

PERSONAL BUSINESS

WEALTH MATTERS

Keeping Their Eye on the Ball, So the Host Can Mingle

By PAUL SULLIVAN

HAVING a party for friends is supposed to be fun. But that may not necessarily be true for the hosts, who do the planning and then often feel that they must make sure everyone is having a good time.

David Noto, who owns Altaneve, a producer of prosecco, said he had found himself in that situation all too often.

Several years ago, Mr. Noto decided to host two parties that could reasonably be called quirky. In the winter, he invited friends to ice skate in Central Park — with everyone dressed in tuxedos and full-length ball gowns.

Come summer, it was remote-controlled sailboat racing at the park's boat pond, with a live jazz band and prosecco liberally poured. Both were such hits with friends, they became annual events.

But instead of enjoying his parties, he worried about the little details, from running around to make sure his guests had what they needed to organizing the heats for the sailboat races.

"In the three hours of the event, I had fun for two to three minutes," he said.

So this year, he hired an event planner to coordinate his mini-regatta. The help did not come cheap. It will cost him about \$20,000, which was three times what he paid last year.

"The cost, although notable, is somewhat more to me if I don't hire someone," he said.

If you're going to spend that kind of money — and many summer parties on the New York circuit will cost

much more than Mr. Noto's — you want to make sure your party is great. And many will turn to party planners to pull off what they can't on their own.

"A good party is people go, they have great drinks, they get buzzed and they enjoy the company," said Stefanie Cove, managing partner at YO Productions in Los Angeles and New York. "To get to great, you have to think about all of these details that people just don't think about. You have to create an atmosphere that people are so comfortable in and never want to leave. It's the right lounge, the right temperature, the right music."

Harriette Rose Katz, founder of the Chosen Few, a membership organization of elite event planners, said her clients spend widely different sums for a great event. A first-rate cocktail party with hors d'oeuvres that are brought to guests by a server could start at about \$350 a person, she said. In this circle, weddings begin at \$500 a person, and the top social events can cost as much as \$1,000 a person.

Things can grow much more expensive when outfitting one's home for a party. Steve Kemble, an event planner in Dallas, said he had one client who spent \$20,000 for an acrylic cover to turn her pool into a dance floor and another who bought a \$120,000 antique rock crystal chandelier and had it shipped from Italy for an event.

"It's that show-off factor," he said. "We're all guilty of it. There are things you're going to do to your



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apartment or house that cost you money that you wouldn't have done unless you were having your friends over for dinner."

He added, "When I hear people say, 'Oh my God, we could have gone to a restaurant for cheaper.' I say, 'Duh, of course you could have.' But there is nothing more personal than going to someone's home for a party."

(How the event planner charges to bring that party home varies. Some mark up everything they touch by, say, 15 to 25 percent. Others base their fee on the cost of the party itself. Mr. Kemble says he'll often tell clients when they can make do with a caterer and save themselves money.)

Still, throwing money at a party doesn't guarantee it will be a success. There are plenty of things either less experienced planners or budget-conscious hosts can overlook.

The most common mistake is not having someone closely track the R.S.V.P.s. "I have got to have a count to produce an amazing event for you," Mr. Kemble said. "I'm the one who is going to look bad when they say, 'I can't believe there is not enough food.' I say it's because she said 25 people were coming when 125 people showed up."

Of course, it can cut both ways. One year, George Ledes, the chief executive of Cosmetic World and Beauty Fashion, said he sent out invitations for his annual Christmas party at Doubles, a private club in the Sherry-Netherland Hotel, but he

forgot to tell the club's manager. He only realized this when his wife, Christine, called the club about something else a day before the event.

(Doing the same party at the same place year after year can pay off. Mrs. Ledes said the club scrambled and the party came off without a hitch.)

Once people are at your event, the party's flow is crucial. This starts from the moment they arrive. "If

Planning and pulling off a party with a little less stress.

you have to wait 15 minutes to valet your car, you'll remember that," Ms. Cove said.

And it continues through the night. If people need to go upstairs, it's best that they stay up there until the end, she said. When there is a bar, there should be one bartender and two assistants for every 50 people to keep waiting times short. And if someone has to sit for dinner, the chairs had better be comfortable.

When Mrs. Katz gave a party to celebrate the newest renovation of her Upper East Side apartment, she had flow in mind when she held it over three nights, with 60 guests each evening.

"Everyone was joyful, but it wasn't so crowded," she said. And

with an acknowledgment that event planners understand budgets, she added: "I did the same food, the same flowers and the same wonderful orchestra each night. It was very cost-effective when you're bringing in rentals and caterers and a group." How a party progresses is also important.

Bentley Meeker, a lighting designer and artist who said he had done 11,000 events in 25 years, said people often call their guests to something, like a cake cutting, and then make them stand around.

"People start to lose interest after one or two minutes," he said. "Timing is what makes everything flow, or everything gets stuck or seems staccato. It's the most important thing. Timing is also free."

The same goes for anyone who wants to make a speech or screen a video, no matter how moving. Both should be short, preferably less than three minutes.

Mr. Meeker said people often cut corners on lighting and sound. The result can be guests, dressed to the nines, looking washed out, not glamorous. Without the right sound, the music can ruin the party.

"The band is gauging their performance by how many people are on the dance floor," Mr. Meeker said. "But if you have a party with a bunch of hedge fund dudes, they're never going to dance. The band is going to play louder, but you have all these dudes trying to get rid of Greek bonds, and they can't do it because they can't hear anything. Now, no one is having a good time."

(The problem can be solved with more speakers around a party space so the volume of each one can be lower than a couple of speakers turned to 11.)

For most people, what makes a party memorable is the atmosphere created. Still, the quirks are often the ones that stand out.

Mrs. Ledes said the most memorable party she threw was a Sweet 16 party. Her daughter was supposed to go to a concert at Jones Beach with friends, but it was canceled when New York City lost power one weekend in August 2003.

Sitting with her daughter and her friends at the West Side Tennis Club in Forest Hills, Queens, Mrs. Ledes said she saw a group of young girls wandering around in cheerleading outfits. They had been heading into Madison Square Garden for a cheerleading competition but got stuck at the Forest Hills train station when the power went out.

Mrs. Ledes invited the girls and their chaperones into the club. "We got some great bottles of wine out of the cellar and gave the kids warm Coca-Colas," she said. "We ended up having the cheerleaders perform for us on the grass courts."

This year Mr. Noto isn't looking for something so unforgettable. He just wants to enjoy his event. He is leaving every detail but the prosecco to the event planner. "I now get to enjoy the event and be with my friends," he said.

And that should be the goal with any party this weekend, regardless of the cost.

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