

Current Events

by Erin Souza | December 02, 2008

We hate to be the Grinch who stole your holiday hope, but we have to be honest: in a time of economic uncertainty, you can be sure about one thing: 'tis the season to be frugal. But that doesn't mean you have to forgo the festivities in lieu of a financial-woes pity party. We scoured the city for some cheap-but-chic party necessities, then checked in with events guru Bryan Rafanelli for pointers on how to make the most of what we found.



\$50 party budget

THE INVITATION: Evite; free at www.evite.com.

THE SIPS: Yellow Tail pinot grigio and cabernet sauvignon (\$5.99 each) at Trader Joe's (1317 Beacon Street, Brookline, 617.278.9997).

THE BITES: assorted mild cheeses and crackers from A. Russo & Sons (560 Pleasant Street, Watertown, 617.923.1500).

THE DÉCOR: snowflake beverage napkins (\$2.95), available at Crate & Barrel (140 Faneuil Hall Marketplace, Boston, 617.742.6025); fresh bunches of Peruvian lilies (\$4.99/small bunch; \$7.99/large bunch) from Star Market (699 Mt. Auburn Street, Cambridge, 617.876.1450); wrapping-paper table runner (\$6.50/roll) from Posh on Tremont (557 Tremont Street, Boston, 617.437.1970).

When you're putting together a party on a very tight budget, being resourceful is your best tactic, says Rafanelli, whose party-throwing resume includes events he's produced for the likes of the Clintons and Denis Leary. "Before you go out and buy anything, you should always open up your closets, your cabinets, and see what you already have and what you can reinvent," he says. Whether it's a white cake plate or silver trays to accent the snowflake cocktail napkins we chose, incorporating pieces you already own is a simple way to accessorize without shopping.

Another tip? "If your budget's \$1 million or \$50, the best starting point is a color or motif," Rafanelli suggests. In our case, he recommends taking the wrapping-paper table runner one step further and using the same inexpensive print to cover serving trays, "and maybe you should wrap your front door in it," he jokes. To add a design element to the cheese-and-cracker tray, Rafanelli suggests retro-vibe butter crackers in a butterfly shape, like the ones your mom used to serve.

And since guests almost always ask what they can bring, politely suggest a bottle of white wine and use some of the cash you allotted for drinks to buy a bottle of vodka. "You can make easy vodka snowcones with crushed ice," Rafanelli notes.

\$150 party budget

THE INVITATION: moss, flourish A2 notes (\$9) from Paper Source (338 Boylston Street, Boston, 617.536.3444).

THE SIPS: vodka, gin, whiskey, rum, and tequila (prices vary) from BLM Wine and Spirits (1354 Commonwealth Ave, Allston, 617.734.7700).

THE BITES: homemade dip and vegetable platter; frozen tomato-and-pesto flatbread (\$3.69) from Trader Joe's; mini cupcakes (\$1.25/each) arranged on a cupcake tier (\$6) from Kickass Cupcakes (378 Highland Avenue, Somerville, 617.628.CUPS).

THE DÉCOR: moss, flourish cocktail napkins (\$5.95) from Paper Source; gold-star candleholders (\$2.50) from Crate & Barrel; martini glasses filled with assorted brightly colored candies.

When you've got a bit more money to work with, sending a paper invitation adds a touch of panache and is worth the small investment. "It makes a statement," says Rafanelli. "It's the first impression. And it's nice to get something special in the mail this time of year that's not a coupon."

A self-professed "design guy," Rafanelli advises putting your money into the tangible details with which your guests will interact — cocktail napkins, glasses, plates to make a big impact. "Focus on the things that people are going to see and feel and touch," he says. Buy as many votive candle holders as your budget will bear, for example, and flood your apartment with soft, flickering light. And for décor that packs a punch, place items shoulder-height or above, Rafanelli says, so your guests can really see them.

And when you can't pour much money into the bar, our expert suggests taking the opportunity to use the items you do have and offer signature drinks. His picks? A mojito and a tried-and-true vodka drink, "like a Christmas cosmo."

\$350 party budget

THE INVITATION: monogrammed note cards (\$6.95/eight) from Copley Flair (583 Boylston Street, Boston, 617.247.1648).

THE SIPS: DIY Naughty Nog (see Chef Andy Husband's recipe); wine and bar staples from above.

THE BITES: platters of mezés (\$9/ five varieties) from Sofra Bakery and Café (One Belmont Street, Cambridge, 617.661.3161); house olive mista (\$10.95/pound) from Formaggio Kitchen (224 Huron Avenue, Cambridge, 617.354.4750); family-style dishes of homemade grilled seafood; customized cookies (\$78/24) from Better Batch (248 Cypress Street, Brookline, 617.739.0333).

THE DÉCOR: pine-cone lights (\$9.99) from Target (550 Arsenal Street, Watertown, 617.924.6574); hanging mirror strands (\$12) from West Elm (160 Brookline Avenue, Boston, 617.450.9500); clear vases filled with colored ornaments (\$6.99/12) from Target.

We know it's not about where you are but who you're with that's most important, but it doesn't hurt to create an inviting and festive environment when you're welcoming friends into your home. When you've got a whopping \$350 (times are tough, remember?) to spend on your celebration, you can put more money and attention into the ambience while also pumping up your party's menu.

Adding some seafood and customized cookies to the table, for example, instantly and inexpensively upgrades the spread. "Shrimp is a luxury item that everyone can identify," says Rafanelli.

A professional chef's cocktail recipe steps up the game, too, at virtually no cost. "There's always marquee value in that," says Rafanelli.

He also suggests making your décor work double-duty by offering the ornaments in your centerpieces as party favors and taking down the glistening mirror strands to wrap gifts once the party's over.

Small touches, such as a simply monogrammed invitation and an inscribed cookie to match, leave an impression on guests. "That's where you bring more specialty to the party," says Rafanelli. "When you're entertaining for the holidays, people notice the effort you put in, and that's the reward — that sense of gratitude. You're saying, 'Your time is important to me, and I'm grateful that you're here.' "

Paying thoughtful attention to keeping your guests happy is something you can do within any price range. What's this season about, after all, if not giving to others? "I think that's alive and well," says Rafanelli, "whether we have nothing or we have all the money in the world."