

# No Recipe Required

## Who needs fancy and formal entertaining if you have heart.

By Rebecca Walden



Domestic goddesses, I tip my spatula to you. You dazzle the rest of us mere mortals with your effortless displays of the deliciously prepared and creatively presented, along with your tips about how to host with panache.

As a young bride-to-be, I remember eagerly pouring over the beautiful new cookbooks I'd received at my wedding shower. Pictures of glittery tablescapes and succulent dishes both Southern and sophisticated made my mouth water, not to mention my neighborhood Williams-Sonoma very happy.

After shelling out a small fortune to appropriately stock the matchbox-sized kitchen of our Vestavia apartment, I couldn't wait to find an excuse to play the happy host and tap my inner Nigella Lawson.

A few months before the Big Day, I got my chance. With a wedding in the works and eager to foster good relations amongst all the soon to be in-lawed, I invited everyone over for some Low Country Boil and a little forced we're-about-to-be-family fun.

Taking a cue from the Emeril Lagasse "bam!" style of cooking, I casually ignored the recommended measurement on the Cajun seasoning canister, and the text stating "Flavor intensifies with cooking time." If four tablespoons were good, wouldn't eight be even better? Simmer for two hours? Why not four?

Oops.

That night, instead of confidently presiding over mutual merriment, I was frantically ferrying out glasses of water and sourdough slices to a crowd that was trying to be polite while my meant to impress dish slowly began to annihilate their taste buds.

"Oh come on, people! It can't be that spicy," I thought, biting into a boiled new potato. Holy schnikes—it was like a firecracker had gone off in my mouth.

My soon-to-be father-in-law must have been looking for a sign that I was finally realizing I'd doomed us all to an evening of antacids, because at that very moment, with great fanfare and an animated "Damn, that's hot!" He took out his handkerchief and started wiping beads of sweat from his forehead.

A few months later, freshly inspired from

the purchase of our very first house, I convinced my husband that we ought to try hosting a "grown up" Christmas party—for like 100 of our nearest and dearest friends.

From napkin rings to scented candles to festive bath linens to background music (contemporary jazz, thank you very much), no detail was too small to escape my attention.

I toiled for hours over the menu, eventually settling on sausage stuffed mushrooms (A+ on taste, C- on presentation), pear and gorgonzola crostini (with slightly browned fruit, thanks to my lack of knowledge about the aesthetic powers of lemon juice), a chilled antipasto platter (it looked nothing like the picture in *Southern Living*—what exactly do those photo stylists do to the food, anyway?), cherry tomato gruyere tarts (broke my blender making the dough) and a smattering of other culinary delights, the preparation of which caused my sink (both sides) to back up to rim level with an hour to go before guests were to arrive.

Like a madwoman, I started double-fisting scoops of sink water into Pyrex cups, racing to the back door to dump them in the yard, when I remembered Martha Stewart's words from "Tips for a Stress-Free Holiday Season," about using the last hour to relax before guests arrive. Dagnabbit!

Somehow getting ready in record time, I was at the door to greet our first guest and accept their wrapped prize for our twist on the predictable "Dirty Santa" game—a "White Elephant" gift exchange (read: fish out the ugliest, most useless present you've ever gotten, wrap it, bring it, and see if you can trade up).

From ceramics class projects gone horribly wrong to funky backscratchers to the world's ugliest wine racks, we all amused ourselves opening the beautifully wrapped and deliciously tacky crap—that everyone had brought for the occasion.

After the last bit of wine was consumed and the final guest had said goodnight, my husband and I collapsed onto the sofa, patting ourselves on the back for a fete well-hosted. Or so we thought.

Until we pulled back the pillow shams that

night, and the shower curtain the next morning, and the pantry door at breakfast, and the guest bathroom vanity a few days later, and the washer and dryer later that week, only to find ... ceramics class projects gone horribly wrong ... funky backscratchers ... and the world's ugliest wine rack, not to mention various and sundry other "gifts" that kept popping up in surprising places until we were safely into the season of Lent.

Argh! I seemed doomed to forever repeat a version of the first dinner party I'd ever hosted. It was to be an intimate gathering of four work friends, one of whom I was secretly crushing on, plus my brother, then an undergrad in the city where I'd landed my first job.

Note to self: choose your sous chef very carefully. When I left my brother in charge of finishing up the spaghetti Bolognese, I hadn't taken into account the 10 years of Boy Scout camping and cooking in the wilderness "resourcefulness" he'd bring into my kitchen. How else can I explain the Spaghetti Sauce a la Sliced Up Hotdogs he brought to the table? Not shockingly, my crush did not call back after suffering through this supremely humiliating Beanie Weanie Supper.

Blessedly this past year, for my husband's 38th birthday, and thanks to the third trimester of pregnancy overruling any desire I might have had to do something fancy and formal, I think I finally got it right.

The cake was store-bought; the candles unscented. The meal—Santa Fe soup and jalapeno cheddar cornbread—was so easy a Home Ec student could have made it.

Instead of contemporary jazz, we dined to the plucky tones of "Elmo's World," which occupied our toddler when she wasn't busily preening around the grandparents to show off her sparkly new cowgirl boots.

No one was in a hurry to leave, and the laughter and stories flowed as easily as the bottles of wine we poured. Across the dining room table, I gave the birthday boy a wink. Watching our families share such an enjoyable evening together made my heart happy—no recipe required. •