

# How to take the stress out of holiday entertaining



By Lisa A. Beach

Hosting a holiday event at any time can prove challenging, from blowing your budget to cooking for 20 to creating the right ambiance. But throw in a pandemic (with masked guests social distancing) and you've taken the stress of holiday entertaining to a whole new level.

"Especially this holiday season, we'll see people moving away from big, formal events and a much

greater appreciation for cozy nights at home,” says Aerin Lauder, author of “Entertaining Beautifully” and granddaughter of Estee Lauder.

While the holidays will likely look different this year, family and friends will still want to celebrate the season together. If you’re thinking of hosting a holiday party or dinner, how can you stay calm and get organized? How can you create a crowd-pleasing menu and decorate festively? And most importantly, how can you weave more connection into holiday get-togethers?

**Get organized**

The most important thing to remember as a host is to be prepared and relaxed, says Lauder. And it begins with good planning.

Lauder tends to make old-fashioned to-do lists,

which help her keep track of everything from the guest list and flowers to candy and music. “Attention to detail is such an important part of entertaining, which is something I definitely learned from my grandmother,” Lauder says.

By using checklists, mapping out timelines, and organizing details ahead of time, your event is more likely to run smoothly. This will allow you to relax before the guests arrive.

“Guests know when you’re stressed or worried,” says Lauder. “Entertaining should feel effortless. Even if everything is not perfect, it’s important that guests feel welcome and comfortable.”

**Tap into tech for ideas**

But you can also tap into tech for a little help. Use Pinterest to save creative decorating ideas. Go eco-friendly by sending digital invitations

via Evite. Cue up your party playlist on Spotify. Track your tasks on Todoist.

**Decorate festively**

Decking the halls doesn’t mean you need to go overboard. “My holiday decorating style is very festive, yet classic and timeless,” say Lauder, noting she taps into nature for seasonal beauty. “I love placing berry branches and dahlias throughout my home and wrapping garlands around staircases and fireplace mantles.”

Soft lighting can easily transform your room into magical wonderland. Add a warm glow to any space with flickering candlelight, being mindful of pets or small children that might be in attendance. (For safety, consider substituting battery-powered candles.) Similarly, a few carefully placed strands of twinkling lights create a festive atmosphere.





**Keep the menu simple**

If you'll be handling all the cooking yourself, you don't want to be stuck in the kitchen when guests arrive. Make what you can in advance, then store it in the refrigerator until the event. At party time, just pull out cold items (like salads and dips) and serve immediately. Use a few slow cookers to keep foods (such as meatballs or chowders) warm. And include some items that you can serve room temperature (think crackers and veggie trays).

"I like to serve classic comfort food. It's the best way to make sure there's something on the menu for everyone," notes Lauder. "One of my favorite dishes to serve is roasted chicken, potatoes and seasonal vegetables."

Or skip dinner and consider a holiday dessert party instead, asking guests to bring their favorite treat to share. Set up a gourmet hot chocolate station with toppings (like mini marshmallows or nutmeg), mix-ins (like Kahlua or caramel syrup), and peppermint sticks as festive (and tasty!) stirrers.

**Foster connection**

Lauder emphasizes that the holidays are all about tradition, nostalgia, and memories—and bringing people together. "I like mixing people of all different ages. I think this creates fun, interesting and engaging conversation," she says.

Whether you're celebrating a well-loved tradition (like conversing by the fireplace) or creating new ones (with a white elephant gift exchange), it's all about creating memories. Challenge guests to share their funniest 2020 memories. Play holiday-themed games. Cue up a montage of snippets from holiday classics like *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Polar Express*. And share wishes filled with hope for next year.

"Celebrating the joys in life is more important than ever," notes Lauder.

