

Secret Sauce

Some of the city's top party planners share tips for crafting a kickin' holiday party.
By Ryan Beshel



Julie Darling
PRINCIPAL, JULIE DARLING, INC.

The key to a fantastic party is not just about what you offer your guests, but about the guests themselves. A great mix of people paired with a few key ingredients—great service, festive cocktails and a welcoming environment—really is the secret recipe. I've received rave reviews from both friends and clients when it's kept simple, easy and seamless in execution. Your guests want to enjoy their time with you and know that you're enjoying yourself as well, so it's about being prepared for anything that may go awry while coming off effortlessly. My secret to success is to listen to my client, whether it's my sister, best friend or boss, and find a way to bring to life their vision for the party they've always dreamed of.

P.J. Acosta
DESIGNER/PRODUCER,
ALICE'S GARDEN/STUDIO AG

When creating a memorable holiday event, always aim to surprise and excite your guests with the environment they are about to experience. Try a video invitation and a visual surprise upon arrival such as a stunning textural lighting projection (or if you're bold, sexy body-painted models).

Have the look and theme flowing throughout the room with unique lounge environments—such as custom highboys—or suspended décor elements. Lighting is a great way to get the biggest bang for your buck: Moving lights, pattern projection and perimeter uplighting are great ways to create color, texture and depth. The food, cocktails and music are always very important; make them fun, modern and memorable. You can even give your cocktails clever names! Keep guests talking by creating a unique exit with swag bags, a dramatic fireworks show, bucket boys on the curb or bike rickshaws lined up to get locals home in an urban way.

"The food, cocktails and music are always very important; make them fun, modern and memorable."



**Michelle Durpetti and
Denise McGowan**
MANAGING PARTNERS,
MCGOWAN DURPETTI &
ASSOCIATES

At MD&A, we love the creative process, which begins the very moment we start to plan an event. We have fun and get our guests involved by creating a memorable theme. The first step is to decide on what you want to achieve with the event. For a private event last summer, we stepped back in time to create a 1800s circus with period costumes, circus performers and music. At a private event in association with the 2009 Chicago Commit to Courage Medal of Honor Convention we were inspired to create a "return to the supper club era" soirée featuring dancers and Chicago's top cabaret artists recreating The Empire Room during its heyday.

"We have fun and get our guests involved by creating a memorable theme."

Tracey Tarantino
PRODUCER,
ZZAZZ PRODUCTIONS

My secret to the perfect holiday party is to use the season as inspiration and bring the outdoors indoors! I've been known to trim the pine trees in my yard to use as decorations on my dining room table and add the scent of pine throughout the space. Using the naturally beautiful aspects of nature is not only a great way to add interesting organic elements to your party, but it's also very inexpensive. Another great idea is to use vintage flatware and linens from a resale shop to add color and depth to your table. If you have a family heirloom linen tablecloth that you're afraid to damage, layer it on the table with a beautiful washable tablecloth overlay and let the expensive linen peek out. It's like wearing an H&M blazer over a Prada blouse.

