

Manners Matter

Politesse makes for happy party-goers and -throwers, so RSVP already

By Jane Meredith Adams

It's not a holiday party at our house without someone crying, and I don't mean tearfully gushing, *This is the happiest night of my life — I am totally, completely fulfilled.* This season promises to be above-average in the anguish department. Not only do I have to worry about getting my hands on Boot Camp Barbie and Marine Ken for my kids, the whole bioterrorism thing has put the kibosh on my powder-dusted gingerbread women.

So I'm doing what Marie Osmond advised in her book about postpartum depression — I'm asking for help. I gave a jingle to all the party-givers I knew to find out if I was the only one silently sobbing at the buffet about rude guests who don't RSVP, strangers who arrive uninvited and vegans. As it turns out, I am not alone. Beneath the cheery masks we hostesses and hosts wear, a lot of us look like Keith Richards on an off-night. May we put these bad manners to rest? May we agree on rules for party-givers and -goers? We think so.

1. RSVP does not mean ESP. You cannot send your hostess a "vibe" that you'll come to her fabulous soiree. You must pick up the phone and tell her. Or else. Woe to the guest who fails to reply to Sharon Bruno's invitations. "I keep a database of who did RSVP and who did not," says the Palo Alto graphic designer. "In the comment section, I put the reason. In some cases it's forgivable and in some cases — not."

Menopause has been very, very good to Bruno. As a hostess, she used to be a softy, once reluctantly allowing a guest to bring a sleazeball date to a formal Thanksgiving dinner. "That's changing as menopause kicks in," she says. "The lack of estrogen is helping me say no."

2. Failing to RSVP and/or show up at a party automatically means you'll run into the hostess/host. In San Francisco, David Daniel Bowes recently threw a lovely baby shower for two moms-to-be. Fifty invitations went out a month in advance. "We got three RSVPs," he says. Between 20 and 25 guests showed up; as for the rest, Bowes sees them regularly at rehearsals of the Philharmonia Baroque orchestra. They seem to be a brazen group. "They never said anything," he says.



3. Don't lie about an E-vite. The electronic party invitation system is also a lie detector; it tracks when the e-mail invitation is opened online. "If they say they never got it, you say, 'Oh really? You viewed it four times: on the 11th, the 14th, the 17th and 18th,'" says Gina Pell, CEO of Splendor, the on-line pampering guide. Good hostesses and hosts share one trait, she says: "A charming, passive-aggressive manner."

4. Don't bring an uninvited guest, unless he has an Oscar. Video and multimedia artist J.D. Beltran was having a small screening party in Potrero Hill when a guest called to ask if he could bring a friend. "He said, 'He's an Oscar-nominated producer and he wants to screen a preview,'" Beltran recalls. "I said, 'Please bring him.' The party got richer."

By the same token, be an interesting guest, but not frighteningly so. At another of Beltran's dinner parties, she repaired to the kitchen to bring out dessert and returned to find that two guests had fled the table. Turns out they were freaked out by another guest's impassioned description of how he'd been abducted by aliens and had had a chip implanted in his head.

5. To both party-throwers and guests: Be prompt. What with agonizing about last-minute cancellations and seating-chart rearrangements, Seth Matarasso, the dermatologist to Bay Area high-society, was a bit of a wreck at his recent birthday dinner at Bix. Guests

had been invited for 7:30 but by 8:20, one was still missing. "Do you sit down? Do you wait?" he wondered. He took action. "Me being as neurotic as I am, I walked out of Bix to look for her, happened to see her at the end of the alley and yelled, COME ON!"

6. Pre-party, put your clothes on. "Every time we go to an event at their house, somebody is still in the shower," moans an East Bay mother of two. Answering the door in a towel earns a big thumbs-down from Honore McDonough Ervin, one of the online advice experts known as the Etiquette Grrls and co-author of "Things You Need to Be Told" (Berkley Books, 2001). "I think everybody should be fully dressed by the time the guests start to arrive," she says. Furthermore, she adds, "Unruly pets should be put away."

7. Announce your food preferences ahead of time or suffer silently. Moments before dinner was served

Illustration by Jo Rivers

guest at Tina Fairbanks' party entered the kitchen and rejected the menu. The soup contained milk, the sauce had wine, the vegetables were covered with butter and the beef — forget it. "She said, 'Can you prepare me something else?'" says renowned San Francisco hostess Fairbanks. "That probably was not the time for her to explain her dietary problems."

8. Cook the food thoroughly, but not too thoroughly. "My grandmother was making everyone nervous," explains a San Francisco woman. "My aunt didn't want to wait." Out came the Thanksgiving turkey, with slices that lay on the plate cold to the touch while pinkish food ran out. "The idea was, we must serve this thing now and get people out here." The granddaughter ward off food-hygiene mishaps by heating the turkey in the microwave.

On the other hand, Scott Davis, a contract programmer in Bernal Heights, risked a major food flameout on Christmas Eve. In an attempt to squeeze both a goose and a leg of lamb into the oven, he latched the oven-door and triggered the self-cleaning feature. The door locked. "The oven is getting hotter and hotter," he recalls. "Nothing I'll open it. I was panicked. I have 12 people coming and the oven is going to 90 degrees."

Removing the stovetop, he was able to unscrew the latch. Then he creatively shaped one of the pans so it fit. "I took a pair of pliers and bent the hell out of it," he says.

9. Serve real food. When Nell Bernstein and Timothy Buckwalter threw a holiday party in Oakland, Bernstein decided to keep the menu simple: seven kinds of Christmas cookies and a wine brew called glug. "There was nothing solid to eat," she recalls. The glug was served warm from a pot on the stove. "I was proud of myself for having made it," says Bernstein. "I was pressing it on people." Innocuous looking, the glug delivered an astonishing wallop. What ensued was "incredible drunkenness," she says. "People were saying, 'What happened?'"

10. Chew your food. Table manners have declined. "Talking with their mouths full, putting elbows on the table — it's a combination of not knowing, not caring, not feeling it makes a difference," says Syndi Seid, the founder of

Advanced Etiquette, a San Francisco training company. Oh, but manners do matter, says Seid. The rule is that you should be able to chew twice, swallow and then launch into an analysis of Osama bin Laden's childhood.

11. Say thank-you. "I always send a note and include something about the evening that thrilled me," says David Daniel Bowes in San Francisco. He doesn't dillydally. "If you're going to write a note, it's best to do it the very

next day." He keeps stamps and note cards together and whips off the missive in less than four minutes. ♦

Jane Meredith Adams last wrote for The Magazine on dressing like a grown-up.

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