

Help yourself

The thought of having guests may sound appealing, but what do you serve without working yourself to death? Capers Catering founder Emma Roberts understands the dilemma and has a few shortcuts to make the experience more enjoyable for the guest and less work for the host. Her main advice: keep it simple. Roberts, a 1992 graduate of the Cambridge School of Culinary Arts and the author of "Sassy Sips & Nibbles," due out this fall, offered tips on hosting a small party in an interview with Globe reporter Carol Beggy.

I want to have a great party with interesting food, but I don't want to have to hire a caterer. Where do I start?

Right off the top, identify the things you do really well and build around those. If you're good at grilling . . . or making salad . . . or at creating a festive decor, start there. Then you can fill in around those. Friends will offer to bring a dish and I will incorporate that into my party plans. If you have a theme or an idea, start with one thing. It might seem small, but take care of the areas where you know what you want, where to get it, or how to do it. For example, a lot of people don't want to use paper plates and they really aren't comfortable with plastic or foam plates. There are these great bamboo plates that I've seen at the local party stores and even in the bigger stores that carry paper goods.

So I make great salad, but how do I get the rest of the meal up to standard?

Buy what you can't do. If you're ordering something from a store or restaurant, tell the staff there what you need and when you need it; maybe they can precook to a point that's best for the food you're serving. You can buy lobster salad from your favorite spot and get some small rolls and assemble the sandwiches yourself. A friend can help you pass them or start them around the room and then leave



them on the table. Or make mini-burgers, precook them the night before. Just don't finish them through. Sear them off, once they get to medium rare, pull them aside and finish them up just before your party. If you don't want to do passed items or have the help to keep the hors d'oeuvres flowing, put them out on a table with small buns, avocado slices, plum tomatoes,

any sauces you might like.

What about the drinks? How do I keep them flowing without the help of a bartender?

You don't have to have a full bar. Make a seasonal sangria, something that gets better as it chills overnight. There are plenty of mixed-drink recipes, and you even see them at the liquor and wine stores. But a quick way to set up your yard for a summer or early fall gathering is take a wheelbarrow, line it with plastic if necessary, fill it with ice and just put your beer, wine, and pitchers of mixed drinks right there.

Is there one thing that's a no-no for a host to forget?

Don't forget to have a great time. The whole point of having people over really is to enjoy the company and have fun. Make sure that you take the time before your party to set up and organize so that you can spend time with your guests.



PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Mini lobster rolls and lemon-mint iced tea are perfect summer party food.

TIPS ON SERVING HORS D'OEUVRES

A quick rule of thumb: For a two-hour party, you'll need at least eight to 12 pieces of passed hors d'oeuvres per person.

Concentrate on stationary food items if you don't have hired help. Try a mini cheeseburger bar: Make burgers the size of a half-dollar, and purchase Martin's mini potato buns from the grocery. These burgers can be quickly sauteed or grilled ahead and held in a warm oven. Serve these with bowls filled with small sliced plum tomatoes, shredded lettuce, chopped bacon, sliced avocado, sprouts, chopped onion, ketchup, mustard, and pickles.

Have a small chafing dish filled with pulled chicken or pork. (To save time, get takeout rather than make it.) Serve with petite potato rolls, so that guests can make their own sandwiches. Also have bowls filled with classic coleslaw, corn relish, tortilla chips, salsas, and guacamole.

In the "even easier" category, Roberts recommends purchasing the fixings for an antipasti platter with Italian meats, beautiful cheeses, roasted vegetables, marinated artichokes, olives, stuffed grape leaves, figs, bread sticks, hummus, and caprese salad. Find a store in your area such as Formaggio Kitchen, which Roberts calls "the perfect spot for picking up prepared gourmet items," or even a bigger store such as Whole Foods, which she dubbed "quite good too," and have them assemble the platter for your party.

SUMMER BERRY LIMONCELLO SANGRIA

A drink you can make in advance so that you can spend more time with your guests.

- **1 cup of mixed berries** (raspberries, blackberries, sliced strawberries) or any summer fruit sliced decoratively
- **Zest of a lemon**
- **4 oz. lemonade**
- **2 oz. limoncello**
- **1 bottle of white or rose wine**
- **Pink rimming sugar** (optional)

Mix together and let sit overnight to come together. **Serve** over ice in tall glasses rimmed with pink rimming sugar. **You can also pour** half a glass of sangria over ice and add club soda for a lighter drink.

THE DEEP END

A snazzier drink that's a bit more involved.

- **1½ oz. vodka**
- **1 ounce lime juice**
- **¼ ounce blue curacao**
- **½ teaspoon fine sugar or maple syrup**
- **Lime wheel garnish**
- **Aqua blue rimming sugar**

Pour vodka, lime juice, curacao, and sugar in a shaker filled with ice. **Shake well** and strain into chilled martini glass. **Garnish** with lime wheel and rimming sugar.