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**EVERYTHING YOU
NEED TO IMPRESS
THIS FESTIVE
SEASON**



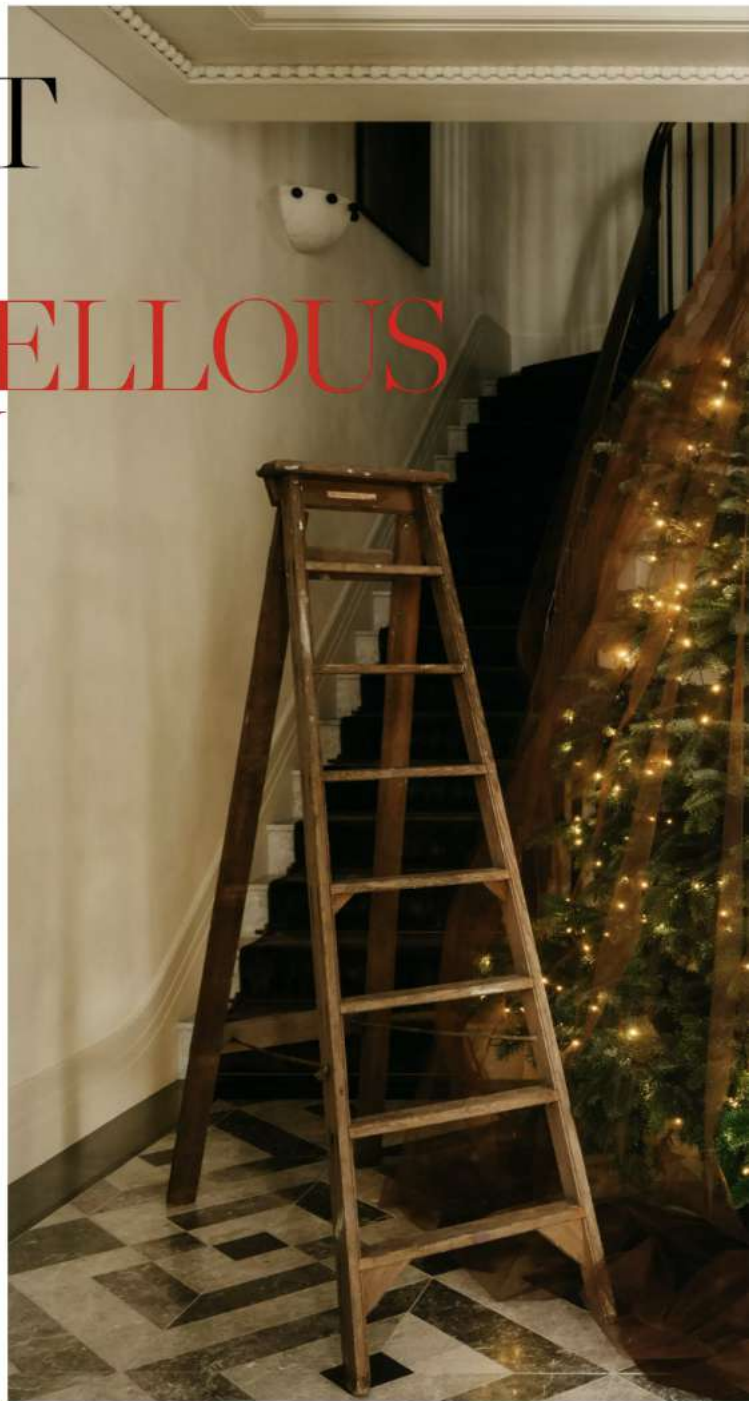
I WENT TO A MARVELLOUS PARTY

Are you ready to RSVP for a good time? This year's festive season promises to be more fabulous than ever before, with hosting advice from the hippest experts and decorating ideas from Alessandro Rabaioli of design studio Banda that break with tradition

WORDS CLARE SARTIN

PHOTOGRAPHY MARK ANTHONY FOX

'A simple Christmas tree with baubles and a star on top has been seen so many times – it's repetitive. Last year, I created a tree with a huge caramel velvet bow for Banda's Chelsea Barracks townhouse; it was the most-liked image on our Instagram, so we needed to elevate the concept again. This tree feels quite monastic, with a see-through chocolate-brown veil covering it. There are twinkling lights but no other adornments. It doesn't need anything else.' ▶







How to throw a 'scream' of a party

When it comes to making an event memorable, the advice of Rebecca Gardner, author of 'A Screaming Blast' and founder of Houses & Parties, is always gloriously extra

You don't have to make it to make it happen

It's thoughtful to serve at least one thing that comes from your kitchen, but it's no fun to be chained to the stove. Focus on what brings you joy and outsource the rest. Remember that very dull things are flattered by fine company – elegant goes with tacky and expensive with cheap.

Give them something to talk about

Popularity, fame and confidence be damned – people who don't know each other need an introduction and an icebreaker. My mother's party trick when things got too polite was to smear chocolate on her teeth and walk around talking to people as if she didn't know it was there.

Don't stay in one room all night

A change of location from cocktails to dinner or dinner to dancing sparks a sense of adventure and momentum. At a basic human level, moving en masse does something to us physically and spiritually. If you're bored, so are your guests.

It's important to curate the guest-list

A mix of people of different backgrounds and ages, with different personalities and fascinations is best. I tend to encourage guest-lists that are either very exclusive or very inclusive. Landing in the middle can hurt feelings.

Don't just be a great host – be the best guest

I'm more introverted than my profession might suggest, but I am a great guest. How to be a great guest? Bring something. A sense of humour. A fantastic pair of legs. An infectious laugh. A dynamic story. A wild opinion. Be more interested in others than you are in impressing them. 'A Screaming Blast: Exceptional Entertaining' by Rebecca Gardner, £35, Rizzoli (rizzoliusa.com, housesandparties.com).



Ways to set the mood with scents

The right aroma can do more to set the vibe than any canapé. Sable Yong, journalist and co-host of the 'Smell Ya Later' podcast, has one for every occasion



'Xtra Milk' incense, Dedcool

The ideal scent for a cosy, casual and fun gift exchange. Something that smells like a cartoon sleepover – musky, fluffy, marshmallow. £19 (dedcool.com).

'By the Fireplace' candle, Maison Margiela

Set the scene for a festive dinner party, with a luxurious cabin-in-the-woods feel of charred wood, incense and suede. £55 (selfridges.com).

'Jasmine Milk' candle, Mind Games

Light this during pre-drinks with friends before a holiday pub crawl. Its vibrant floral scent is like a shopping spree at a bougie boutique. Approx £100 (mindaamstrance.com).

'So Many Colors' diffuser refill, Pura x Dutjahn

Everyone else's house will smell like pine, but for family get-togethers, opt for something unique. This is warm, ambery and woody. £11, plus diffuser, from approx £40 (pura.com).


'Safari' candle, Nette

For a New Year's Eve house party, you need something earthy and sophisticated to cover up the smell of cigarette smoke wafting inside from the balcony. Approx £60 (nettenyc.com).



'How do you push the boundaries of what people think of as a Christmas tree? Our idea was to create a structure using 20 metres of olive-green crushed velvet (dead stock from the fashion industry) suspended from metal chains – it's a conceptual tree, more like an art installation. As gifts, we wrapped pears in beautiful silk and placed them beneath it. For the mantelpiece, meanwhile, we wanted to bring in a note of red as a more traditional nod to the festive season. My friend, floral artist Giulia Rinaldi of Croco Studios, created this mountain of anthuriums in a moody burgundy shade.' ▶



A photograph of a dining table set for breakfast. The table is covered with a white tablecloth and features a large stack of croissants in the center. There are several white coffee cups and saucers, along with glassware and silverware. The chairs are made of light-colored wood with a distinctive cutout design on the backrests. A modern chandelier with multiple shades hangs above the table. In the background, there is a wall with vertical slats and a white shelf with various decorative items.

"We have envisaged this breakfast table for the morning of Christmas Eve or the big day itself as a nod to the 1980s. Some people perceive this decade as kitsch, but we wanted to make it very chic. The way the napkins are placed in the glasses references retro styling ideas taken from the era's approach to hospitality – the tableware was even borrowed from a golf club (very Rivals) – while the colour palette is very fashion. This shade of butter yellow is the same that was seen on the catwalk at Jacquemus. The idea is to take something that could be quite unfashionable and make it cool. It's simple, but intentional and restrained."





What to dish up to make an impression

Nathaniel Mortley has gone from serving time at HMP Brixton to opening his first restaurant, 2210 in London's Herne Hill. His festive dishes similarly defy expectations...

Starter **Ackee and saltfish arancini with scotch bonnet aioli**
Bite-sized, festive and easy to prep, this is an Italian classic with Caribbean soul

Serves: 6-8

Ingredients

200g cooked saltfish (desalted), 150g canned ackee (drained), 1 small onion (finely chopped), 1 red bell pepper (diced), 1 clove garlic (minced), 1 tbsp thyme leaves, 300g cooked risotto rice (cooled), 50g Parmesan (optional), 2 eggs (1 beaten for mix, 1 for coating), 100g plain flour, 150g panko breadcrumbs, vegetable oil (for frying)

Aioli ingredients

150g mayonnaise, 1 small scotch bonnet (deseeded, finely chopped), 1 clove garlic (grated), 1 tsp lime juice, pinch of salt

Method

- 1 Sauté onion, garlic and red pepper. Add saltfish, ackee and thyme. Cool.
- 2 Mix with risotto rice, Parmesan and 1 egg. Form balls, chill.
- 3 Coat in flour, egg and then breadcrumbs. Fry at 170°C until golden.
- 4 Mix aioli ingredients and serve.

Main **Rum and pimento glazed duck with plantain purée and spiced jus**

This is an indulgent and festive dish – duck feels celebratory, especially balanced with sweet plantain

Serves: 4

Ingredients

4 duck breasts (skin on), 2 tbsp dark rum, 2 tbsp honey, 1 tsp ground pimento (allspice), 1 tsp soy sauce, salt and black pepper

Plantain ingredients

2 ripe plantains, 25g butter, 100ml coconut milk, pinch of salt, squeeze of lime

Jus ingredients

200ml chicken stock, 1 tbsp red wine vinegar, 1 tsp honey, ½ tsp ground ginger, ½ tsp allspice, 1 tbsp rum

Method

- 1 Score duck skin, cook skin-side down until crisp. Brush with glaze, roast at 200°C for 5-6 mins. Rest.
- 2 Boil plantain, then blend with butter, coconut milk and lime.
- 3 Reduce stock with vinegar, honey and spices. Finish with rum.
- 4 Serve duck sliced over purée with jus.

Dessert **Spiced sticky toffee pudding with rum caramel**

A comforting and familiar end to the meal, with a touch of spice and rum adding a festive lift

Serves: 6-8

Ingredients

200g dates (chopped), 200ml boiling water, 1 tsp bicarbonate of soda, 100g butter (softened), 150g dark brown sugar, 2 eggs, 200g self-raising flour, 1 tsp mixed spice, ½ tsp ground ginger, pinch of allspice

Caramel ingredients

150g caster sugar, 50g butter, 150ml double cream, 2 tbsp dark rum

Method

- 1 Soak dates in boiling water with the bicarbonate of soda, then mash.
- 2 Beat butter and sugar, add eggs. Fold in flour, spices, then mashed dates.
- 3 Bake at 180°C for 30-35 mins.
- 4 For the caramel, melt the sugar, then whisk in the butter and cream. Finish with rum.
- 5 Serve pudding warm with caramel sauce.



The best bottles to gift your host

Picking up a cheeky red from the supermarket on your way is poor form. Put in the effort with these suggestions from Jasper Delamothe, founder of Oranj Wines

Big Bunch Theory 'Go Together' Blanc 2022, Patrice Beguet Ideal for a hearty Sunday lunch on a chilly day, this playful natural white is a blend of Melon de Bourgogne, Chardonnay and Savagnin grapes. It's made with wild yeasts, minimal sulphur and a touch of skin contact (£37).

Crémant de Loire NV, Domaine de Veilloux Celebration is in the air at this time of year, so start your dinner party with this bright and vivacious crémant. It opens with lemon peel, brioche and a whisper of spice. On the palate, crisp acidity meets a creamy texture, delivering a mouth-watering surge of citrus and a clean, mineral finish (£33).

Radikon 2022, Slatnik A real treat from a truly iconic winemaker, this orange wine has a golden-amber glow in the glass. Opening with notes of incense, dried flowers, tangerine zest and a hint of fresh mint, it has a palate that's lush but taut – apricot and candied citrus dance over a mineral skeleton, with hints of spice and a delicate bitterness inviting further exploration (£49).

Family Reunion White 2016, Gut Oggau Super special, seductive and a little wild, this wine has notes of ripe pear, apricot and lemon peel, lifted by fresh herbs and flowers. As a result of a tricky harvest, Gut Oggau blended grapes that would usually stand alone, bringing them together to create one rare wine. Drink with comté cheese or cold cuts for an informal feast (£55).

Buisson Pouilleux 2022, Clos du Tue-Boeuf An old-vine sauvignon blanc, grown since 1950 from organic, granitic-limestone soils in Touraine, this wine is fermented with wild yeasts and aged on lees in old barrels. Expect a gentle richness, with lively acidity and a slightly wild edge typical of natural Loire whites (£36). All Oranj (oranj.co.uk)



The signature cocktail that will please everyone

Champion bartender Kaitlyn Stewart (the brains behind *Likeable Cocktails*) believes in beverage inclusivity – her new book *‘Three Cheers’* includes this classic tippie, tweaked to suit all tastes

The classic

French 75

1 ounce gin, juice of ½ a fresh lemon, ½ ounce simple syrup, 1 dash orange bitters, 3 ounces champagne, lemon twist

Method

In a shaker, combine the gin, lemon juice, simple syrup and orange bitters. Add cubed ice and shake vigorously for 10 seconds. Fine-strain into a flute and top with champagne. Garnish with lemon twist.

The riff

Eiffel 65

1 ounce gin, ½ ounce blue curaçao, ½ ounce lemon oleo-saccharum (lemon syrup), ½ ounce fresh lemon juice, 1 dash orange bitters, 2 ounces champagne, orange twist

Method

In a shaker, combine the gin, blue curaçao, lemon oleo-saccharum, lemon juice and orange bitters. Add cubed ice and shake vigorously for 10 seconds. Fine-strain into a coupe and top with champagne. Garnish with orange twist.

The zero-proof sip

The 1975

1 ounce spirit-free gin, ½ ounce acidified grapefruit juice, ½ ounce lemon oleo-saccharum (lemon syrup), 1 dash orange bitters, 3 ounces non-alcoholic sparkling wine, grapefruit twist

Method

In a shaker, combine the spirit-free gin, acidified grapefruit juice, lemon oleo-saccharum and orange bitters. Fine-strain into a flute and top with non-alcoholic sparkling wine. Garnish with grapefruit twist. *‘Three Cheers – Cocktails Three Ways: Classics, Riffs, and Zero-Proof Sips’* by Kaitlyn Stewart, £18.99, Random House (penguinrandomhouse.com).



How to create a fantastical floral display

This year, think beyond the usual wreath and garland. Kidge Flowers founder Katie Isitt shares advice and ideas for seasonal homes

Consider which spaces will make the most impact

It could be the room you'll be spending the most time in, or perhaps something that will make a big statement when guests arrive – a hanging installation or bannister decoration.

Sustainability should always be a consideration

Take into account what is around in nature at this time of year. While it might seem as though not much is growing, there are sculptural branches, evergreens and winter bulbs in abundance.

Think minimal with bare branches and ribbons

Suspend them from a ceiling, over a table or in a hallway. You can make something really bold and clashing or more pared-back and elegant by playing around with different textures and varieties of ribbon. Velvet is opulent, while silk speaks of elegance.

Choose something that will make an impact for the whole season

Clusters of amaryllis bulbs (a beautiful and seasonal option for indoors), planted in eye-catching containers, would start in bud and, if you time it just right, finish in blooms of vibrant colour around New Year's Eve.


Try a traditional style with a thoughtful twist

Swags of pine may be a Christmas-time staple, but they can look very chic when tied with ribbon and placed facing each way down the centre of a dinner table. For a special meal, embroider place names into the ribbon at each seat.

Fruit and veg displays create striking arrangements and pops of colour

Everyone loves a clementine during the festive season. Pile them up in contemporary shapes, grouped together with other spicy favourites – ginger, walnuts, star anise – to create a spectacular sculpture in your home (kidgeflowers.com).





'Inspiration was taken from Old Masters artworks and Flemish painters when styling this dessert table, with its generously draped cream fabric, the loose folds of which are accentuated by the purposefully dim light. There's an undone quality to the tableau, which encourages festive messiness. It's a composed scene, decadently dressed with silver tableware from Puffcoart, but it invites fun – spray champagne up the walls, grab your cake, eat it.' ▶





'What would the spread be like at the coolest New Year's Eve party? We pictured fries piled high on silver platters and ready-made martinis – it's elegant, classy and a little offbeat. The star of the show is the tablecloth: extravagantly draped silk in a shade of brown that looks like poured melted chocolate. Key to the display is the varying heights, which showcase the offerings, as well as a grand floral tail designed by us in-house – it contains more than 400 copper-coloured chrysanthemums.'

