

# CONNECTICUT

MAGAZINE

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Party Planner

When it comes to parties, there's seemingly no limit to what people are willing to arrange—and spend. Here's a look at some current trends in party-giving, followed by a statewide resource guide to help you plan your own.



## Party Time

By  
Margaret  
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FOR MERYL JAPHA, it was the party of a lifetime, conceived four years ago when her father was battling stomach cancer. Thinking ahead to 2006, the Stamford resident realized her 50th birthday and her father's 80th would coincide in August, the same month as her 25th wedding anniversary. "If we pull through this, we will celebrate," she vowed. And celebrate they did, treating 99 guests to dinner and dancing at a loft in New York City.

In Greenwich, for her husband's 50th birthday last year, the wife of a high-profile financier surprised him with a three-day extravaganza for 30 friends and relatives that started with a welcoming lobster bake Friday evening and concluded with brunch on Sunday.

Across Connecticut, people are touting

life's big moments in ever grander style, relying in many cases on event planners to create can-you-top-this celebrations. "There's a huge trend in celebrating life," says Traci Romano, founder of The Romano Group Event Planning and Design in Westport. "We're in a delicate situation around the world and when you have a happy occasion, you really want to celebrate it."

Birthdays, bar and bat mitzvahs, and anniversaries have long inspired festivity, but the planning process today goes way beyond managing food, beverages and RSVPs. "It's all about putting on a production," says Lyndsey Hamilton, an event planner with offices in New York and Connecticut. And the challenge for our times is "incorporating a person's life into the party and personalizing it," she adds.

For the Greenwich financier, for example, each event of the weekend was themed around a

place where he had lived. The lobster dinner Friday evening evoked Nantucket, the safari-style gala on Saturday, Africa, and on Sunday it was brunch with a French twist. Guests, who flew in from around the world, were housed for the weekend and provided gift baskets and flowers in their rooms. There was a catch, however: They also had to sign a privacy waiver, says Hamilton, declining to reveal her client's name or the tally except to say it cost "a couple hundred thousand dollars."

That was her most extensive job to date, but "hugely elaborate multiday parties—that's the thing nowadays," she says.

THE AIM TODAY is a party bigger and better than anyone else's, agrees Elissa Fallo, vice president of Perfect Productions in Farmington. While 40th, 50th and 60th parties predominate on the birthday circuit, they are by no means the only

excuse for excess. For a 22nd birthday in October, Fallo orchestrated a \$70,000 Moroccan-theme party for just 15 guests. The expense included renting a penthouse suite, moving out the furniture and storing it for the night, setting up low tables and pillows for dining, and draping 1,500 yards of gold, turquoise and burgundy organza to create a scene worthy of a sultan. More than 100 candles flickered as the guests savored a meal cooked by the chef of a Turkish restaurant. The guest of honor attends the University of Connecticut; his wife, a friend of Fallo's, is "the Paris Hilton of the Turkish world," according to Fallo. Fallo won an award from the International Special Events Society for pulling the whole thing off in less than a week.

When it came to her big bash in New York, Japha was surprised it took so long to find the right planner. "I had a hard time

communicating," she recalls. "I wanted it sparkly and festive, and I wanted that wow factor." She had already interviewed and rejected three planners when she discovered Traci Romano. The invitation Romano suggested—hand-sewn with silver circular confetti reflecting a "circle of life" theme—"blew me away and set the tone," says Japha. The party planner noted that the significant years for the three "circle of life" celebrants added up to 155, and that became the name of a cocktail served at the bar, as well as the logo on the cocktail napkins and hand towels. "Thinking about all the little details and putting them together" is what sets a fantastic party apart from a ho-hum one, says Romano.

Japha and her dad, Norbert Gaelen, decided not to celebrate in a typical party venue. Japha pored over wedding announcements and listings on the Web and came up with the idea of

### Party Time UNIQUE IDEAS

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Event planners' fees vary. At the high end, Hamilton charges \$10,000 and up, and most of her clients "spend six figures," she says. Romano says the creative end for a 100-person party, with lighting, photography, florals and her design fee could reach \$25,000.

the loft on West Street in downtown Manhattan.

The menu included butter-squash with curried ginger soup, roasted corn soufflé drizzled with lobster and sherry bisque, and beef tenderloin or sea bass. So that guests wouldn't be planted at the table for hours, the host and hostess decided on a coffee bar and dessert station. Finger desserts were passed as well.

"It was everything we wanted it to be," Japha says. "We spent way more than we ever thought

we were going to but it was well worth it."

As party planners' involvement escalates, so do the fees. "People are giving a lot more license to their event planners," says Elise Braun, membership services coordinator for ISES in Chicago. Fallo agrees. Her clients "want to do the event but they don't want to touch it," she says. "They want someone else to have the responsibility."

Hamilton, however, says her Connecticut clients still get more involved in the planning

and design than New Yorkers, who typically "like to hand it over." This might mean having the planner design and print invitations; book rooms for out-of-town guests; hire entertainers, photographers, caterers and florists; select the menu and wines; and choose gift bags and table favors.

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party, with lighting, photography, florals and her design fee, could reach \$25,000, the cost of a new American car. Food and beverages might put the tab over \$50,000, she adds. For clients who prefer to do much of the legwork themselves, Seccuro charges \$150 an hour; otherwise her starting fee is \$6,000. Carol Albert of Buds in Bloom in West Hartford itemizes jobs like centerpieces and adds 20 percent for vendors she hires.

NOT SURPRISINGLY, wealthy Fairfield County suburbanites stage some of Connecticut's most lavish parties. "Most of our Connecticut business tends to be in Fairfield County, where entertaining is almost like a sport," says Liz Seccuro, owner of Dolce Parties in Greenwich.

The sky's the limit in children's parties too, even for 1-year-olds still striving to walk and talk. "First birthdays are huge, although I'm not sure I agree with it," says Seccuro, referring not just to the number of guests but to what she calls "blow-the-bank craziness."

A Westport couple spent well over \$5,000 on their son's first birthday last fall, says Romano, who coordinated the at-home gala. The guests, 40 adults and 18 children, enjoyed meals catered by Cabbages & Kids in Weston, including individually boxed chicken fingers for the children. The hired entertainer,

even so, Seccuro tells her clients that successful entertaining is about much more than how much money they spend. "It should be about being a gracious host and showing guests a good time," she says. "People should never leave your event saying, 'Wow, they must have spent a lot of money!' They should leave saying, 'Wow, that was the best party I've ever been to.'"

Lately, Seccuro sees more women hosting their own landmark birthday parties. "It's not considered tacky," she says. "It's acceptable." For a 50th, she coordinated an itinerary for 30 that included transportation, spa beauty treatments, drinks and a seven-course tasting menu. For the finale, they went dancing and received very grown-up "woody bags"—with Egyptian cotton pajamas and cashmere slippers.

INDEED, GIFT BAGS and party favors, once the purview of the under-fives set, play a prominent part in today's fetes. Guests of Meryl Japha and her dad received a hand-blown bottle into which was tucked a note written by Japha or Gaelen recounting that person's importance in their life. The waiters passed out the bottles on silver trays. "Some people cried, others waited till they got home to read them," recalls Japha, explaining they had limited the guest list to men and women who "had given our lives meaning." Among them were artists whose works her parents had collected.

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who entered the business 26 years ago. "When we clean up, we find all those things are left behind," she says, no matter whether they are inexpensive picture frames or pricier bracelets.

Trends in party design come and go, planners say. At ISES, which has an international perspective, Braun says the coming trend is a return to elegance. But for now in Connecticut, people celebrate in "a more themey way," says Fallo.

For an avid card player who turned 85, she designed a "Queen of Hearts" party with jumbo playing cards in the centerpieces, red sequin tablecloths and a personalized deck of cards for each of the 58 guests. The icing on the cake was in the form of a floral flush. For a James Bond party, she conjured up a martini bar carved out of ice and dancers who looked like Bond girls. For a theme to work, it should be present consistently through all the details, from invitations to menus to favors—"or it's not worth doing," says Fallo.

Ally Markowitz, 13, of Canton loves to shop, and "Shop Till You Drop" became the theme for her bat mitzvah in November. To implement it, Ally's parents, Susan and David Markowitz, turned to planner Carol Albert. "I was kind of at a loss," says Susan. "We knew exactly what we wanted but I wasn't sure how to do it." On the wish list were

Ally's name flashing in lights, and centerpieces, place cards and menus reflecting the "Shop Till You Drop with Ally" theme. Susan did much of the legwork herself, schlepping into 18 stores to get different shopping bags, which then figured prominently in each centerpiece. Instead of numbering the tables, place cards said "Mr. and Mrs. John Smith will be shopping at Nordstrom tonight," and guests knew to then look for the table with the Nordstrom shopping bag.

Five years ago, when Ally's brother Seth had his bar mitzvah party at Tower Ridge Country Club in Simsbury, the Markowitzes did not use a party planner. "My son was okay with anything," his mother says, "but Ally wanted to be involved. She wanted a theme." To implement their vision for the 160-person affair, Tower Ridge charged about \$10,000 for the food and beverages, says banquet coordinator Karen Nadeau. For the party planner, DJ, photographer and florist, "I guess she spent another \$7,000 or \$8,000," Nadeau estimates.

Noting the bat mitzvah was more extravagant than her son's bar mitzvah, "Maybe it was a little over the top... I don't know," says Susan. But after three years of planning, she was happy with the results. The difficult part, if there was one, was the aftermath. As so many hosts and hostesses discover, "It's sort of a letdown when it's over."

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a magician called Mr. Bungles, had to work without face makeup for fear of scaring the guest of honor and his pals, who were too young to appreciate his standard clown gig.

In the 20 years that Nancy Douglas of Stamford has been in the party business with Let's Have a Party Premiere Events, first birthdays have ballooned from intimate, low-key family affairs to galas with sometimes 20, 40 or 60 children. "You have no idea how large some of these parties are," she says, noting that many have multiple entertainers, such as clowns, magicians, balloon sculptors and DJs.

The trend toward can-you-top-this parties is evident throughout the state for all age groups. "In this hectic world, people relish the chance to get everyone together for these milestones," says Fallo. "Whether they have the money or not, they're spending it, thinking, 'I'll pay for it later.' Douglas concurs: "Even people you think might not be able to [afford] additional entertainment find it important to have it," she says.

Even so, Seccuro tells her clients that successful entertaining is about much more than how much money they spend. "It should be about being a gracious host and showing guests a good time," she says. "People should never leave your event saying, 'Wow, they must have spent a lot of money!' They should leave saying, 'Wow, that was the best party I've ever been to.'"

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