PLANNING A LAST-MINUTE DIWALI PARTY ON A BUDGET? **RAKHEE JAIN** HAS SOME TIPS AND TRICKS



It's that season of the year when we plan our weekends and evenings far more fastidiously than our weekdays and mornings. People across the country are celebrating the festivities with late-night parties, playing cards, and of course, guilt-free eating! Diwali revelry is usually accompanied with a lot of joy and excitement for majority of the people but it can also be an occasion of colossal stress for torpid party planners who love the idea of hosting memorable evenings, but have procrastinated for too long.

Here are a few DIY last-minute style tips to make your party stand out for epicureans like me, who believe that laughter is the brightest where food is the best. But before we style the food, having a clear vision of the evening is mandatory.

The importance of menu planning — past to present!

Let's start by talking about an era where an 8pm invite really did mean people turning up at 8pm. Hence menu planning for pre-Diwali home parties was quite undemanding and elementary in the late Nineties to even a decade ago. I'm not sure if people had discovered the joys of getting food catered in those days because the highlight of the evening was always maa *ke haath ka* khana where everything from the mezes to the main course was cooked at home and laid out consecutively on the dining table for everyone to break bread together (well mainly parathas and puris!!). Invariably it ended up being the same menu year after year which everyone looked forward to without protesting or kicking up a fuss!

However, times have changed and we have evolved, with bigger social circles as well as capacious appetites for an elaborate and diverse spread. We now live in the 'smart' age where for some unknown reason people feel it's fashionable and cool to be turning up late. An 8pm invite could mean people turning up anytime between 10pm and 2am as they party-hop. Hence ladling out fresh hot food can get quite tricky for the host. This is one time of the year catching up with friends daily and playing cards till wee hours of the morning is the norm. These parties are not time-bound, which also implies that the flow of food cannot be limited to certain hours only. For those of you who believe in cooking food at home, formatting a menu which keeps you out of the kitchen and continues to excite the taste buds of your guests through the long hours is imperative. To cope with these new party trends one has to give up antiquated methods and embrace the new formulas.



Alcohol-infused welcome drink shots in test tubes



Canapes like mini kebabs on slate

Choice of cuisine — old is gold!

So the question as to what we can serve our new and evolved guests, sits like the elephant in the room. Choosing a global cuisine ranging from the most trending Sri Lankan and Filipino food to our good old pan-Asian recipes to pamper our guests is absolutely splendid. The only drawback of serving non-Indian food is that most of the dishes in these menus cannot be pre-cooked or re-heated. It works without a hitch if we are hiring a special team of culinary experts to be on their toes to cater freshly prepared modern recipes that keep everybody drooling through the night. The main advantage with this recourse is that the chefs overtake the kitchen, making the lady of the house redundant. It's a relatively hassle-free option that can be a little impersonal apart from being pricey.

When stuck in a last-minute situation without huge budgets, my personal recommendation would be to be in your comfort zone,



Desserts like laddoo in clear-glass candle tube



Lollipop-style tikka in tiny glass bottles



Black dal and naan in martini glasses garnished with dry lamb

Biryani stuffed in *kulhars*



Yogurt-laced chaats on miniature acrylic chairs

which for most of us is Indian food. This is because it doesn't involve a calculative process when it comes to cooking it. It's something where we know what's right and is second nature to all households in the country. The other perks being, we have most of the ingredients at home and are able to fix any snag with ease. We have the recipes and flavours ingrained in our system, it's almost like typing without looking at the keyboard. It's complicated yet it's simple but the best part about serving Indian is having the option to pre-cook and reheat closer to serving as the flavours and spices continue to soak into the dishes.

Style of service — change is the only constant!

We all live in an era that thrives on hands-free mobility. Convenience is supreme. It's important to apply these simple contemporary concepts to our everyday lives, including our parties. Gone are the days where home parties meant holding heavy plates piled up with food at dinner time. People now prefer socialising around the bar or playing cards at the poker table. Holding a drink in one hand and eating a quick bite from the other seems to be the most convenient way of dining at Diwali parties. Sometimes to solve a new problem one has to make new rules. So I highly recommend expunging ancient system of elaborate buffets and cumbersome sit-down dinners and incorporating the refreshing style of serving 'flying buffet' this season.

Hands-free dining is an interesting concept where bite-size food is served in mini portions at regular intervals for easy, hassle-free consumption. The menu can have piping hot kebabs to cold chaats. The food comes to the guests rather than the other way round. Equal emphasis should be given to presentation as is given to the taste to bring out the individuality of each dish. I suggest incorporating a 12- to 15-course menu with assorted items served at different hours to avoid repetition.

To give you an example, the menu could include alcohol-infused welcome drink shots in test tubes, warm soup garnished with bread in espresso cups, hand-pick canapes like mini kebabs on slate, lollipop-style tikka in tiny glass bottles, yogurt-laced chaats on miniature acrylic chairs, dollops of paneer parcels in tasting spoons, main course like black dal and naan in martini glasses garnished with dry lamb, biryani stuffed in *kulhars* (terracotta pots) otherwise found on roadside tea stalls, desserts like laddoo in clear-glass candle tube and so on and so forth.

All these pretty and inexpensive individual dishes can be easily sourced through online portals like Amazon. It's a perfect opportunity to kill two birds with one stone where you showcase your creativity with your culinary skills while the constant flow of the bite-size surprises keep people entertained and satiated. It gives them a topic of conversation while enjoying the out-of-the-box display and curation of the same old recipes.

In conclusion...

On a more positive note, breaking the stereotype always makes planning a party more exciting, and when budgets are limited, what we don't do is as important as what we do. I couldn't agree more with the British gastronomical genius Heston Blumenthal who says "food is as much about the moment, the occasion, the location, and the company as it is about the taste!" We Indians love to cook, love to eat and love to feed. Keeping all of the above in mind, I would highly recommend all the eleventh hour party planners to opt to plate up something stress-free that they can serve comfortably.

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