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Perfect Table

It's not just the menu that makes a dinner party divine — the table setting goes a long way to ensure success.

By Kelley Atherton



Dinner party or holiday get together, most everyone considers what the menu will include — how each course will flow into the next, what wine will pair perfectly with the food, all just so. Yet, many times there isn't much thought put into the table setting. However, it is the setting that sets the tone of the evening, even before food is served.

Expert decorators say there's a science to the settings, and their tips can help you recreate the look at home.

"It's all about the feeling at end of the day," says Alina Isambert, president of Thierry's Catering in Miami. Her husband, Thierry, creates the food, and she designs the settings for their clients' events. She suggests a different tone, depending on the mood of the gathering. A fun get-together should have whimsy as its centerpiece — lots of bright colors, fresh flowers in vases of different shapes and colors, Isambert suggests. Business dinners

that need to have a professional tone should use a minimalist palette of grays and blues for napkins and tablecloths. Isambert suggests that plates for an at-home gathering of business associates should be crisp — "clean white."

Interior designer Stacy Curran of South Shore Decorating, outside Boston, says her focus is always on the comfort of the guests.

"My biggest goal is to not be too fussy or formal." She suggests little details to make the most difference, such as using fresh greenery twigs or flowers as a decoration on the table or as a decoration on a napkin ring.

Laura Martin Bovard agrees. The goal should be to create a beautiful and elegant table without "overly fussy decorative items," says the designer, who founded Laura Martin Bovard Interiors in Oakland, Calif. Invest in quality pieces that will last for years and keep each occasion fresh by changing small details. "I like to accent the napkins with

one memorable token for guests to take home to remember the meal by.”

When it comes to a formal dinner, all of the designers agree that different rules apply. The focus should be on the tableware. Yes, this is the time to bring out your best china. If it's inherited — say your grandmother's best Noritake — and you fear it's dated, add some modern elements such as a single flower over each plate, says Isambert. Keep it uniform with a particular flower or stem, she explains. “All of a sudden, it flows and looks quite beautiful and very authentic.” The more minimal the presentation, the more modern it will become, she advises. “I love to mix the old with the new. It's quite special.”

Our experts also advise to let go of the long-held traditional idea of everything matching, advising that it's perfectly acceptable to take design risks. Curran admits she still hasn't used her full set of her china, opting instead to mix it with other pieces. She uses her grandmother's lace tablecloth with black plates and casual glassware. “I love how it breaks up the formality a bit.”

Bovard suggests using modern textiles like geometric napkins or an open-weave runner, newer styles of glassware and vases, fresh flower arrangements, and layering white with colorful pieces to make heirlooms feel up-to-date. “It's a way to honor the old while acknowledging that the new has a lot to offer, as well.”

Modern placemats and colorful runners can also create a mix-modern effect. Under each main plate, place a couple of decorative servers in complementary colors.



The best-kept secret of top designers is layering. Each layer adds dimension and depth to the table and offers more visuals that dress up the presentation — runners, pavers, centerpieces, and fanciful serving utensils also add to the visual elements. Yet, avoid clutter. A cluttered table will become overwhelming for your guests when they're trying to focus on food and conversation. Also, keep vases, centerpieces, and other accessories low to provide a clear pathway for conversing.

The final touch in table decoration is the latest trend of bringing elements of nature indoors to enhance the rich colors of the food. Create a simple centerpiece with some wildflowers, or scatter greens or leaves as a centerpiece. “Just look outside for color inspiration,” says Bovard. Mother Nature is the original hostess with simplicity as her guide for setting the perfect table. **fi**

Above: Crisp “clean white” settings work best for business gathering says Alina Isambert of Thierry's Catering.

Below: A fun get-together should have whimsy as its centerpiece — lots of bright colors, fresh flowers in vases of different shapes and colors, Isambert suggests. (Courtesy Thierry's Catering)

Opposite page top: A modern place setting features a table runner to create contrast (Courtesy Laura Bovard Interiors).

Opposite page below: Keep centerpieces low so that guests can easily converse, experts say. (Courtesy Thierry's Catering)

