

Holiday party. planning: *keep calm and carry on*

It was about five seconds after I agreed to plan my work holiday party that I had a terrible revelation:

I had agreed to plan my work holiday party.

My previous forays into party planning had been simple and basically consisted of getting dressed and showing up. Occasionally, I'd bring a bag of chips or a bottle of wine. If I was feeling saucy, I'd wear a funny hat. I had always been the party-goer, never the party planner.

Suddenly, festive party happiness for 30-plus people was in my hands. There would be no faking an illness to dodge this holiday bullet.

One thing I've realized from living on the Oregon Coast is that everybody loves a good party, and there is no shortage of planning experience.

I gathered my resolve and picked up the phone.

My first call was to Sandy Sturm, who, along with husband Harvey, has owned and operated the Terra Cotta Cafe in Manzanita for over a decade. Sandy is a veritable encyclopedia of party-planning tips and has carried out everything from themed wine pairing nights to murder mystery dinners. They'd always been a thundering success and usually ended with her receiving a standing ovation.

"Don't panic," she told me. "Planning the party is the fun part."

I exhaled slowly. I was in good hands.

Sandy stressed three major points to concentrate on: invitations, venue and menu.

I suggested an e-vite and Sandy chided me that invitations, especially during the holidays, need to be more personal.

"People appreciate handwritten invitations," she says. "It shows sincere effort."

Thankfully, nearby places like Salt & Paper in Manzanita, Shorelines NW in Cannon Beach, and Winnifred Byrne Luminari Arts in Astoria stock wonderful selections of sea-



Submitted photo

Offering a variety of hors d'oeuvres at your party is sure to impress guests.

sonal cards. Plus, there are living, breathing people on hand to help you find them.

Check one item off the list.

Next came venue selection, which is all about timing. Most area venues book up for holiday parties months ahead of time. Sandy reminded me that her holiday-themed dinners were usually fully booked by August.

In other words, if you don't plan far enough in advance, you could end up holding your party in a storage unit or parking lot.

Thankfully, I got lucky and found an opening at the Pine Grove Community House in Manzanita. I also found some great future alternatives by calling visitor centers in Astoria, Seaside and Cannon Beach.

With just one major item to go, I breathed a little easier.

When I realized that item was menu-planning, I reached for a paper bag.

Getting a party menu just right is considerably more tricky than it used to be. As a kid in the '70s and '80s, I'd occasionally tag along when my parents were invited to a holiday party, and the menu was usually potluck. Tables were crammed with various Pyrex and Tupperware containers overflowing with casseroles, bean salads, Chex mix and cheese logs. If anyone had a food allergy, they either didn't know it or ignored it.

Now, people pay more attention to what they are eating, and it's important to take that into consideration when planning your party.

It was time to consult another expert. Ju-



File photo

Dale Clark and Charlotte Bruhn run Winnifred Byrne Luminari Arts in Astoria, an eclectic souvenir shop and gallery with plenty of greeting cards and invitations available for your holiday party.

lie Barker, owner of Buttercup in Nehalem, has long been a stalwart of the coastal restaurant scene. She also has nearly 30 years of catering experience under her belt.

Holiday party menus, she assured me, are the most fun to plan and more stress-free than other events. Barker says that's due in large part to the fact that the holiday season allows people to plan a party they wouldn't have the time or money to do other times of the year.

"I love parties this time of year because people really want to do something fancy; they want to celebrate" she says. "It's about having fun and going all-out."

Barker explains that if your party goes the catering route, a good caterer eliminates the stress for people

from day one, which includes providing allergy-free menu options for a variety of dietary needs.

"They (clients) appreciate having someone else handling everything," she says.

That can include everything from setting up, cleaning, and providing servers. Barker says clients can save money by opting out of some or all of these services. "It's all about how much you want to do," she says.

A trend that Barker has noticed in recent holiday parties is the growing emphasis on hors d'oeuvres, whether as appetizers or as a whole meal.

"Doing a party with nothing but hors d'oeuvres can be fun and informal," she says. "People are very impressed by a wide variety."

She stressed three major points to concentrate on: invitations, venue and menu.



Submitted photo

A growing party trend is to serve hors d'oeuvres, whether as appetizers or as a whole meal.

And don't forget drinks. Barker says having a bartender adds an element of class to any party. She adds that she has often come up with specialty cocktails to fit any menu.

When planning a holiday event, Barker echoes the theme that I heard the most. "I tell everyone to start planning at least a month ahead of time," she says.

With my planning nearing completion, I decided to make one more stop for my own well-being: a massage to knead out accumulated party stress.

Figuring more advice on the subject is always good, I asked my masseuse if she had any tips for people planning holiday parties.

"Tell them to get a massage," she laughed.

Coastal Life

Story by DAN HAAG

4 | December 10, 2015 | coastweekend.com