



**By Adrianna Borkowski**

photography by Ashlea Wessel

## Host Extraordinaire

When Rowan Barrett of Mississauga accepted a position as captain of the Canadian national basketball team in Dijon, France, he knew the job was going to be about more than basketball. "The French have a celebratory lifestyle that's about being out, dining and enjoying life," says Barrett. "I wanted to get professional advice that would help me conduct myself around different kinds of people in various social settings."

So Barrett turned to Mississauga's Donna Chevrier of Donna Chevrier & Associates for image and etiquette consulting. Wanting to best represent his team and country, he asked for help in dining etiquette and proper conduct at cocktail parties.

To a certain extent, each of us is an ambassador all the time, but this is especially so during the holiday season. "This is the time of year when people mix folks up a bit — business associates with friends, neighbours and family — and of course you want to present beautifully prepared food and décor," says Chevrier.

Being an extraordinary host is not unlike being an athlete. It involves planning, practice and execution. According to Shannon Smith, image strategist and president of Premiere Image International, being a good host is the result of practice and technique. As she discusses in her upcoming book, *Unnoticed to Unforgettable*, once you know the rules, you're in control. "It's like knowing the rules of tennis. Once you know the rules, you can break them."

Being a gracious host is the sum of many small courteous gestures and acts of friendship. Good hosts successfully demonstrate how much they value relationships and the occasion. Etiquette consultants, who coach people on the finer points of social interaction, including how to be the best host, say it's really about enjoying your company with others, and at large, growing relationships or connections with business associates. "It's not about you, it's about your guests," says Smith. »

Welcome guests with flare to a colourful, festive and carefully decorated table such as this one by Encore Events & Wedding Design. Sparkling silverware and stemware courtesy of Johnathans of Oakville restaurant.

### Before the Party: Preparation, Planning & Plotting Your Game

Angèle Desgagné, of Oakville-based Imagélite International, advises her image and etiquette clients to have a sense of humour when hosting functions. Smith agrees. "Have fun. If you're having fun, your guests will; if you are harried, your guests will be, too."

First, finalize the guest list and send out invitations. Smith advises giving six to eight weeks notice for holiday parties, although a casual party may require less time. When preparing the guest list, make it a mix of people. "The guest list is critical, and it's different viewpoints, perspectives and interests that stimulate conversation."

Besides stating the time, date, place and purpose of the event, the invitation accomplishes many things. It sets the mood and provides a record of clear expectations. The invitation should also indicate the degree of formality, as well as directions and an RSVP date. Chevrier says an invitation usually indicates the beginning and completion times for a cocktail party, open house or preshow gathering. When an invitation does not include a completion time, it's up to the guests.

Follow up on RSVPs, Desgagné says, as some people do not know this is a request for both accepts and regrets. She also suggests indicating the best time to call, such as "after 5 p.m. on weekdays," to avoid initiating a game of telephone tag. Finally, when speaking directly to invitees, ask about dietary restrictions or allergies and confirm they understand directions.

Early planning of the mood, music, decorations, guest list, menu and program is key. If the food will be a product of your own kitchen, make shopping lists and purchase nonperishable items ahead of time. If you're not a great cook, get it catered.

### Dress It Up

Weeks ahead plan your outfit and ensure it is ready to wear. Chevrier says clothing choice is etiquette-related — a well-groomed and appropriately dressed person sends three important messages: I respect you, I respect this occasion, I respect myself.

Desgagné emphasizes the importance of showcasing oneself with confidence — confidence inspires confidence in others. Smith emphasizes the golden rule — enjoy opening your home and your heart. "It's not about looking like a supermodel."

### Meet & Greet in a Festive Setting

Set the scene with upbeat music, festive decorations and ornaments, and low lighting and candles for an evening party. Create large quantities of colourful and beautiful food for visual appeal, and boil fragrant spices, such as cinnamon sticks or cloves, on the stove to create a warm, spicy aroma. Stay aware of candles and things on the stove throughout the event.

Music sets the mood. Aleta Mayer, special events planner for the Oakville Hospital Foundation, says their annual Candlelight Ball is a recurring success because of the variety of music they provide that allows guests of every age group to "dance the night away." If you're hosting at home, there may be no live band or DJ, so choose the music days or weeks earlier, load the CD

player and set it to play automatically.

Proper introductions are vital to making guests feel welcome, etiquette consultants say. Desgagné recommends tasking children or teenagers to help answer the doorbell and collect coats. "Instruct them to direct arriving guests to the host. This is a great way to include children and make them feel very special by helping out with such an important responsibility," she says. "You cannot be everywhere at once."

Chevrier tells clients to offer new acquaintances a "bridge" — a piece of information of interest to both parties. "A warm reception at the door and making introductions, including a bridge, are key ingredients for making guests feel welcome," she says. "This helps them bridge the 'introduction gap' by providing subject material for an ensuing conversation."

Keep a hand free for handshakes when meeting your guests and their dates or family members, and ensure your body language is hospitable and open. »



### **Eat, Drink & Be Merry**

Smith suggests a “toast of welcome” at the outset. Try a simple one-liner such as “I’m so happy to have you all here, thank you for joining me this evening.”

Of course, when serving alcohol, a good host is aware of how much guests consume. This is not only caring, it’s smart. Legally, hosts can be held liable for their guests. “If someone is in no shape at all to drive, you may need to confiscate their keys, arrange for another to drive them or a taxi, or tell them how honoured you would be if they stayed the night,” Desgagné says.

Chevrier recommends hiring or enlisting the help of a responsible person or a bartender who may be skilled at spotting signs of intoxication. Another way to help guests pace themselves is to serve many nonalcoholic alternatives throughout the evening. She says two or three drinks with snacks, drawn out over a long event of about six hours, is usually safe for a person of 180 pounds. “But having a nondrinking designated driver is the safest possible choice.”

At formal dinner parties, hosts may use place cards to show guests where they will be seated. Mixing guests helps everyone to meet new people, exchange ideas and experiences, and thus enlarge their circle of friends or business contacts. The hosts sit at the ends of the table, with a view to all guests, to ensure everyone is being looked after and enjoying themselves.

Owner of Encore Events & Wedding Design Joy Moyles says she’s grateful the trend has finally turned around and entertaining is once again conducted in an overstated manner instead of the understated simplicity of a few years ago. She says that next to cuisine, the most important element of entertaining is the awe factor — the visual presentation that sets the tone for the success of the event.

Custom textures and colours, beautiful centrepieces, wine bottle wraps, knife rests, seating cards, individual menus and themed dishes are just some of the items she incorporates into table settings to create the perfect complement to any type of entertaining. She cautions, however, against over setting — ensure your tableware is in proportion to the size of your table to give your guests ample room to savour and enjoy.

For an extra touch, Chevrier suggests setting a small wrapped gift at each place setting. Gifts could be as simple as some candies or truffles in a small silver or gold container, or “small containers of perfume or aromatherapy scented oils, or a rosebud in a spectacular container. Packaging is key to the excitement and pleasure,” says Chevrier.

Next, guests should be served first, and at the outset of the meal the host should ask them to begin, as their food will get cold if they wait for everyone to be served.