

# FIESTATIME!

Elegant touches and practical tips to lighten up your holiday house party

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**VISUAL TOUCHES**

To make your guests feel at home, she says, “create spaces where people can have a conversation.”

Start by removing 50 percent of your stuff from key entertaining areas. The couch can stay, but books and small pieces of furniture should go. Then, group chairs together in different areas, and keep table tops minimal with a centerpiece that sets the mood, like a wreath with a candle in the middle. “If you can’t have a conversation, your party’s pretty much dead,” she says.

To infuse your holiday festivity with a unique flavor, look for inspiration in the colors and art of countries south of the border. In your living room, add drama with a few inexpensive red pillows or a colorful sarape. Once an Aztec favorite, poinsettias placed on strategic places can brighten any room.

True to her belief of blending traditional with modern, Johnson suggests incorporating into the décor items such as a silkscreen candle depicting the Nativity scene or a pillow with a picture of The Three Kings. Place religious candles on one surface and stylish mercury candle holders on another.

Even in Chicago, it’s easy to find the right accessories to add a little tropical flavor. Molcajetes (traditional Mexican mortars) and hollowed-out bell peppers can be filled with greens and flowers. Decorate the buffet table with multi-colored chiles and palm leaves, or fill glass vases with citrus fruit. Where there’s a surface, place small, decorative candles – add orange ones to the traditional green and red for visual punch.

Metallic accents, the latest trend, will add a bit of glam to the mix. “This year you’re going to see a lot of gold, silver and bronze,” says Johnson.

But keep it simple. Think: gold-rimmed glasses with gold candlesticks.

Anyone who’s thrown a party knows what it feels like to be a waitress in their own home. You’re still chopping the veggies and haven’t even changed clothes when the doorbell rings. It’s that guy from work you hardly know, arriving 20 minutes early.

Somehow you never catch up, and by the end of the night your house is scattered with bottles, your cousin is blasting *reggaetón* and your famous Christmas *ponche* never made it out of the fridge.

As the creative director of Kehoe Designs, Bridget Johnson understands the stress of party-throwing. After all, she works for a company that transforms interiors for weddings as well as corporate and social events by adding furniture and accessories, and instills ambience with fabric and lighting.

Following a stint designing interiors for Nordstrom, Johnson joined Kehoe seven

years ago, and today creates the vision behind high-end parties for clients ranging from Accenture to the Lyric Opera of Chicago. Still, much of her time is spent unearthing inexpensive treasures in area stores to provide whatever feel her clients request.

A native of Colombia, Johnson was the girl who did all her friends’ nails and hair. Eventually, she began decorating the homes of family members each Christmas. At 45, not much has changed. “I change the colors and accessories in my home seasonally, from the glasses to the pillows and sheets,” she says.

Through the years, Johnson has traveled back to her native Colombia and picked up a number of ideas to make holiday décor truly unique. Following a visit last year, for example, she was struck by the mix of traditional craftwork with modern style that surrounded her. She believes the same balance should be achieved when decorating a holiday party.

On the other hand, having lived in a house where, at Christmastime, the entire neighborhood would show up – and never leave! – she knows a thing or two about how to create the right atmosphere when throwing a house party.

**CENTER SPREAD:**

Bridget Johnson, of Kehoe Design, generates design ideas that infuse any interior space with a festive spirit.

**UPPER FAR RIGHT:**

A photo of *Los Reyes Magos* exemplifies how cultural symbols add seasonal touches to home décor.



Coconut shrimp skewers (All food pictured courtesy of Café 28)



Clockwise from left: *Empanadas*, *Congrí* (black beans and rice) and *Mini Rellenos de Papa*



From left: *Tequila Mistletoe Mixer*, *Coquito* and *Canelazo*

### FOOD FOR ALL

To enjoy your party, Johnson suggests avoiding anything that requires utensils. No matter how great your *caldo* is, serving it will turn you into a waitress.

On a buffet table, fill trays with bite-sized servings. Be creative. Johnson recalls a party where plastic shot glasses were filled with rice and beans. Keep extra food trays in the kitchen to replenish. The day of the party, start setting up early. Empty shelves can be filled with food and plates.

### DRINKS TO YOU

Growing up, Johnson's home was party central. "Whenever we moved [to a new home], the first thing we decided was where to put the bar," she says.

Stock the bar and include seasonal pre-made cocktails so people can serve themselves. Serve "anything that can be decanted," says Johnson. For large parties, consider hiring a bartender for peak hours.

### PARTY TUNES

Create a dance space and load your MP3 player in advance with lengthy playlists. This will free you up to mingle later. Plan the music in stages, starting with Christmas tunes that both your teenage nephew and *abuelita* can enjoy.

When the party picks up, Johnson recommends something upbeat, like the latest CD by Los Lonely Boys. Once you've got a packed house, switch to dance tunes and let the salsa begin! 🎶

### TEQUILA MISTLETOE MIXER

- 1 ounce tequila blanco
- 1/2 ounce triple sec
- 1/2 ounce pomegranate juice
- chilled champagne
- pomegranate seeds for garnish

In a cocktail shaker, mix the tequila, triple sec and pomegranate juice. Pour into a champagne flute. Top with chilled champagne and sprinkle in pomegranate seeds. Serves one

### COQUITO

- 2 15-ounce cans cream of coconut
- 2 14-ounce cans condensed milk
- 6 ounces white rum (less if desired)
- 1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1/4 teaspoon ground cloves
- 1/8 teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 1 teaspoon coconut (or vanilla) extract
- coconut flakes for garnish

Mix all ingredients in a blender. Serve cold with sprinkled coconut flakes in small glasses. Serves 6-8

### CANELAZO

- 1 cup of *aguardiente*
- 3 cups of water
- 1 cup sugar (preferably brown sugar)
- 6 cinnamon sticks
- 1 teaspoon lemon juice

Combine water, sugar and cinnamon sticks in a saucepan and bring to a boil. Pour the *aguardiente* and simmer, do not boil. Once hot, remove from heat and add the lemon juice. Serve hot in short thick glasses. Serves 4-6