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Hosting a Holiday Party on a Budget

Seven cost-saving tips for throwing a fete without losing flair

By **PERVAIZ SHALLWANI**

The current economic malaise doesn't mean it has to put a damper on holiday festivities. While your pocketbook may be lighter this year, there are ways to throw just as festive an affair on a tighter budget. Here are seven tips:

Buy Cheese From the Big Chains

Instead of going to a specialty cheese store, which may have more variety but often costs more, check out big-chain stores like Wal-Mart and B.J.'s Wholesale Club. As consumer interest in cheese has grown, big box retailers have expanded their selection, often offering great buys on quality cheeses, says San Francisco-based cheese and wine writer Laura Werlin.

"What you have to do is cease being a cheese snob for a minute and realize that there are some very good cheeses to be found at the grocery store," says Ms. Werlin. "Even Costco is getting in good cheeses these days. One I had last week from Costco is a Comte from France. It was in bulk, but it was \$11 and it was excellent. If you are used to going to the specialty cheese shop, you can mix and match the specialty cheeses with a few from the grocery store."

Another trick: Try cooking with cheaper or lesser-quality cheeses. If you make grilled cheese sandwiches or crostinis, you don't need a super fancy cheese.

"Fondue is a wonderful idea because it satisfies that basic need for cheese and feeds a lot of people," Ms. Werlin says. "The aroma of melted cheese fills the room and is very enticing."

Use Alternative Cuts of Meat

Slow-cooked stews and braises are a nice alternative to the classic tenderloin or rib eye roast, and the meat used in them can be up to \$10 to \$20 a pound cheaper. Buy shoulder, rump or brisket cuts and spice them up with exotic flavors such as earthy coffee or spicy dried peppers, says Kempy Minifie, executive food editor at Gourmet magazine.

The key is to not make it seem like an ordinary dinner, Ms. Minifie says. Serve

stew in a nice set of china and pair it with a few slices of buttered crostini or a dollop of crème fraîche to jazz it up.

With your savings from the meat, you can splurge a little more on the bread.

"Who doesn't like fresh hot bread?" Ms. Minifie says. "Think about when you go to a restaurant. If the bread is really good, by the time the main comes out, you are stuffed."

Turn to Comfort Foods

Instead of the typical holiday caviar, many customers are requesting comfort fare such as mini burgers, pulled pork sandwiches, and macaroni and cheese, says Ron Parker, managing director of Hudson Yards Catering in New York. (In fact, Mr. Parker's caviar orders have dropped from 30 pounds last year to five pounds this year.) Not only are these foods more comforting in these tough times, but they're less expensive.

Mr. Parker recommends picking dishes that will elicit warmth and conversation: mini burgers with French fries, grilled cheese with shot glasses of tomato soup, or a dressed-up version of a gratin (try a creamy béchamel sauce). Better yet, serve a family recipe that will evoke fond memories.

Bring Out the Punch Bowl

The comeback of the glitzy cocktail den has turned the punch bowl fashionable again. Another bonus: Serving one special drink means you don't have to lay out a full bar -- and you can economize even more by buying the ingredients for your punch-bowl cocktail in bulk.

"You can make a nice historic drink that avoids bringing up memories of college and punch made out of garbage cans," says David Wondrich, a mixology writer for Esquire magazine. "It's also pretty communal and people gather around."

Try the stately Fish House Punch (rum, cognac, lemon slices, peach brandy and sugar water), which has a long and rich history in Philadelphia, or the pineapple-juice-based Pisco Punch, which was popular during the 18th-century Gold Rush.

Make a Cocktail List

Having a well-stocked bar is where the cost of a party really adds up. If the punch bowl doesn't appeal to you, write up a cocktail menu that features just a few drinks. Have a mix of both seasonal and classic concoctions, such as spiked hot chocolate and dirty martinis, says Mr. Wondrich, and buy in bulk to limit the costs.

"One of the easiest things to do is come up with a theme," he says. "This way you can pick things that go along with the theme and you don't have to have a full bar."

Buy Boxed and Sparkling Wines

Cheap wine doesn't have to mean poor quality. Buy wines from lesser known regions such as British Columbia and Portugal (for non-port wine), which tend to be better priced, says wine writer Ms. Werlin. Also try boxed wines, which have made strides in quality in recent years, she says.

"It's not the most beautiful presentation, but you can put the wine in a carafe," Ms. Werlin says.

Ms. Werlin recommends the Wine Cube, which is available in four reds and four whites at Target. A 1.5 liter box (equivalent to two bottles) retails for \$9.99 and a 3 liter cube sells for \$15.99.

As for champagne, there was a time when all bubbly paled in comparison. Not anymore. Spanish cava, Italian prosecco and American sparkling wines have improved to be nice alternatives for that New Year's toast, and can be cheaper by more than 50%.

Mr. Wondrich recommends Gruet, a sparkling wine fermented in New Mexico. "It's got a nice, champagne-like flavor," Mr. Wondrich says. "It's about \$12 to \$15 a bottle. But you don't want to get cheaper than that -- it should still taste good."

Be Creative With Presentation

If a roast or caviar spread is non-negotiable, there are ways to do more with less.

"It's all about visual tricks and controlling the amount," says Ms. Minifie of Gourmet magazine. "Rather than letting people hack at it themselves, slice your meat thin and present it nicely -- it will look like more."

Also serve more sides and sauces. "If you have choices, people feel like they are getting more," she says.

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