



The Perfect Mix

Throwing a great cocktail party is easier than you think. BY BRIAN SCOTT LIPTON

ARE THERE two more glamorous words in the English language than “cocktail party”? Visions of elegant women in soignée gowns and men in tuxedos engaging in sophisticated conversation, while a pianist plays music in the background, immediately come to mind. But the 21st century cocktail party doesn’t have to be that kind of hoity-toity black-tie affair. You can gather friends on the deck in

sundresses and shorts, around the pool in swimwear, or inside the house in cool, casual clothes.

And while throwing a really great cocktail party takes a certain amount of preparation, inventiveness, and even skill, any host or hostess can pull it off, says Nick Mautone, one of the world’s leading mixologists and the author of the recently released “Raising the Bar: Better Drinks, Better Entertaining” (Workman

Publishing). However, the secret to throwing the perfect party begin long before the first drink is poured.

Indeed, step one is to make sure you have the right bar tools on hand: these include cocktail shakers, jiggers, zesters, strainers, paring knives, corkscrews, and even an electric citrus juicer. The good news, says Mautone, is that these tools don't have to be an expensive; although you should feel free to invest in the best if you so choose. "The most important thing is that you have everything you need to make drinks correctly. But a \$20 bar set is usually just as good as a \$100 one," he adds.

Step two is having the proper glassware; but again you don't need to get completely carried away. "Whether it's a martini or red wine, a drink tastes better if it's served in the appropriate glass," says Mautone. "But I don't think you need to have 50 types of glasses. A good all-purpose wine glass can be used for many

drinks, and beside that I think you can get by with martini glasses, rocks (or double old-fashioned) glasses and highball glasses. As far as quality, the nicer the better is a good rule, but only up to a point."

For the most part, Mautone is a strict believer in using actual glass – no matter how annoying the washing-up process might be – but there is one important exception. "If you're doing the party on a deck, or especially around the pool, I think plastic glasses are not just acceptable, they're actually safer," he says.

Of course, the biggest component of a cocktail party is the cocktails. "I think if you're going to be a proper host, you should have everything available, including all the major spirits (gin, vodka, scotch, rum, tequila), wine and beer," he says. "And you should probably have two different types of each spirit, a high-end brand for your more discerning guests as well as a lower-end one."

To make the party particularly special, Mautone likes to offer guests home-infused vodkas and gins; infusions are herbs or fruits that are added to the spirits a couple of days in advance to give extra flavor. "There are some good flavored gins and vodkas on the market, but many of them are too artificially colored and sweetened," he says. "The great thing about a home-infused spirit is that it's easy to make and it can last for months."

Spirits also require proper mixers, such as club soda, tonic water and juices, an essential ingredient in many cocktails, Mautone recommends using fresh squeezed juices, which are surprisingly easy to prepare. "Nothing compares with that taste," he says. "And you can make your juices up to a week in advances and leave them in the freezer; just make sure you freeze them immediately after making them."

When it comes to making any kind of classic cocktail, Mautone believes that a standard recipe should be followed to ensure it tastes just right. "I think it's very important to measure the ingredients appropriately. Unless you're a professional bartender or you've been making this drink for 20 years, eyeballing is a mistake. Once it's properly made, you can add either more alcohol or mixer if you don't like the taste," he says. "The other rule I follow is not to overpour. You don't want to overstimulate your guests."

Mautone also believes that no cocktail party is complete without having one specialty drink available, such as his Strawberry-Kiwi Sangria (see sidebar). "It's nice to introduce your guests to something new," he says. "With some of these drinks you can make the base of the drink early in the day, and just leave it in the refrigerator. Then just before the party starts, add the alcohol and other ingredients, put the drink in a pitcher and leave it in the refrigerator until it's ready to serve."

If it's not too much trouble, you should also make a festive non-alcoholic specialty drink, such as a coconut limeade or faux mojito, since not all your guests may be partaking of alcohol – either by preference, for health reasons, or if they're a designated driver.

Lastly, a cocktail party does not live on cocktails alone. It's important to feed your guests -- whether it's just providing a few nibbles or offering slightly more substantial fare. "I like to offer an array of things, from guacamole and chips to cheese puffs, sesame grilled asparagus or bacon-wrapped, chestnut-stuffed dates," says Mautone. "The great thing is cocktails go with a variety of foods, so it's not the same as having to pair food and wine." ♦



Strawberry-Kiwi Sangria

(From "Raising The Bar: Better Drinks, Better Entertaining" by Nick Mautone)

Makes 10 five-ounce servings

INGREDIENTS

- 1 pint strawberries, cleaned, hulled and halved
- 3 kiwifruits, peeled and sliced into ½-inch thick rounds
- ¼ cup sugar
- 1 750-ml bottle of fruity rose wine, chilled
- 8 oz. crème de fraise, strawberry schnapps or your favorite berry cordial
- 8 oz white rum, chilled
- 8 oz white grape juice, chilled

Place fruit in a pitcher or punch bowl that has been chilled. Stir in sugar. Let fruit stand for five minutes. Stir in rest of ingredients. Let sangria stand for five minutes before serving. Pour into punch glasses or tall cooler glasses.