

HOLIDAY PARTY PLANNING

By Ashley South

Qiana Turner. She is the owner and chief event planner of Madison Elyse Events in Naperville, a boutique firm that specializes in posh, personalized events.

Madison Elyse was established in 2017. Qiana was working during the day and running her business on evenings and weekends. She worked at a large healthcare provider as their events coordinator. Thousands of staff members attended her events. Qiana built her own brand and relationships during that time. Her path was set.

We reached out to her for expertise on how to host a legendary holiday party this season. These are her tips.

Theme

Find your inspiration on Google or Pinterest! You may have no idea what direction your plans will take. Looking at other people's products and parties may evoke a reaction and spark an idea.

Qiana listed off several of her favorite holiday themes:

- Ugly sweater
- White elephant
- Preplanned gift exchange
- Cookie exchange

- Paint and Sip (Pinot's Palette)
- Neighborhood open house
- Hanukkah celebration
- Gingerbread house making
- Festivus party (air those grievances!)

And if going virtual, Home for the Holidays, where food, drinks, and games can still be enjoyed together.

Location, location, location

Determine the number of people you want to host. Depending on the number and vision, you may opt to host at home, the party room of a restaurant, or pull in some neighbors for a multi-house affair. For the purposes of this article, we are focused on a holiday party hosted in your home.

Timing is everything

Select your date. Check with key people you would like to attend for their availability. When you have a good foundation, build from there. If people already have plans, c'est la vie.

Get those invitations out right way! Paper

is always a classic way to go. Pick them up at our local Paper Source or order handmade cards via an Etsy store. Evites are still in use. And never underestimate the impact of a phone call to pitch the idea and get the excitement going on the other end of the line.

“To me, the spirit of the season is really about the memories that you make!”

The heart of the party is the food and the drinks

Choose your food and beverage. Who is coming? Consider dietary needs. Who is meat-free, gluten-free, sugar-free, dairy-free, nut-free, seafood-free? No one wants EMTs crashing their party. Select a caterer or make guest friendly food. We met with Nataly Flores of Bellyfull Boards who designs charcuterie boards for guests to graze. Anything and everything can be added to the boards. Her creations are extensive.

“I always try to source uncommon

and seasonal fruit. This can include gooseberries, champagne grapes, little tom grapes, figs, persimmons, and cara oranges. Look for honeycomb for a different twist on sweetness. Use seasonal cheeses. This makes for a unique board each and every time.”

Next up: Beverages!

Ask guests to bring a bottle of wine to share or keep it hassle-free by hiring a bartender to serve your guests. With or without the bartender, create a holiday drink menu for your guests. (The

demonstration of making each one of them in front of guests also serves as entertainment.)

Based on the theme, go with colors and flavors that are complementary. Jackie Portillo, bartender at Dark Horse Catering, provided us a few tips. “Get creative and find glasses and garnishes to match. It is all about the details. For a cocktail, the way it looks is as important as the way it tastes.”

One of Jackie's signature holiday drinks:

Coquito – *Makes about 6 drinks*
 5 ounces white rum
 1 - 14-ounce can sweetened condensed milk
 1 - 12-ounce can evaporated milk
 1 cup unsweetened coconut milk
 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
 1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
 1/4 teaspoon grated nutmeg, plus more for garnishing
 Cinnamon sticks, as garnish

Create and present a printed copy of a featured recipe. As a possible giveaway at the party, give all ingredients for making to one lucky winner!

Rule of thumb for alcohol

If you have about 30 people at a party that lasts four to six hours, you can assume that each person will have three to four drinks during the event. Conversion time: 1 – 750 ML bottle gives you a little over 25 ounces. For the Coquitos, you would need 4 bottles of white rum.

Decorations

There is no right formula, but the theme you choose will guide you. Qiana simply encourages you to make sure to keep in the same theme or color when selecting. When doing beautiful and upscale, select elegant glassware and candles versus Santa's toy shop which would include candy canes and gingerbread people. (Check our *Live Here* section on page 24 for more inspiration.)

Party Favors

Outside of things you make on site, maybe give a drink kit as mentioned (include a glass and recipe for the drink) or seasonal candles. Kids love takeaways—candy, cookies (in little containers that are decorated - head to the dollar store), stickers, ornaments.

Music

If your voice has to elevate over the music, it is too loud. Consider it a background accent. Bing Crosby, Michael Bublé, Nat King Cole, and Dean Martin are Qiana's beloved classics. Again, stick to music to complement the theme.

Enjoy!

Live in the moment with your guests. Unplugged parties are the new rage. Qiana loves nothing more than to see the sparkle of decorations outside, the smell of baked goods filling the house, and the laughter and love in your home when celebrating together. “To me, the spirit of the season is really about the memories that you make!”

Qiana is available to do all of this for you!



Madison Elyse Events
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Printed menu, Luxe place setting

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Floating votives

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Charcuterie board, Bellyfull Boards

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