

A close-up photograph of a dark grey ceramic bowl filled with a seafood orzo salad. The salad contains orzo pasta, mussels, clams, sliced hard-boiled eggs, and fresh herbs. The bowl is set on a grey textured placemat. In the background, two wine glasses are visible on a white tablecloth, and a purple napkin with silverware is partially seen.

seriously simple parties

RECIPES, MENUS & ADVICE
FOR EFFORTLESS ENTERTAINING

diane rossen worthington

PHOTOGRAPHS BY YVONNE DUIVENVOORDEN

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CHRONICLE BOOKS
SAN FRANCISCO

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ISBN 978-1-4521-2868-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available under ISBN 978-0-8118-7257-5

Designed by Laura Pales
Prop styling by Catherine Doherty
Food styling by Lucie Richardson
Production management by Sarah Licht

Chronicle Books LLC
680 Second Street
San Francisco, California 94107
www.chroniclebooks.com

acknowledgments

Ethan Ellenberg, my agent, who is always available with a creative thought

Bill LeBlond, my supportive editor, who is always there to listen to my ideas

Amy Treadwell, for her helpful editorial input and creative thinking, which have helped me solve organizational challenges

Joanna Ramos, for her skilled assistance in the kitchen and her sense of humor

Jill Kanofsky, for all of her recipe assistance, testing, and help at a moment's notice

Anthony Dias Blue, whose expert knowledge is reflected in the wine pairing advice

Denny Luria, for her lifelong friendship and thoughtful insights and for always being there

Laurie Burrows Grad, Kathy Blue, Janice Wald Henderson, Ciji Ware, my cooking colleagues and dear friends, for all of their input

Mary Beth Rose; Lucy Suzar; Connie Bryson; Judy, Kenny, Sam, and Ali Miller; Lisa and Steve Hillman; Cathi and George Rimalower; and Ruth and Don Salk for being great tasters and critics

And last but not least, my husband, Michael, and my daughter, Laura, who always make me laugh.

for laura
& michael,
who give
me reason
to celebrate

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I wrote *Seriously Simple* in 2002 to help the busy home cook spend as little time as possible in the kitchen while still creating tasty dishes. My recipes had as much to do with lifestyle as they did with flavor. They were designed to minimize prep time and streamline cooking techniques, while retaining the pleasing, complex flavors of more labor-intensive dishes.

The recipes I created seemed to resonate with my readers, and *Seriously Simple Holidays* followed soon after. In response to that book, repeated e-mails to my *Seriously Simple* Web site raised questions about entertaining. My readers wanted to know how to throw a party without becoming overwhelmed by all the planning, shopping, prep work, cooking, and serving. Is it possible to do it all without calling in the troops? I love to entertain and have many tips to share, having learned from my own mistakes over the years. So I decided to write *Seriously Simple Parties*, a collection of recipes that are meant to reduce that all-too-common feeling of party anxiety.

This book will show you how to pull together a festive meal for a small or large group that is tasty and beautifully presented, but doesn't require endless hours of preparation. I've developed recipes based on fresh ingredients, shortcut cooking techniques, and a well-stocked pantry to enable you to throw a party with a minimum of effort.

The most important requirement for a successful party is organization.

Years of entertaining have shown me that careful organization ahead of time makes for the best event. Preplanning allows me to spend time talking and relaxing with my guests, instead of working in the kitchen. Whether I am preparing a meal for 4 or 12, planning ahead and making to-do lists is my secret to an enjoyable get-together.

1. Decide what kind of gathering you want to have.

The section on Party Entertaining Styles ([page 23](#)) will help you select from a range of options, whether it's a sit-down brunch for 6, an outdoor buffet dinner for 12, or a family-style luncheon for 10, where all the dishes appear on the table at the same time.

2. Choose your menu.

Seriously Simple Parties provides a variety of menus ([pages 31 to 45](#)) for a range of different kinds of entertaining. The menus are meant as suggestions: feel free to make changes to suit your own taste. Note that the menus and recipes are arranged by season, so your dishes will include the freshest ingredients currently available.

3. Select your beverages.

See *Stocking the Bar* ([page 26](#)) to organize the drinks for your party. I describe how to figure out the amounts of wine and liquor you'll need, depending on the size of your gathering. Check out the *Beverages* chapter ([page 47](#)), and choose from a number of creative cocktails to help get the party going.

4. Check and replenish your pantry.

Having your staples on hand is key to hassle-free party prep. The Party Pantry ([page 13](#)) will help you stock your cupboard with ingredients that are essential for my recipes. For example, you will appreciate having a good selection of red and white vinegars and assorted oils when making salad dressings, sautés, and sauces. Keeping good-quality chicken or vegetable stocks and canned tomatoes within reach will make soup and stew prep that much easier. A selection of chocolates and nuts will give you the freedom to throw together cookies or cakes without having to make another trip to the store.

5. Make those lists!

They may seem like extra work, but careful planning will save you time and make entertaining seriously simple. I think of these lists as my road map to a successful party, a strategy that takes the stress out of pulling everything together.

6. Prep kitchen a week or two before the party.

Space out your cooking tasks. My recipes always offer tips for advance preparation, which will make your work more manageable. A sauce can be made a week in advance and frozen until you're ready to use it. The first couple of steps of many recipes can be completed days ahead. As the day of your party draws near, remember the Seriously Simple philosophy: keep it fresh and keep it simple. That means if you don't have time to prepare all the dishes you want to serve, don't panic. Feel free to pick up a fresh store-bought item instead.

Menu and Cooking Schedule

List all the dishes you will serve at your party, and note when each one will be made. You may decide to do some steps well in advance, and others a day or two before the party. Also note any last-minute touches that will need to be added.

Shopping and Chores Schedule

Arrange a schedule for buying flowers, desserts, or other last-minute purchases. Coordinate any final tasks for party prep, including lighting the candles, refrigerating wines and drinks, and getting ice ready. Note any family member or friend who can do the task.

Drinks and Other Nonperishables Shopping List

Note all the nonperishables you need, from the wine to the centerpieces. These can be bought a week or so ahead.

Perishables Shopping List

The list should include all the fresh food you will need, such as salad ingredients and other vegetables, cheeses, and meats. Purchase fruit that needs to ripen at least a couple of days ahead of your event. Decide what flowers you will need and purchase them a few days ahead of your event.

Tabletop Items

The dishes, tablecloths, napkins, silverware, serving pieces, and candles you plan to use should be included in this list. You might want to think about where people will sit, and even make place cards for a more formal gathering.

There are so many reasons to celebrate.

I'm big on informal gatherings like a family-style dinner or a casual midday brunch. I also look forward to annual parties like my Academy Awards dinner or a Super Bowl Sunday lunch. And I love to throw parties celebrating family moments like a graduation or anniversary dinner. I believe that there's an occasion, that's a good reason for a celebration. And if there's no occasion, arrange a gathering together and create one.

Just know that when you choose to entertain, you are not alone. You can rely on my book as your friend in the kitchen and at the party.

have fun,
diane

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the party pantry

The Seriously Simple Party Pantry is all about having straightforward, uncomplicated ingredients on hand that can make a bold impact, even when you are putting together only a few simple dishes for an impromptu get-together. Many of these ingredients will keep for a long time in your pantry, refrigerator, or freezer.

agave syrup

A healthier alternative to sugar, agave is a great sweetener to use in homemade drinks and desserts. You can use it in place of simple syrup.

apricot jam

Use the jam for brushing on finished pastry.

baking powder

Look for double-acting aluminum-free brands. Store in a cool dry place for up to 6 months. After that, baking powder loses its effectiveness.

baking soda

Store in a cool dry place for up to 6 months.

broths

In recent years premade chicken, vegetable, and beef broths have drastically improved. They are great time-savers and are perfect for homemade soups, stews, and sauces. Select broths in paper cartons so you can store the leftovers easily in the refrigerator for a few days. You can also freeze small quantities for a few months and use them for sauces or stir-fries. Look for low-sodium broths so you can control the amount of salt going into your dish.

butter

I use unsalted butter because it has no preservatives and has an excellent flavor. I always have a few pounds in my freezer for any last-minute cooking, since it keeps so well.

capers

These piquant buds are available either packed in brine or salt. Make sure to rinse them well. Try these as an added flavor enhancer in salads, dressing, and sauces, and as a simple garnish.

cheese

Cheese is a fantastic party food because it is so versatile. It can be a course all on its own, with just a few accompaniments, or it can be a component in salads, entrées, and even desserts.

BLUE CHEESE: Domestic Maytag blue and Point Reyes blue, and imported Gorgonzola, Stilton, and Roquefort are all recommended.

BURRATA: The creamy cousin to mozzarella. Burrata means “buttered.” This cheese has a mixture of cream and mozzarella curds in the center of each ball, and an outside layer of mozzarella that holds it together. It has a buttery, creamy flavor. Serve this cheese on its own as a first course or pair with olive tapenade or fresh or sun-dried tomatoes. It is also good wrapped with prosciutto or as a simple dessert drizzled with honey. Burrata is best eaten as fresh as possible.

CHEDDAR: The longer this cow’s milk cheese is aged, the sharper and more complex the flavor will be. Look for an aged cheddar for both cooking and eating. Cheddar cheeses are usually white to pale yellow.

FETA: Traditionally made from sheep’s or goat’s milk, feta is now made with cow’s milk, too. This white cheese is cured in brine, which accounts for its salty flavor. It is also slightly tangy and has a crumbly texture. Feta can range from soft to semidry. It is good in salads, pastas, and appetizers.

GOAT CHEESE: Domestic goat cheese is now readily available. Chèvre, or French goat cheese, is a bit stronger and more expensive. Fresh goat cheese is good served warm on salad or as an ingredient in cold salads and pasta sauces. Or try a log of fresh goat cheese coated in herbs as a dressed-up, simple hors d’oeuvre. As goat cheese ages, it becomes stronger and its character more pronounced.

MOZZARELLA: Fresh mozzarella is best used in salads and for cooking. It’s a popular ingredient in pizza and pasta dishes because of its excellent melting qualities. Fresh mozzarella usually comes packed in water and is available in several sizes, including ciliegine, which are little balls. They’re great in salads.

PARMESAN: Authentic Italian Parmesan, known as Parmigiano-Reggiano, is strictly licensed and has been produced in much the same way for almost seven hundred years. The cheese should be straw yellow in color and have a crumbly, moist texture. Look for the words Parmigiano-Reggiano stamped on the rind of the cheese. Store it in plastic in the refrigerator for up to 3 months. If it becomes dry, wrap it in moist cheesecloth and leave it in the refrigerator for a few hours. Then rewrap it in plastic. It’s best to grate Parmesan as needed for optimum flavor.

PECORINO ROMANO: An Italian hard sheep’s milk cheese that has a very sharp, pungent flavor. Aged pecorino ranges in color from white to pale yellow. Use it for grating for a stronger flavor than Parmesan.

PECORINO TUSCANO: A sheep’s milk cheese that is considerably milder than Pecorino Romano, Pecorino Toscano is made throughout Tuscany. It is similar to Parmigiano, though it’s a little creamier and has a distinctively bitter walnut undertone that balances its subtle sweetness, giving it added complexity. Aged Pecorino Toscano is also good cut into thin crumbly slices over foods. Try it with a sliced pear and a drizzle of orange honey or in any pasta dish that calls for Parmigiano-Reggiano.

PEPPER JACK: Like all Jack cheeses, it is a mild, semisoft cheese with a high moisture content. Pieces of chile peppers are added for a spicy flavor. (The cheese is sometimes named for its chile, such as

jalapeño Jack or habanero Jack.) The longer the cheese is aged, the hotter and spicier it becomes.

WHITE TRUFFLE CHEESE: This is a semifirm sheep's and cow's milk cheese studded with bits of white truffle. The earthy white truffles mingle nicely with the sweet and tangy flavor of the cheese. Try it in grilled cheese sandwiches, potato gratin, and in mac and cheese.

chocolate

The cacao content of chocolate is the percentage of the chocolate that comes from the cocoa bean. The cocoa bean contains cocoa butter and chocolate liquor. When the percentage of cacao is high, there is more chocolate liquor and less cocoa butter. Sugar is added to bittersweet and semisweet chocolate, but not to unsweetened chocolate.

COCOA POWDER: Choose a good quality unsweetened cocoa powder, such as Scharffen Berger. I like it for its delicate flavor. It's great for baking and making hot chocolate.

SEMISWEET AND BITTERSWEET CHOCOLATE: Semisweet chocolate is usually around 60 percent cacao. Bittersweet is 65 to 75 percent cacao. Make sure to store all chocolate in a cool, dark place. For semisweet or bittersweet chocolate, I use imported Valrhona or Callebaut, or domestic Scharffen Berger or Ghirardelli.

UNSWEETENED CHOCOLATE: It is 100 percent cacao and consists entirely of chocolate liquor, with no added sugar. It is used in baking in combination with sugar or another sweetener. I like Scharffen Berger, Baker's, or Hershey's.

WHITE CHOCOLATE: There is no chocolate liquor in white chocolate. It does contain cocoa butter, which is why it is called white chocolate. The flavor is very mild, sweet, and creamy. I like Ghirardelli or Lindt. Use white chocolate for baking cakes, cookies, and muffins.

citrus

A little juice and zest from lemons, limes, or oranges can really brighten up the flavors in a dish, such as steamed vegetables or split pea soup. In the spring, consider using Meyer lemons and blood oranges for a unique flavor and, in the case of blood oranges, a surprising splash of red. A simple wedge or twist of citrus can also make the perfect party garnish for drinks, entrées, and desserts. Always keep citrus fruits on hand because even if you don't use all of them, they make a fabulous centerpiece in a bowl.

condiments

CHILI SAUCE: A tomato sauce that usually includes onion, green pepper, sugar, vinegar, and spices. It's a tasty base for cocktail sauce or for serving with meat. It also makes a good Thousand Island dressing with the addition of mayonnaise.

CHUTNEY: A spicy-sweet condiment that contains fruit (such as mango), vinegar, sugar, and spices. It can be chunky or smooth, mild or hot. A chutney makes a great accompaniment to main dishes, cheese platters, and appetizers.

FIG COMPOTE: Made with dried figs, sometimes other dried fruits, sugar, and wine, this compote is delicious with Brie and prosciutto as a sandwich or appetizer.

KETCHUP: It's always good to have your favorite brand on hand.

MAYONNAISE: A great helper in making aioli. Try light mayonnaise for a creamy texture without all of the calories.

MUSTARDS

Keep these three different mustards on hand.

Dijon: Smooth, silky, and slightly tangy. Grey Poupon and Pommery are good brands.

Honey mustard: Make sure this has a base of Dijon mustard, not the ballpark variety.

Whole-grain mustard: Mustard with the hull of the mustard seed included.

TAPENADE: An olive spread that usually includes green or black olives, capers, anchovies, garlic, and olive oil. Add a tablespoon to mayonnaise or a vinaigrette for a Mediterranean touch.

cooking spray

A healthful alternative to oils and butter, cooking spray makes for easy cleanup and helps baked goods release from the pan.

ALL-PURPOSE: Great for keeping food from sticking to the grill or baking sheets.

BAKING: Made with flour, baking spray can replace the time-consuming and messy process of greasing and flouring baking pans and muffin tins.

OLIVE OIL: Helps you spray an even layer over bread, potatoes, vegetables, etc. so they can brown.

cream of coconut

Look for the Coco López brand. Cream of coconut is excellent in dessert sauces and cocktails.

dried fruits

Dried cranberries, cherries, apricots, figs, currants, and prunes are good pantry items to have in the winter months, when fresh fruit is not abundant. Use them to brighten up quick breads, muffins, sauces, rice, or stuffing. Dried cranberries, currants, and cherries can be used like raisins in baking and cooking. Plump them in boiling water or wine for about 20 minutes to bring out their full flavor.

dried mushrooms

Make sure mushrooms are tightly packaged. I like to use shiitake, porcini, or morels. To rehydrate the mushrooms, cover them with boiling water for 20 minutes before using.

figs

Fresh figs are available in the summer and fall months. Look for the deep purplish-black Black

Mission, yellowish-green Kadota, brownish-purple Brown Turkey, or pale yellow Calimyrna. Any of these varieties are excellent for cooking or eating raw. Refrigerate until using.

flour

ALL-PURPOSE FLOUR, UNBLEACHED: This is used in most cooking and baking.

BREAD FLOUR: Higher in gluten than all-purpose, bread flour is used for making bread, pizza, and flatbread.

SEMOLINA FLOUR: A hard durum wheat ground into flour, which is yellow in color. High in gluten, semolina is excellent for making breads as well as pasta.

fresh herbs

Fresh herbs don't last long. During the growing season, cultivating your own small herb garden is the most cost-effective way to ensure that you always have fresh herbs. Fresh herbs are wonderful in everything from soups to vegetables and can really brighten up a dish. Fresh flat-leaf parsley, basil, and thyme are some of the most versatile.

frozen foods

Frozen vegetables and premade dough can be a time-saver for parties, and your guests will never know that these ingredients came straight from the freezer. They are convenient to keep on hand because frozen foods last a long time.

BERRIES: When berries are not in season, you can substitute frozen berries instead of buying expensive imports. Add whole frozen berries to Champagne or mixed drinks for an elegant touch.

EDAMAME: Select shelled frozen edamame, which is the Japanese word for green soybeans. Microwave and salt them for a great party snack or add them to sauces, such as pesto, and salads.

ICE CREAM AND SORBET: I always have French vanilla and mango sorbet in my freezer for last-minute desserts. A scoop of vanilla ice cream on a warm dessert always pleases.

PEAS: Look for petits pois that have been frozen at their peak of freshness. I use these peas in rice, pasta, soups, and as the foundation for a puréed pea sauce.

PIZZA CRUST: Many grocery stores now carry good-quality frozen pizza dough. You may also find fresh ready-made pizza dough at your local pizzeria.

PUFF PASTRY: I always keep a package in my freezer. Keep it simple by using frozen puff pastry for petite hors d'oeuvres or desserts that will wow your guests.

fruit nectars

I like to use guava, apricot, or peach nectar for drinks and marinades because of their concentrated

flavor.

garlic

Prepeeled whole cloves of garlic is a great time-saver. For minced garlic, use a garlic press instead of chopping. Garlic is used in many cuisines, so is great to have on hand. Don't worry about the pungent flavor; garlic tends to mellow as it is cooked.

ginger

After you peel the ginger, you can shred or grate it or cut it into julienne strips. Do not substitute dried ginger for fresh.

grains and pasta

These are great to keep in your pantry because they will last a long time, and they can help make stellar hot or cold sides for parties any time of the year. Herbs, cheeses, and dried fruits and nuts are particularly good when tossed with the following grains and pasta.

ARBORIO RICE: This short-grain Italian rice is incredibly versatile. Arborio has a very high starch content, making it a favorite for preparing risotto. Other varieties like Vialone Nano or Carnaroli are also excellent. Risotto makes a great party food because it can be flavored in a variety of ways and made in large amounts.

BOMBA RICE: A Spanish short-grain rice that is recommended for making paella. It can absorb a great deal of liquid and still be perfectly cooked, with distinct grains.

ELBOW MACARONI: Best for making macaroni and cheese or Baked Greek Pasta ([page 102](#)).

ISRAELI COUSCOUS: These little balls made out of semolina and wheat flour are usually toasted and are slightly larger than other couscous grains. Choose regular or whole wheat.

ORZO: A variety of pasta shaped like large grains of rice. But unlike rice, it does not tend to stick together, making it a wonderful choice for cold pasta salads. Orzo is great when tossed with fresh herbs and can make the perfect side dish for meat or fish dishes.

QUINOA: A South American supergrain packed with nutrients. Quinoa is easy to prepare for crowds and has many uses. It is great served warm with meats and fish or cold in a salad, mixed with herbs and vegetables. Try cooking quinoa with vegetable or chicken broth instead of water to add extra flavor.

greek yogurt

Found in most well-stocked supermarkets, Greek yogurt is a thick and tangy plain yogurt. It makes a great marinade for chicken, lamb, or fish, and when combined with lemon and herbs, it makes a wonderful dipping sauce for crudités. Look for nonfat or 2 percent.

hoisin

A deep reddish-brown, thick, sweet and spicy sauce used in Chinese cooking. Hoisin sauce is made from soybeans, vinegar, garlic, sugar, chile peppers, and spices. It is available in jars in Asian markets and most supermarkets. It must be refrigerated once opened.

honey

There are many types of honey, and they vary in flavor and appearance. Some are thin while others are more like a firm paste. Honey can be white, golden, amber, brown, or even black. The most popular types are clover honey and orange blossom honey, both of which are suitable for cooking and baking. Look for lavender, sage, white truffle, or wildflower honey at specialty food stores and farmers' markets. These are wonderful drizzled on cheese and fruit. All honeys should be stored in tightly sealed containers, although eventually they will crystallize and harden with age. To soften the honey, place the jar in a bowl of hot water.

horseradish

Cream-style white horseradish is useful as a flavor enhancer for sauces, and it's also wonderful in Bloody Marys.

hot sauce

Just a little bit of heat can really add some spice to your party.

CHOLULA: Similar to Tabasco but with less vinegar, Cholula is good for adding heat to sauces, and it makes a great drizzle over egg dishes.

SRIRACHA: A Thai thick hot sauce that is great in dipping sauces and marinades.

TABASCO: A vinegary hot sauce that is perfect for adding heat to soups, chili, and many other dishes.

TABASCO CHIPOTLE: Chipotle peppers add a smoky flavor to this hot sauce, which can lend some depth to your sauces and barbecue foods.

maple syrup

Pure maple syrup gives a deep, complex sweetness to a variety of dishes, both savory and sweet. Try it in salad dressings, baked beans, nut tarts, plain yogurt, or warm cereal. I like using a good dark amber Grade B syrup for cooking, since the flavor is more intense than the lighter Grade A (which is best for pouring over pancakes). Look for pure maple syrup from producers in Canada, Vermont, or New Hampshire in specialty stores or online.

marzipan

A thick paste made of sugar and almonds. It is used in baking.

marinades

Marinades add flavor to whatever you're cooking. Most marinades are a combination of an acid—

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