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Small and large parties for friends, families

RING IN the holiday season and the New Year with a resolution to entertain elegantly but with ease.

"You don't have to be a gourmet cook or a social register hostess," says Isabelle von Boch, spokeswoman and family member of Villeroy & Boch Tableware, a china manufacturer. "The key ingredients to easy, elegant entertaining are organization, imagination and self-confidence."

The beauty of holiday entertaining is that there are no rules. You can host an event as formal as black-tie only complete with caviar and champagne, or simple come-as-you-are get-together with cookies and eggnog. Here are a few party ideas to consider.

COOPERATIVE BUFFETS: Cooperative Christmas buffets limit the amount of time the hostess has to spend in the kitchen. Instead of one person being responsible for the many courses of the annual yuletide repast,

assorted friends and relatives can constitute the menu. The ground rules are simple: the hostess sets and decorates the table, roasts the turkey and provides the Scotch. The guests contribute hors d'oeuvres like Scotch pate, vegetables, relishes and desserts.

TREE TRIMMING: Another tradition that benefits from a modern twist is Christmas tree trimming. Instead of trying to fit this activity into a hectic weekday schedule or Christmas Eve, many families put up the tree on a weekend prior to Christmas. They are also using the tree-trimming as a reason for a separate party — one to which they can invite neighbors and friends to decorate, carol and make merry. The tree can be decorated at leisure and guests can enjoy fruitcake, assorted cookies and hand-warming beverages like Scotch coffee.

Even simple refreshments, like port wine and cheese, make a get-together festive.

"Nothing could be simpler, more appealing or warming than a glass of ruby port and slices of good cheese," says David Sandeman, chairman of House of Sandeman, producers and shippers of port, sherry and madeira wines. "Pour the wine into a cut glass decanter, grace it with a holiday bow and you have a Christmas treat as satisfying as it is pretty."

GRAZING PARTY: Long before there were yuppies, many cultures enjoyed grazing. The Russians, for example, enjoyed grazing treats, which they call zakuska, or "little bites." The holiday table would include sliced beet vinaigrette, button mushrooms in spicy marinade, piroshki (pastries filled with meat, cheese or vegetables), pelmeni (a meat dumpling), smoked fish, stuffed cabbage, pickled herring, caviar with vodka and Russian dark bread, according to Stolichnaya vodka experts. Try a smorgasbord of your own, fi ed your favorite foreign cuisine.

No matter what the party, Von Boch contends that presentation also is a vital element.

"Dining is entertainment, and it should be approached with a touch of drama and art," von Boch says. "Even the most basic, seemingly ordinary meal can be made more glamorous and appealing when it's beautifully presented. A creative table setting, therefore, sets the entire stage for a tour de force meal."

For the novice or most seasoned hostess, von Boch offers a number of tips that can help to keep entertaining elegant but easy this holiday season.

- Start planning the menu as much in advance as possible, at least two weeks. Write down ingredients you'll need for recipes, plus serving pieces you'll use for dishes. Shop for groceries and supplies ahead of time to avoid last minute crowds.

- Select recipes that can be prepared ahead of time.

- Prepare recipes in advance and have them ready to use in pretty oven-to-table casseroles or cookware.

- Set the table as early as possible — the night before or even up to two days ahead.

- Experiment with the table settings. Mix and match china and crystal patterns using colors and shapes as unifying themes.

Here are some recipes to try for your holiday party.

QUICK SCOTCH PATE

1 pound liverwurst, at room temperature
1 package (8 ounces) cream cheese, at room temperature
¼ cup Scotch
1 clove garlic, finely chopped

Combine liverwurst, cream cheese, Scotch and garlic in a mixing bowl or food processor; mix until well blended. Transfer mixture to a small bowl; cover and refrigerate at least four hours to blend flavors. To serve, pile mixture into a serving bowl or shape it into a loaf. Serve with an assortment of crackers or toast.

SCOTCH COFFEE

Warm heat-tempered glasses — tall, tapered glasses that hold about 6 ounces to create an attractive effect. Pour in about 1 ounce of Scotch whisky and 2 teaspoons of sugar. Fill glass to within 1 inch of the top with strong hot black coffee and stir to dissolve the sugar.

Then trickle double, not whipped, cream over the back of a spoon onto the top of the coffee. This must be done carefully so that cream floats on the surface of coffee and just reaches the brim of the glass.

ORNAMENT COOKIES

¼ cup butter or margarine
¼ cup sugar
1 egg
¼ teaspoon peppermint extract
1 tablespoon milk
1 ½ cups unsifted all-purpose flour
one-third cup unsweetened cocoa
½ teaspoon baking powder
¼ teaspoon salt
Decorations: red cinnamon candies

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