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Street Smarts—Nicole Kaney

Essential intelligence about throwing a party.

Hannah Wallace

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As marketing director for several prominent culinary corporations, Nicole Kaney threw opening parties for three Mattison's restaurants as well as downtown Sarasota's Whole Foods Market. In May 2007, she opened NK Productions, a boutique wedding- and party-planning company that has so far organized more than a dozen Sarasota weddings.

In most cases, it's about your friends, so don't try to impress anyone.

You do want to follow etiquette, but there are so many ways to be creative, too. I love it when guests leave a wedding saying, "It's so them." Keep the party about what you're about. One of my clients loves vintage things, so we're going to use a bunch of old glass bottles as decorations. For another, we're stacking antique books on the tables. I have the time to spend to get to know them.

One of the first things clients say to me is, "Tell me about your wedding." We eloped in Italy. When we got back, I realized it's really hard to follow etiquette for eloping. I threw an "elopement shower," and we had a pre-reception beach party for friends and family—what would have been the rehearsal dinner. At the reception, we put up photos from Italy; we had Italian-style food and sambuca, and a small wedding cake to make my mother happy. It was just like a wedding, but without the ceremony. We made everyone feel included.

Location sets the tone of the party. Homes are a great resource, very personal and cost-effective. And of course in Sarasota we have a lot of great houses. You can do everything from a formal wedding to a backyard barbecue in your own home.

Lighting sets the mood. A lot of background lighting is good. You don't want lights in people's eyes, but you do want your guests to be able to see. I say you can never have too many candles. If the party is at your own home, you can pull out lamps from different rooms and put them on the tables.



Photo by Lori Sax

When you're deciding what food to serve, take into consideration who your audience is. Are there cultural differences? Is anyone vegetarian? Stepping out of the box is always good. One of my clients threw a dessert reception. People have wedding brunches. You can throw a party with a picnic theme.

A great party is when the host can stay out of the kitchen. Plan the meal so you can get everything done ahead of time. You can set up a theme like "build your own taco"—all the meats and sauces are prepared beforehand, and everyone helps themselves. Then you can get out and have fun with your guests.

How the food is served depends on the tone of your party. Food stations are very popular—they keep people up and walking around, so there can be socializing and lots of dancing.

Send out formal invitations—three months in advance for weddings; three weeks or so for other parties. If you're throwing a smaller gathering, stick to the cell phone rule: If you don't have their number in your phone, don't invite them. Ask for RSVPs, and hand-written thank-you notes are still the way to go.


Putting a lot of thought into your design doesn't mean adding things to it. I like a very clean look. And it doesn't have to be expensive. You can add personal touches with things that you have in your back yard. I have awesome tropical plants, so I always take clippings and use them in my decorations.


Don't feel like you have to follow tradition. In weddings, a lot of couples have different people to incorporate—step-parents and siblings and close friends. We can do anything. There isn't a mold anymore.

But if you do break from tradition, don't leave your guests in the dark. One of my clients doesn't want to have place cards at his reception. That's fine, but we'll make an announcement letting people know how the seating works. You have to keep your guests informed.

When I'm a guest at a party, it's so much fun for me. I relax and enjoy it—and lots of times I see really good ideas. I'm not there to judge; I know how hard the host worked.

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