

party perfect

Easy Breezy Brunch by Cristina Velocci

If the brutal winter weather has you holed up at home, limiting your human interactions to phone and email, it's time to change out of your pajamas and invite friends over for an intimate get-together. What better way to enjoy each other's company than by throwing an informal brunch, all in the cozy comfort of your own home? When we think of brunch, we immediately associate it with the weekend, catching up with friends and leisure. This mid-day meal has a relaxed quality to it, and it doesn't take much energy to plan one. We've even done some of the leg work for you by consulting Patty Sachs, author of 10 party and event planning guides and the co-owner of PartyPlansPlus.com, a party-planning consulting site. Here are some tips to help you get started:

- Aim to keep things small and personal. Since it is one of the most informal types of gatherings, minimizing your guest list will maintain an intimate feel, keep conversation flowing, and help you maintain your sanity. About six guests is a good number to shoot for.

- Plan ahead: Despite the event's informality, it's best to keep in mind people's busy schedules. "If you are planning on a weekend day, a good two to three weeks is insurance for a good turnout," says Sachs. "The shorter the notice, the more likelihood of your invited guests already having a plan." While sending a hand-written

invitation adds a personal touch, if you are short on time a phone call will suffice. The impersonality of email should be avoided, unless you use a creative template available online. Try sending invitations through Evite.com or Sendomatic.com.

- Get help! Ask friends to assist you in the set-up or make it a potluck brunch—whatever will make the ordeal go smoother for you so you don't end up collapsing at the end, vowing never to throw another party again. "Guests will enjoy themselves as much as you do—or as little," says Sachs.

- Set up a breakfast bar, buffet style. Allowing guests to serve themselves will keep them mingling and let them pick and choose what they want or go back for more later. Present your guests with a variety of options to choose from. Scrambled eggs, pancakes, bacon, chicken and apple sausage, and a basket of bagels, muffins and breads are a good place to start. Provide assorted jams, spreads and toppings, such as flavored maple syrup, berries, crushed almonds

or walnuts, powdered sugar and whipped cream, or guests to customize their meal. Display plenty of fresh fruit, as it adds color to any spread. Use a scooper to create small balls of melon or chop up pieces of banana. When people don't have to fuss with utensils and complicated, large pieces of food, they'll be more at ease.

- As far as drinks go, get as creative as you want to be, but juices, coffee, tea and the tried and true Mimosa and Bloody Mary work just fine. Just make sure to have plenty on hand to go around. To spruce up a plain pitcher or vase of water, drop in orange or lemon slices for a colorful garnish with a slight taste.

- To keep the vibe going, play music softly in the background. "Keep it low-volume and bright—nothing too high energy or too sedate," advises Sachs. "Give folks a chance to converse without shouting or racing." Pick up a mixed CD of jazz or lounge music, or create your own play list on your iPod to set the tone.

- Don't worry about scheduling activities to entertain your guests. "If it's just for socializing and gathering, conversation can be enough to keep guests happily busy," says Sachs. "Of course, eating is a big activity." So relax, chat, and simply enjoy the company of a few good friends. It certainly beats spending the afternoon watching the Food Network alone.

