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COCKTAIL PARTY

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By Sebastien & Sheila Centner

Most people think hosting demands lots of work, time, and effort—but it doesn't have to! The trick is to start small, gain comfort, and gradually add elements as you feel ready. Casual or impromptu gatherings often create just as much joy for guests as a carefully planned five-course meal. Even with a busy schedule, there's no need to miss out on entertaining loved ones.

In France, cocktail parties are called "cinq à sept," after the classic cocktail hour from five to seven. This style of get-together is low-pressure and eliminates

the need for a full meal, making it ideal for newer hosts or those who want a more relaxed, intimate vibe. Cocktail parties are some of our favourite evenings—always brimming with laughter, easy conversation, and memories made.

One of the best aspects of hosting a cocktail party is its flexibility. Your menu can adjust to fit the guest list, from a few friends in the backyard to a larger group in the kitchen. No formal seating is required, and impromptu guests are always welcome. As we like to say, our door only opens inward!

THE SETTING

For a cocktail party that feels effortless yet chic, aim to create a relaxed atmosphere that encourages mingling. Opt out of traditional seating and let guests move freely as they enjoy cocktails and canapés in various areas of your home. Keep décor simple: small floral arrangements and votive candles add elegance, while soft candlelight enhances the evening's mood.

Set the tone with the right playlist. Background music should be enjoyable but never overpowering. Look for a mix that's mellow and lets the conversation flow easily. (Search "Seb and Sheila" on Mixcloud for our go-to Dinner Series Playlists!)

As for serving, present canapés on classic platters or trays placed around high-traffic areas like the kitchen island or coffee table. If you're working with a large space, spread food out so there's always something nearby.

To maintain flow, keep the bar and food stations separate to avoid crowding. Small floral clusters at key spots, like the bar and serving areas, give guests gentle cues on where to gather. For simple sophistication, we suggest finding easy, elegant greens.

ON THE MENU

Hosting a cocktail party is all about mingling, so we recommend choosing canapés that can be prepared in advance and served at room temperature, allowing you to spend more time with your guests.

Here's a perfect lineup for easy, crowd-pleasing bites:

Prosciutto-Wrapped Asparagus:

Blanch asparagus, wrap in prosciutto, and finish with olive oil and Parmesan. Serving them as single stems makes them easy finger food.

Endive Cups with Goat Cheese or Feta:

Filled with a goat cheese-herb mixture or feta, and topped with nuts and honey, these cups are tasty, elegant, and easy to eat.

Cucumber Cups with Crab Salad:

Hollow out cucumbers and fill with crab salad. They take a bit more prep but are worth the effort for their flavour and presentation.

Stuffed Red Onion Cups with Mashed Peas:

Marinate red onion cups in vinegar for a colour pop and fill with mashed peas – delicious and vibrant!

Bacon-Wrapped Pretzel Sticks:

Serve these in silver cups with rosemary sprigs for an eye-catching twist.

For a fun DIY element, offer a self-serve bruschetta bar with three toppings, allowing guests to customize their own bites. For larger gatherings, we suggest adding a charcuterie board to round out the menu.

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DRINKS

While canapés are key, the main attraction at a cocktail party should, of course, be the cocktails! If you love trying something new, use the occasion to experiment with innovative mixes that your guests will love.

Start with a welcome drink to encourage guests to venture outside their usual cocktail preferences. A grapefruit spritzer is perfect: add a sugar cube and a few dashes of bitters to each champagne flute, pour in a splash of fresh grapefruit juice, then top with Champagne when guests arrive for a delightful fizz effect.

In addition to the welcome cocktail, offer two specialty options. First up, offer a refreshing southern lemonade, made with whisky and served chilled from a punch bowl or carafe. Set it out with lemon wedges so guests can garnish their own drinks.

The second cocktail, a Chambord spritz, is a simple, crowd-pleasing mix of Chambord liqueur, white wine, soda, and blackberries. These can be batched and set out for easy self-serve.

For those who prefer a classic, have a few basic wines and liqueurs on hand.

Tip: Stick to a mix of batched cocktails and easy-mix drinks to avoid bartending all night! For batched cocktails, serve soda separately so guests can control the strength.

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