



APPETIZERS

# PARTY BITES

Creating a dinner party menu with hors d'oeuvres, small plates and petite desserts

By Debra Lykkemark

One of our favourite styles of entertaining is doing a combination of hors d'oeuvres, small plates and petite desserts to replace dinner. There are many advantages to doing this style of dinner party rather than a formal sitdown dinner. Guests can mix and mingle freely and enjoy a wider variety of food. A well-designed menu can accommodate many different food requirements and allergies. More guests can fit in a smaller space, and the experience can be further enhanced by having chefs interact with guests while creating the small plates.

The following are our top seven tips and tricks for creating a dinner event where mingling is encouraged and memories are made:

1. Start the evening with passed hors d'oeuvres for the first 60 to 90 minutes. We recommend six to eight different hors d'oeuvres with a mix of seafood, meat, poultry and

vegetarian ingredients. Check with the host or planner for the event to get a sense of the guest demographic. Age, gender, nationality, dress code and dietary or religious food restrictions should all be considered when planning the menu. At Culinary Capers Catering, if we are catering an event where everyone is formally dressed, we apply what we call the "Versace Test." If a guest would be hesitant to eat the hors d'oeuvre for fear of ruining their outfit, the menu item fails the test and we either have to make it one bite with no dip, or remove it from the menu.

2. When most of the hors d'oeuvres have been passed, we open the food stations. These serve small plates with miniature plates one-third the size of traditional entrées. You can also have your service staff tray pass these from the kitchen, but if you have the room for stations and your chefs are comfortable in the limelight, having them cooking and plating in the middle of the party is always a big hit. We usually allow for three to five different small plates with a protein portion of two to three ounces per plate. A typical event would include stations with poultry, red meat, seafood and vegetarian options. When menu planning, we try to cover off as many food restrictions as possible by making one or more stations both gluten- and dairy-free.

3. The grand finale would be petite desserts, either passed by tray or set out in a beautiful display. We like to offer a wide variety of desserts so that each guest can find their favorite flavour. Your options here are nearly endless: petite custards and puddings in elegant liqueur glasses served with an espresso spoon, cheesecake lollipops, chocolate truffle cones, petite fruit galettes, macarons, cream puffs, specialty cookies and pop tarts – to name just a few! We recommend allowing for three to four pieces per person from a variety of six or more choices.



4. Because of the smaller plate size, you should provide guests with salad forks, not dinner forks. Unless there are lots of tables where guests can sit or stand to eat their food, food that requires a knife should also be avoided. Small plates that are easy to eat with just a fork can still impress! Guests love our maple/miso-glazed salmon with ancient grain pilaf and vegetable jewels. Definitely avoid anything really messy like linguine or spaghetti, or hard-to-cut choices such as thick cuts of roast beef. Better choices would be penne or rotini pasta and fork-tender beef shortrib or thinly sliced beef tenderloin.



5. High-quality paper cocktail napkins are a better choice for this style of mingling menu as guests will need a few napkins for the hors d'oeuvres, one for each small plate and then one or two more for the petite desserts.

6. Don't skimp on the service staff. This type of event requires as much staff as a seated dinner as there is a lot of passing of food and bussing of dishes. We would recommend one service staff person for every 15 guests if the small plates are passed by tray. One service staff person for every 20 guests would suffice if the guests are picking up their small plates from a chef-attended food station.



7. Take time to carefully plan the execution of your small plates. How many hand movements is it going to take to build your plate? If you are cooking à la minute at the food station, how much time will it take to do the cooking? The last thing you want to do is accidentally set off a smoke detector when you are sautéing! Once you have figured out all the variables, you can calculate how many chefs you need to produce your small plates. On average, guests will have three to four small plates spaced out at 15-minute intervals, so if you are cooking at the back of house and plating at a station, you need to think about how to keep your food hot at the station. Chafing dishes on the station are one option, or you could use a thermal container tucked under the station if space permits. When designing your stations, be sure to leave enough room for decor, equipment, plates and cutlery, and remember to leave a spot open on the table to set out finished dishes.

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