRAPEFRUIT COCKTAIL WITH THYME SIMPLE SYRUP

CUCUMBER SALAD ROLL WITH ORANGES, SUNFLOWER SEEDS & HONEY MUSTARD VINAIGRETTE

SERVES 6

Honey Mustard Vinaigrette

- ¼ cup liquid honey
- ¼ cup lemon juice
- ¼ cup orange juice
- 1 tbsp grainy Dijon mustard
- 1 tsp garlic-infused olive oil
- 1 cup grapeseed oil

Salad

- 1 tbsp kosher salt
- 18 asparagus spears
- 3 cups mixed spring greens
- 3 cups baby kale
- ½ head radicchio, cored, cut in ½-inch strips
- 1 English cucumber, ends trimmed
- 1 small bunch chives
- 2 (to 3) oranges, peeled and segmented (24 segments)

- ¼ cup sunflower seeds
- Sea salt and black pepper

Vinaigrette

Place the honey, lemon and orange juices, Dijon and garlic oil in a blender. Blend on medium speed, slowly drizzling in the grapeseed oil until combined. Refrigerate in an airtight container for up to 1 week.

Salad

Bring a large pot of hot water to a boil over high heat, then add the kosher salt. Prepare an ice bath and set aside. Wash the asparagus. Snap off and discard the tough ends. Place the asparagus in the boiling water for 2 minutes (thicker asparagus may need to cook for longer), then immediately transfer to the ice bath. Combine the mixed greens, baby kale and radicchio in a bowl and set aside. Slice the cucumber in half lengthwise, and, using a mandolin, cut it into

6 long, thin ribbons and reserve the rest for another use. (We like to cut the remaining cucumbers into slices and serve lightly salted with canapés.) Lay a cucumber strip vertically perpendicular to the edge of the counter. Spread about 1 cup of the greens crosswise onto the cucumber ribbon (the greens will be parallel with the edge of the counter) and place 4 chives across them. Try to centre the greens on the cucumber. Lay 3 asparagus spears on top of the greens. Holding the greens in place, roll the cucumber up and around the greens to secure the ingredients and lay it flat with the ends of the cucumber ribbon on the bottom, underneath the greens. You can use a toothpick to hold everything in place until you're ready to serve. If you're not serving these immediately, cover them with a damp cloth and refrigerate for up to 2 hours. Place the salad roll in the centre of a plate and arrange 4 orange segments around it, then top each salad with 2 teaspoons of sunflower seeds, 2 tablespoons of dressing, and a pinch of sea salt and black pepper.

BOURBON GRAPEFRUIT COCKTAIL WITH THYME SIMPLE SYRUP

MAKES 1 COCKTAIL • 3½ CUPS SYRUP

Thyme Simple Syrup

- 2 cups granulated sugar
- 6 thyme sprigs

Bourbon Grapefruit Cocktail

- 2 oz bourbon
- 6 tbsp pink grapefruit juice
- 1 tbsp Thyme Simple Syrup
- 1 pink grapefruit slice, for garnish
- 1 thyme sprig, for garnish

Thyme Simple Syrup

Combine sugar, thyme and 2 cups water in a small saucepan and bring to a boil, without stirring, over medium heat. Reduce the heat to low and simmer, uncovered and without stirring, for 10 minutes. Remove from heat and let cool for 1 hour. Strain the syrup and refrigerate in an airtight container for up to 3 weeks.

Bourbon Grapefruit Cocktail

Fill a cocktail shaker with ice, then add the bourbon, grapefruit juice and simple syrup. Shake vigorously for 10 seconds. Strain into a rocks glass filled with fresh ice. Garnish with the grapefruit and thyme.

"Entertaining should be fun, so make sure to take a step back and enjoy every moment, because the better time you're having, the more your guests will enjoy themselves." – Sebastien & Sheila



CRANBERRY BAKED BRIE

CRANBERRY BAKED BRIE

SERVES 6 TO 8

- 1 (16 oz) brie wheel
- 1 cup pecan halves, lightly toasted
- ½ cup dried cranberries
- ½ cup pumpkin seeds, lightly toasted
- 1½ cups maple syrup

Preheat the oven to 325°F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper. Place the brie on the

prepared baking sheet and bake until soft, about 25 minutes. Meanwhile, in a small pot, warm the pecans, cranberries, pumpkin seeds and maple syrup over medium heat, mixing until warmed through and the maple syrup evenly coats everything. Transfer the baked brie to a serving dish just large enough to hold it snugly without crowding and pour the maple syrup mixture overtop. Serve immediately while still hot alongside toasted baguette and with a small spoon or knife for spreading.

CORNISH HEN

SERVES 6 TO 8

- 5 garlic cloves, minced
- 2½ tsp sweet paprika
- 5 tsp herbes de Provence
- ½ tsp sea salt
- 2½ tsp black pepper
- 2½ tbsp olive oil
- 4 Cornish hens
- 1 tbsp grated lemon zest
- 1 tbsp flat-leaf parsley, finely chopped

Preheat the oven to 350°F. In a small bowl, combine the garlic, paprika, herbes de Provence, salt, pepper and oil to form a paste. Set aside. Pat the Cornish hens dry with paper towels. Cut them along the breast and backbone to halve them – keep in mind that this is different than spatchcocking. There are some excellent videos on YouTube on how to do this. Rub the hens with the seasoning paste. Heat a large cast-iron pan on the stove over high heat. Sear the Cornish hens, skin side down, until the skin is crisp and releases easily from the pan, 3 to 4 minutes. Transfer the hens to a large baking sheet or dish and let cool enough to handle. Push the drumstick meat down the bone by about 1 inch. Cook the Cornish hens until their internal temperature is at least 160°F, but not more than 180°F. The timing can range from 25 to 40 minutes, depending on the size of the hens, so use a meat thermometer to be sure. Remove the hens from the oven and sprinkle with the lemon zest and chopped parsley. Reserve the cooking juices. See the serving tip on page 93.

ROASTED ROOT VEGETABLES

SERVES 6 TO 8

- 1 lb Brussels sprouts
- 1 lb heirloom carrots
- 2 cups red or white pearl onions
- 2 tbsp thyme leaves
- 2 tbsp rosemary leaves
- 1 tsp ground fennel seeds

- ½ cup olive oil
- 1 cup fresh or frozen and thawed cranberries
- Sea salt and black pepper

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper. Stem and halve the Brussels sprouts, peel and cut the carrots into 2-inch pieces, peel the onions, and coarsely chop the thyme and rosemary. Transfer the vegetables and herbs to a medium bowl and add

the fennel seeds and oil, mixing well to coat evenly. Transfer the vegetables to the prepared baking sheet and roast until the vegetables are caramelized and can easily be pierced with a knife, about 35 minutes. Increase the oven temperature to 375°F and sprinkle the cranberries over the vegetables. Roast for 10 more minutes. Remove from the oven, season to taste with salt and pepper, and mix well to ensure seasoning is distributed throughout.

"We absolutely love to entertain, and bringing people together over a great meal gives us tremendous joy." – Sebastien & Sheila



Find more recipes and entertaining tips in *Eatertainment* by Sebastien and Sheila Centner, Appetite by Random House, \$40.

SERVING TIP While roasting the Cornish hens, prepare enough mashed sweet potatoes for the number of servings required. To serve, place a Cornish hen half directly in the centre of the plate, straddling a dollop of mashed sweet potatoes. Arrange the vegetables around the Cornish hen and pour the reserved cooking juices from the hen all around.