

How to Master the Art of Entertaining

Jennifer Crocker's cracked the code.

By Tina Borgatta | Photography by Foxes & Wolves and courtesy of Jenerations



Jennifer Crocker is a success from scratch. The founder of Jenerations culinary and event planning earned a degree from Cal State Fullerton, but she began her career in junior high, after deciding to stop eating red meat. "I learned to make everything without beef," she says. By the time she hit high school, she was cooking for families. After college, she worked in the corporate world, raised her own family, started a cooking group and founded Jenerations. Now she plans feasts for clients and represents the luxury appliance brand Subzero-Wolf, showing home cooks that folks without formal training can be great in the kitchen too. Here are a few of her top entertaining tips.

What's the most important thing to keep in mind when planning an event this time of year? Start with your space. Is your inside space large enough? Does your outside space allow for seasonal changes? Is it an intimate affair or a huge party? These things help with direction and focus, and then the fun starts—the décor, the food, the beverages, the music and timing. And all events need a theme. It's the map for your event. Sometimes it may be as simple as a color that you build upon.

Do you approach planning for family-oriented gatherings differently? No, I consider music for the kids, foods they're willing to try and ones I know are a hit. I also want to keep them entertained and busy. Crafts help. Adult entertaining is very much the same. Gotta keep them just as busy. I start with top-notch beverages and off-the-chart appetizers. Unique take-away gifts always help.

Any examples of a fun family-oriented event? A few weeks ago, I did a grand opening for a new community. I made the theme camping, and it was a huge hit. I brought back the Jiffy Pop, the Coleman stove, lanterns, sleeping bags and checked linens. We had it all. It was held in the neighborhood park. I transformed the grassy knoll into a retro campland and served food you'd have if you were camping, like chili, egg salad, macaroni salad, tomato soup and grilled cheese. The menu was for the young at heart but with an additional flair, like adding serrano chili to the egg salad. We even had a candy buffet. There wasn't one person who didn't thank me for making them feel like a kid again. And the kids—well they were running around playing the life-size tic-tac-toe, connect four, jumbo cards, corn hole and lawn darts.

Is there anything that you always advise against? If you're having a pot luck, express exactly what you want guests to bring. If you're OK with store-bought stuff, say that. I would rather have you come empty-handed.

Any new party trends we should know about? Some of the kids-craze foods are even more for adults, like liquid nitrogen popcorn or candy buffets. The adults are always the first in line.

