

I am invited to a lot of parties. I may not be popular or cool, but I am inoffensive, I rarely spill things, and I know when I'm not wanted, all of which make me an excellent party guest.

I also host a lot of parties, because years ago I bought one of those glass drink dispensers with the little metal spout and now I want to get some use out of it.

Therefore I feel qualified to offer a little advice to both host and guest, so that everyone can get through this grueling obligation with grace and good humor and then go back to doing what they really want to be doing, staying home and watching "Game of Thrones" in peace.

PART ONE: How to host a party

Look at Pinterest.

See a photo of a dozen single-portion tureens of truffle macaroni and cheese tucked into a rustic tray.

Decide you want to have a party.

Go shopping.

Buy a couple of things that seem like you might want them for your party, things like half a dozen mini soup tureens or a box of paper drinking straws which are just like plastic drinking straws only they do not function as straws at all.

Plan your party.

What goes with macaroni and cheese? Mason jars full of lemonade? Mason jars full of soup? Do that. Do both.

Keep planning your party.

Add more and more. Design a signature cocktail. Compile a wry, thematically coherent play list. Organize lawn games.

Send out invitations.

Keep planning your party.

What if the cupcake tower was itself *made of cupcakes*?

Send out more invitations.

The more the merrier when it comes to lawn games! Don't stop until you've invited way too many people to execute your original plan.

Run the numbers.

Realize it would cost \$600 to buy that many tureens.

Find substitutes.

Instead of truffle macaroni and cheese in ceramic tureens, how about cheese popcorn in paper cups?

Make lists.

Lists and lists and sublists, with headings like "Things to get at Trader Joe's" and "To do by Monday." Soothe yourself with lists. A person who makes lists is a person who gets things done.

Get to work.

Successfully complete the least important thing on your list. Look at that hand-lettered menu! It's effortlessly elegant.

Things are going pretty smoothly now.**Things are going less smoothly now.****Pretend your guests will notice everything.**

Clean. Clean the baseboards. Clean, even though in the back of your mind you can't forget that you are cleaning your house in anticipation of throwing open the doors to three dozen drunks with cheese popcorn on their fingers, and that at best only the first guest will ever see how clean everything was before she came.

Look at the clock.**Pretend your guests will notice nothing.**

Nothing matters now. Throw it all into closets, toss it behind closed doors. What kind of freak looks at someone's baseboards?

Despise your guests.

It is at this point that every friend you chose to welcome into your home becomes your worst enemy. Say things like, "Whatever, they don't need fancy cocktails, they can just mix drinks themselves," and then, "Who cares if we're out of mixers, let them drink beer," and finally, "If they want beer so damn much, they can bring it themselves."

Despise your home and family.

Why isn't this place bigger? Why don't we have more chairs? Why can't a single person in this goddamn place make a cupcake tower? What are you, an idiot?

Bake all night.

Or cook, or clean, or decant popcorn into little paper cups. You are so tired.

Look at the clock.**Look at the clock.****Stop looking at the clock!****Get dressed.****Drink too much, too soon.**

You are sleep-deprived and butter-creamed and giddy with relief. It's out of your hands now, you've commended this party to God – so have a couple of cocktails, you've earned it!

Be a good host.

Introduce everyone, offer drinks, take coats, top off the popcorn.

Be a worse host.

The more people, the more drinks, the harder it is to make all those introductions and take all those coats. Leave at least one thing you slaved over to burn in the oven or congeal forgotten on the counter.

Notice that no one noticed the food.

You can spend all morning piping salmon mousse into fingerling potatoes, but the most popular item at the party will always be chips. Remember, people really only want to eat chips.

Clean up.

This is the cleaning up you do late at night, when you're already a bit hungover, and you're sort of ineffectively pushing things around and dumping them into trash bags, and wasting food, because honestly there is just no way in the world you are going to wrap up those last few soggy fingerlings when you could just throw them away. There is a wicked, reckless joy in throwing food away – a whole chicken, half a birthday cake – though you still carefully sort the recycling from the waste, you're not a monster. This is a also good time to break a few wine glasses.

Give up. Go to bed.

In the morning, clean up properly.

Marvel at the number of bottles in the recycling bin, and the even greater number that didn't make it into the recycling bin. Ruefully rinse the tureen that some asshole used as an ashtray.

Talk it all over with your significant other.

Gossip, compare notes, start an enemies list. This is the best part of the party, and maybe the only reason to have parties at all.

Find a bocce ball lodged in your rain gutter.

Despise your friends. Vow you will never have a party again.

Look at Pinterest.

Repeat.

PART TWO: So you've been invited to a party

First ask yourself:

Is this a real invitation?

This is a fair question, and should not be a sensitive one. Sometimes people want you to come to their party; other times, they are inviting you out of obligation. Neither option is a bad one, but it's important to be able to tell the difference. I sincerely appreciate grudging invitations, because they demonstrate that the host has the maturity and kindness to do the right thing even you are the thirteenth guest and she's just bought a bunch of fancy napkins that only come in packs of twelve.

Remember, being invited to a party you do not have to attend is the best of both worlds: your friend gets to feel magnanimous for inviting you, you get to feel even more magnanimous for politely declining, everyone remains friends, and no one has to squeeze an extra chair onto the patio or sit in what is clearly an afterthought chair.

Do I want to go?

No, no one ever wants to go to parties.

Am I obligated to go?

Maybe. There are times when you are doing someone a favor by going to their party. Perhaps you are intended to serve as a distraction, ice-breaker, or neutral party. If your job is to diffuse an uncomfortable situation or forestall a worse one, show up and do your part. Perhaps you round out an unbalanced gathering, or add diversity to a uniform one. Perhaps you're the one bringing the chips. The only fast rule is that if fewer than 30% of invited guests RSVP "yes" to a party then you must go no matter what, even should you have to harrow Hell to get there.

PART THREE: How to attend a party

Do not come early.

Seriously. I don't want to hear your excuses. Don't be early. Drive around the block if you have to.

Do not come (very) late.

Do not arrive at a party less than a half an hour before its probable conclusion or everyone else will be obligated to stay longer because of you and now they'll be no time left for "Game of Thrones."

Bring a gift but don't make a thing about it.

It's a lovely gesture, sure, but the sun need not pause in its course to admire those tea towels. Set them down discreetly in some dark corner where they will be discovered long after the party and cause as much confusion as cheer.

Notice the things you are supposed to notice.

Anything that clearly took a lot of work and a lot of time, praise it. Even if it looks a little lopsided and wonky, praise it. Unless it looks really lopsided and wonky, in which case, politely ignore it so the host doesn't feel any worse than he probably already does about that terrible collapsing cupcake tower.

Do not notice the things you are not supposed to notice.

It goes without saying that no guest would ever mention dirty baseboards. What I'm saying is, don't *notice* the baseboards. Don't let your eyes see them. Don't let that little shard of judgment into your heart.

Make yourself useful.

No, not like that.

Find something to do that is simple and necessary and requires no decision-making or discernment. Slicing up a bunch of bread is helpful; rearranging all the furniture is not. If in doubt, do less (this is probably a good motto for life).

Talk to the person no one else wants to talk to.

This is absolutely the best contribution you can make to a party. Is there someone who doesn't quite fit in with everyone else? Go find that elderly relative, next-door neighbor, or newly transferred coworker – entertaining the host's weird cousin is a hundred times more helpful than mangling all that bread.

Don't talk to the host.

They're busy feeling terrible about their baseboards. Just say a quick “thanks and that's a hell of a cupcake tower.”

Fill up on chips.**Play along.**

No one wants to play lawn games, obviously, but if the host has her heart set on lawn games, group caroling, or a murder mystery dinner party, swallow your pride and participate graciously.

But don't play along too much.

Jesus, it's just a game, have some dignity.

Don't announce you are leaving.

If you are leaving early, don't make a big show of it – it interrupts the flow of the party and encourages others to leave too, breaking up the gathering right as the murder mystery was getting good.

Unless you should announce you are leaving.

If you are leaving late, and it's clear the host would like others to follow, then yawn and stretch and gather your things with big, showy movements, like a mime pretending to walk an unruly dog.

Go home.

If your host is cleaning up, it's time to go home. If you are the last person present, it's time to go home. If your host has changed into more comfortable clothes, then sweet Jesus, go home.

On the drive back, agonize over every single thing you said and did all night.

Send an awkward apology email that's far worse than saying nothing at all.

Send a thank you note.

Thank you notes are the bedrock of civilization.