

Ring in the new year without breaking the bank

by Emilie Le Beau - Dec. 17, 2007 08:17 PM
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In just a few weeks, the credit card bill from Christmas will land in your mailbox. All the money spent on gifts, wrapping, donations and tips will be tallied into one horrific, nauseating bill. And the spending isn't over yet for the season. New Year's can also be pricey, especially if you're hosting a party.

Planning a chic but cheap party can help cut costs. Food writer Melissa Gibson recommends establishing a theme to set perimeters and control the budget. "So when you get your bank statement next month you're not in the red because you entertained 10 of your friends," says Gibson, co-author of "The Little Black Apron" (Adams Media, \$14.95).

Setting a theme is just one strategy for cutting expenses. There are many ways hosts can save on drinks, dinner and decor:

DRINKS

Wine from the box may not be glamorous but it is inexpensive. And a less expensive bottle can seem more upscale when presented properly, says Carolyn Hammond, author of "1,000 Best Wine Secrets" (Sourcebooks, \$12.95).

Serving wine in glasses that are narrower on top than bottom, for example, can make a difference.

"That will improve the taste of the wine; it captures the nose and makes the taste more intense," Hammond says.

Chilling the wine can also help hide flaws. Hammond says white, blush and sparkling wines should be stored on ice. The red can be kept on the back porch, depending on climate, so it is slightly chilled.

Another strategy is to serve a limited bar menu, suggests Jennifer Sbranti, founder HostessWithTheMostess.com, a Web site with party planning ideas and tips.

"I love to serve a signature drink," Sbranti says. "A lime sherbet champagne punch is really affordable and it goes a long way."

A signature drink can also be switched every hour. Event planner Kara Underwood recommends throwing a decades party where the theme changes every hour.

For the 1980s hour, for example, serve orange martinis with Tang, says Underwood, of Magnificent Milestones, an event and design firm in Chicago.

While a limited bar menu may cut costs, curbing excessive drinking can save serious money. A party guest who guzzles a dozen beer bottles or several bottles of wine can quickly drink away the budget.

Underwood says she is often asked by clients how to curb a guest's excessive drinking. "It's a sticky situation, you don't want to offend anyone," Underwood says.

Being discreet and prepared can solve the problem and Underwood suggests stocking up on non-alcoholic beer and sparkling cider.

When switching beers, Underwood recommends pouring the non-alcoholic into a glass and telling the guest it is a microbrew. For wine, switch the person over to sparkling cider and call it sparkling wine.

Cocktails can simply be diluted with more mixers so the alcohol is minimal or absent. "If they are truly past their limit, they can no longer taste alcohol," Underwood says.

MENU

Since it's New Year's Eve, most guests will expect alcohol and a champagne toast. But you have more flexibility with food. One budget friendly option is to serve lots of bread.

"Obviously, bread is really cheap. You can get a baguette for 89 cents," Underwood says.

That baguette can be used for dips or bruschetta. It can also be used for dipping into a cheese fondue or placed alongside cold appetizers, Underwood says.

Pasta dishes can also feed a lot of people for less. Gibson says one common mistake hosts make is planning a meal with too many "big ticket items" like a roast. Instead, she says an Italian-themed meal featuring pasta with sausage and peppers can be both chic and cheap.

"You want to stay away from your really expensive meats," Gibson says.

Also consider ingredient lists when meal planning. Underwood says ingredients for some appetizers may cost more than buying them pre-made at stores like Trader Joe's.

And big meals aren't required. Because it's New Year's, Gibson says it is acceptable to start the party at 9 p.m. - not 7 p.m. - and serve only cocktails and dessert.

But don't try to start the party early and skimp on food. "If people come at dinner time, they will expect dinner," Gibson says.

DECOR

With a little reworking, Christmas decorations, wrapping and ornaments can serve as fun and free party decor, Sbranti says.

"I use gift wrap and scrapbook paper as place mats and table runners," Sbranti says. "Gold and silver -- works hand in hand with New Year's."

Twinkle lights can be wrapped around baseboards, furniture and beverage tables. Meanwhile, vases can be filled with ornaments or covered in leftover gift wrap, Sbranti says.

The centerpieces may be cheap but Sbranti highly recommends using a linen, not a plastic or paper tablecloth. Also try to avoid dinner on plastic plates or pouring bubbly into plastic cups.

"I'm not a huge fan of plastic cups but in large parties that is sometimes necessary," Sbranti says. "If you use papers, definitely look for high quality, nothing that looks cheap."

The right lighting and music can also help make a budget party seem more glamorous. Dim the lights and let the twinkle lights shine or set up a dance floor if there is room.

And be sure to watch the clock. No one wants to miss the countdown. "The midnight toast is the biggest deal of New Year's," Sbranti says.