



# SERVE

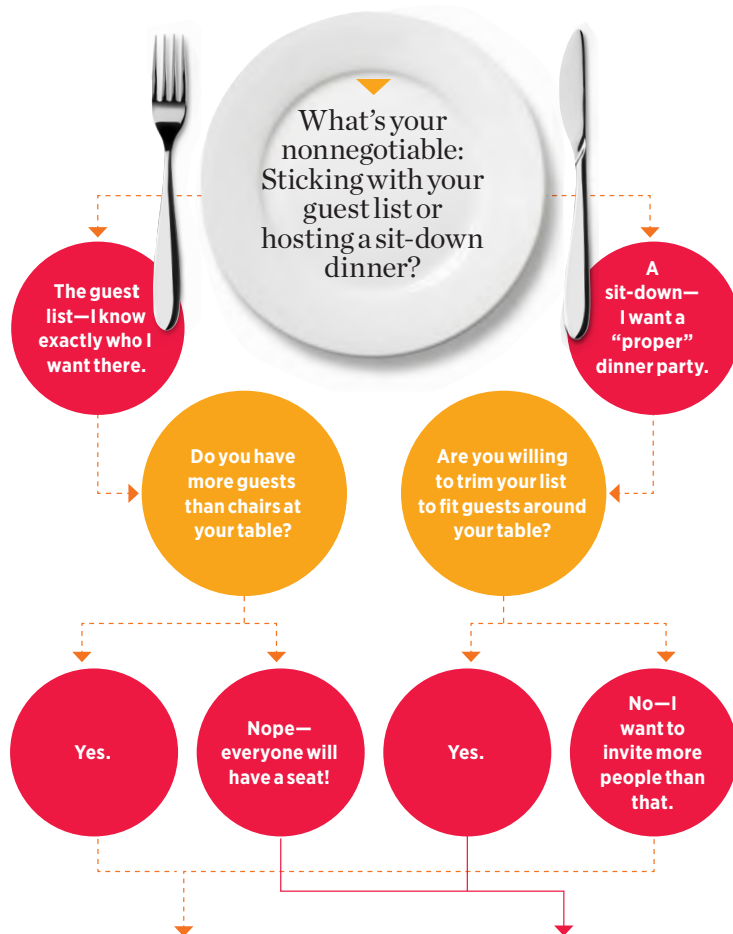
# THEM

# RIGHT!

Welcoming friends and family to your home for a meal is a wonderful gift to them—and this guide lets it be just as enjoyable for you. Back up your generosity with planning tips from renowned caterer Peter Callahan, author of *Party Food*, and see how easy it can be to throw a casual buffet, a fancy sit-down, or anything in between.

BY MELANIE MANNARINO

## CHOOSE YOUR PARTY: *BUFFET* OR *SIT-DOWN?*



### HAVE A BUFFET DINNER!

Buffets allow for better party flow—and give some built-in guidance for menu planning. “For a buffet, you don’t want anything runny, or that means guests have to cut meat on your nice couch,” Peter Callahan advises. “There are lots of great dishes that don’t need a knife, that can be made ahead and popped in the oven, so you can be a guest at your own party.” Just be sure everyone has a place to sit: “Count your chairs, sofas, and window seats to determine how many can be seated at one time,” the caterer says. “It can be awkward as a host to see a guest who is eating standing up!”

### THROW A SEATED DINNER!

This party encourages intimate conversation. More important, it puts the focus on the food, since you’re all sitting around the table looking at it. This is a great option if you want to show off your cooking expertise and have a plated dinner. Since everyone will have a seat at the table, you can plan whatever menu you like (requiring as many utensils—steak knives, soup spoons—as you have). What’s the right number of guests? “Do what your place is set up for,” Callahan says. “If your dining room table maxes out at eight people, then right there—that’s your size limit.”

## PLAN THE MENU

“People are eating much healthier these days, but when they attend a dinner party, they still want something special,” says Callahan. Here are his menu-planning tips for a buffet or a sit-down meal:

### TAKE A CONCEPT AND RUN WITH IT

“A theme helps inform everything from the food to the decorations,” he says. “Deciding on a Thai dinner, for example, sets the whole look. And you can make different levels of food—from simple to more involved.”

### STRUT YOUR STUFF

“If you’re throwing a dinner party, chances are you fancy yourself a good cook,” the caterer observes. “Show off a bit in the kitchen—try something a little complicated. It’s a wonderful thing to do for your friends.”

### EXPLORE THE UNEXPECTED

If you serve it at a party, it’s party food. “Almost nothing is off-limits. A really good meat loaf could be great,” Callahan says. “Peking duck and a salad. Or in the fall, take any vegetable and char it—Brussels sprouts are really good charred!”

### PLEASE THE CROWD

“It’s the guests’ responsibility to let the host know if they don’t eat certain things,” the party pro points out. “When you’re hosting a party, you want to serve what pleases you, but it’s nice to have a side dish like pasta or risotto that doubles as an entrée for vegetarian guests.”



## STOCK THE BAR

“Cocktail culture is a big thing right now,” Callahan notes. To keep things simple, choose a signature cocktail that goes with your theme. One current favorite: “The jalapeño margarita—it’s got zip and is easy to make,” he explains. “Taking something familiar and adding jalapeño to it makes it a whole different animal.” Not into mixed drinks? “You can make a big statement with wine, too. You don’t have to know much about wine—just ask your local wine shop for suggestions for something universal.”

**THREE’S A CHARM** No matter what beverages you serve, conventional dinner party wisdom dictates having enough for each guest to have three glasses—but you know your company best.

## DO THE DINNER PARTY MATH

With a buffet, there’s one all-important goal: “You can’t run out of food,” Callahan cautions. When you get right down to it, you may feel as if you have more control at a sit-down dinner, but the same rule holds true. “You don’t want to run out—it makes a host very nervous. Just know that you will have leftovers.”

You want a minimum of three dishes: “An entrée, a pasta or grain, and a salad or vegetable. Then you can build out more: a vegetable and a salad, or a pasta and a grain.” Bear in mind: As you work in more dishes, the quantity you’ll need per person changes—but not always as much as you’d expect. “If you’re doing more than one entrée, you never really know what anyone will eat on any given day,” Callahan explains. “What if everyone wants the fish?” So if you’re preparing one to two entrées, he suggests making a full portion of every dish for every person. “But if you’re making three entrées, you can start pulling back. If you get up to five, you can cut back even more. Generally, when you add more dishes to the menu, you can and should plan smaller portions.” Multiple dishes make for a more festive party, he notes. “Plus, it lets you try different recipes—that’s part of the fun!”



## DRESS THE TABLE

When you’re serving a meal, “The food becomes the centerpiece. It gets people talking, and if one guest is holding a platter while others serve themselves, it engages them,” Callahan explains. But a table should look full: The less food you put out, the more you need another centerpiece—even an abundance of Granny Smith apples piled up in a large wooden salad bowl, or a group of unscented candles. “My wife assembles the most beautiful heads of lettuce tied with a black ribbon on a cake stand,” he says. “It looks superchic.”

## GET THE TIMING DOWN

“A party evening definitely has a rhythm to it,” Callahan says. Here are some of his guidelines to help keep your gathering on track.

### WHEN GUESTS ARRIVE

“Put out cheese or vegetables and dips—unless you want to serve dinner late. In that case, you need more substantial snacks.”

### WHEN DINNER IS READY

“You want to have food in front of people as soon as they sit.” Remember, a seated dinner with courses will take more time than a buffet. Most people will visit the buffet table once or twice, filling their plates the first

time around, and picking and choosing on the next visit. “It goes faster.”

### AFTER DINNER

“It’s nice to move people around. So if you’re doing a seated dinner, move guests to a different part of your house after the meal.”

### DESSERT

“You want to have dessert right after the main course—unless it’s a weekend. Then you might want to have a lag.”

### WRAPPING THINGS UP

“As a host, you send signals. If you’re offering coffee, that sends guests a sign that you’re getting people ready to leave.”

**“A HOST SHOULD BE WORKING AS LITTLE AS POSSIBLE. YOUR GUESTS ARE THERE TO SPEND TIME WITH YOU. AND AT THE END OF THE NIGHT, LEAVE THE DISHES FOR TOMORROW. YOU WANT TO ENJOY YOUR PARTY.”**



PHOTOGRAPHY: (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): OFFSET; STOCKSY; GETTY; OFFSET, PREVIOUS SPREAD: STOCKSY (MAIN); GETTY (PLATE).