Entertaining Etiquette

Party planning is tough enough without having to sort out proper etiquette techniques. No worries: Manners expert Melissa Leonard of Harrison has some tips. —E.N.

For the guest...
- Always exit your chair on the right side.
- Put your napkin on your chair if you have to excuse yourself.
- Flowers are a great gift to bring the host.
- If the invitation states a form of dress, stick to it.

For the host...
- Send invitations out at least four weeks in advance.
- Call guests that don't RSVP.
- If you don't want children at your party, say so.
- Ask if any of your guests have food allergies.

Delightful Dessert

Strawberry shortcake is a summertime favorite, but its popularity may mean your guests have eaten it numerous times already this season. Instead, try our scoop-up version. With all the original components—berries, pound cake, whipped cream—it looks traditional, but has a fresh new taste. —E.W.

Spiked Strawberry Shortcake
(14 servings)

Cream-cheese pound cake
1 1/4 cups butter
1 8-ounce package cream cheese
3 cups sugar
1 tsp. vanilla extract
6 eggs
3 cups cake flour

1. Preheat oven to 325 degrees. 2. Blend together butter, cream cheese, and sugar. Stir in vanilla extract. Add flour and eggs. Pour batter into a greased 10-inch tube pan. 3. Bake for 1 hour or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean. Let cool.

Vodka-Soaked Strawberries
1 lb. fresh strawberries (sliced)
1 cup Stolichnaya strawberry vodka
1/2 cup water
1/4 cup sugar
1/4 cup lemon juice

4. Place strawberries in bowl and stir in vodka, water, sugar, and lemon juice. Let soak overnight in refrigerator.

Vanilla Whipped Cream
(makes 2 cups)
1 cup heavy cream
1 tsp. vanilla extract

5. Pour cream into chilled bowl. Beat with a hand mixer until cream begins to thicken. 6. Add vanilla extract and beat until completely thickened. 7. Refrigerate. 8. When ready to serve, slice pound cake into 1/4-inch pieces. Cover with a spoonful of strawberries and dollop of whipped cream.

Brunch Basics

Getting together for summer brunch is a great way to catch up with friends. And unlike a birthday or dinner party, they're less formal and lighter on the prep work. Take advantage of the season's fresh fruits, vegetables, and herbs, says Avril Kaye, owner of Avril Kaye Inc. Caterers (118 Brook St.; Scarsdale; 472-7712). "Definitely make things with tomatoes, corn, and basil," she suggests. Although people will be expecting a variety of breakfast options, Kaye recommends serving less-egg-heavy dishes. "People have been going toward salad and grilled fish," she says. They hold well in the fridge, saving you valuable prep time. If you want to do traditional bagels or fruit, offer a variety. "Have a pitcher of plain yogurt that people can pour over fruit." Pies, tarts, and sorbets are perfect desserts and don't forget about drinks—bellinis, mojitos, and cosmopolitans go hand in hand with brunch. —D.K.