



MUSINGS ON “POTLUCK” RECEPTIONS

ANDREA GIARDINO

Andrea:

I think potluck is a terrible idea.

NAW:

Hmmm. All right. Interview over. (Laughter)

Andrea:

No, seriously, I don't *really* think it's completely terrible. I understand where it comes from and how much it supports a feeling of sharing and the creation of a casual and familial experience. But if it's not managed with a great degree of control, it's likely to become truly awful.

Remember, a wedding reception is really centrally about entertaining—and entertaining is more than just putting nutritious food on the table. It's a gift you give your guests.

NAW:

You are an unusual resource—a party planner who also cooks. Food, therefore, must be a crucial part of your planning?

Andrea:

I think that exceptional food is central to showing people that you really do care about them. If the environment is over the top but the food is mediocre, somehow all the decorations seem hollow, and everyone winds up talking about the rubber chicken or the tasteless cake. We've all been to those kinds of parties. And we've been to others where the food and drink were so glorious and delicious you never knew the paint was peeling!

NAW:

Do you think one can ever make potluck work?

Andrea:

Yes, but first you must know what you're starting with. Are there friends who have special recipes or dishes that they are known for? If you try to organize an event around the things that people do exceptionally well, you'll be better served than arbitrarily assigning something safe, like three-bean salad.

For instance, I once actually organized a potluck reception for the wedding of friends. And that's how I know there's a huge amount of organization required.

The groom was an old friend from Uruguay who was marrying a beautiful doctor with family from Jamaica. They are part of a larger group of friends who are all here in New York from other countries. So I figured that if each of us knew one specialty dish from their country, they could bring this to create a feast, and that would be a celebration of how we bring our cultures with us when we come to America.

Hugo, the groom, intended to wear authentic gaucho clothes—which is how I knew the idea of representing our mother countries was in his heart at this time.

I listed all the nationalities that would be represented at the wedding and made a list of all the foods those countries were known for. From there I designed the meal, with some options, and began to call the guests and assign the dishes. It was a small enough group, and that's another very important point:

potluck works best with small groups because they are easier to control.

Next I helped most of them with measurements to change their kitchen recipes to quantities that might feed thirty or forty. It's important to remember that very few home chefs are prepared to cook for more than twenty people and you don't want to offer a dish that is not sufficient in quantity to serve all.

Another important part to control is the presentation. The best place to start is to get serving dishes that are all coordinated. They don't need to be expensive but they must look as though they all belong in the same place. You can rent them or buy them. For Hugo, I got wonderful huge terra-cotta bakers and shallow bowls and dishes from a garden supply market and I distributed them to our "cooks." At Hugo's house we had all the garnishes waiting for their arrival, and the ovens were hot and ready for anything that needed to be heated before serving.

I worked out a buffet tablescape in advance and I knew where every platter and bowl would be. I made little cards for each dish so that everyone could read what the dish was, who made it and what country it came from.

Everyone loved it! They all shared recipes the night of the wedding. You know, South Americans went home with a pesto recipe from an Italian, and



the woman who made the Jamaican chicken went home with my empanada recipe. One friend couldn't cook but she was a brilliant florist. As everyone else was making food, she made a cake of flowers that looked just like a real cake with a slice missing, and brought it on a cake stand.

In some ways it might have been easier to just do the food myself but it wouldn't have supported as well the essence of this group of friends. We were able to honor our home countries in this celebration that was a marriage of cultures and also suggest that the bits of our own past that came with us were still able to enhance and enrich our new lives.

NAW:

So, if I'm getting it, potluck can work but it should be a natural element of the wedding theme. It needs tight, detailed organization and planning, spectacular design and a high degree of cooperation from the participants.

Andrea:

Yes. If it's not going to look slipshod it needs all of those things. And I think there are very few places where it is appropriate, but when it is and if you're prepared to do the work, it can be wonderful.