

Eco-parties to make your chums green with envy

Carey Sweet, Special to The Chronicle

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Not so long ago, hosting a green holiday party meant tacking up extra mistletoe.

Today, with environmental consciousness at the forefront, a green soiree brings more intimidating implications - serving organic and sustainable food and drink, using recyclable or biodegradable cutlery, and perhaps even tossing in tricks like nonpolluting music (yes, there really is such a thing).

Yet pulling off an earth-friendly party need not be worrisome. It's easy to impress guests with thoughtful entertaining that promotes good cheer along with good practices.

Just ask Kelin Backman, co-owner of Clementine Eco Events, a 15-month-old Petaluma company that, Backman says, specializes in "eco-fabulous events that are mindful of environment and community." Or check in with Danielle Venokur, owner of dvGreen, an Earth-themed event design and production firm in New York.

When Venokur founded dvGreen two years ago, not many people were familiar with the idea of a sustainable event. That's changed dramatically, she says, but "still, they are a bit confused about what's involved - how do I compost my leftovers, what is an eco-friendly candle?"

For others, a green gala may be second nature. Zem Joaquin, owner of Ecofabulous.com, a San Francisco online source for "sexy" eco-friendly products, identifies her largest clientele as younger than 35, for whom sustainable shopping is a way of life.

When self-titled eco-citizens Suzanne and Ted King of Forestville hosted their wedding and reception this June, for example, they went green from invitations to party favors, and vowed to "continue (their) green and sustainable practices together as husband and wife."

"It was actually easier, in a sense, to go green," said Suzanne, who reduced the need for paper by offering her event details on a custom Web site. "We were focused on what we wanted, and this helped us with choices. If a caterer wasn't willing or able to use local, sustainable food, we knew we didn't need to interview him. Everything we chose, from musicians to wine, came from Sonoma County."

Shopping, eating local



For Healdsburg caterer and event planner Mateo Granados, green parties come naturally, he says. "That is, without really trying." Whether he's planning a black-tie event at a posh winery, a backyard barbecue or one of the picnics he stages at North Bay farmers' markets each weekend, his menus are crafted from what is seasonal and fresh from within a 100-mile radius. He sources his boutique ingredients from his long-established relationships with local farmers and purveyors, and by shopping at the same farmers' markets where he hosts food booths.

As a new trend based on old customs, Granados likes whole animal roasts such as baby suckling pig, lamb or fish. Using the entire creature means less waste, and offers a warmly communal gathering.

Fish can be particularly challenging to source as sustainable, but the Blue Ocean Institute, a nonprofit marine conservation organization, maintains a list of safe species, available at www.blueocean.org or sent as a text to your phone via its www.fishphone.org.

Desserts also can be green, such as the organic Champagne or dark chocolate cakes created by Da Bombe Desserts of Rohnert Park. Owner Jenna Cook set up shop last year in Sonoma Mountain Village, advertised as the largest green community in the country. She partners with Planet Organics, a Sonoma delivery service that provides such green goodies as lemon-dill sauerkraut, organic buffalo and ostrich, and fresh Dungeness crab.

Party accessories

To serve it all, turn to corn-based cups, potato starch cutlery and sugarcane plates. Backman gets hers from thegreenoffice.com of San Francisco.

Earth-friendly wines are increasingly available, such as the certified organic Preston Vineyards Sauvignon Blanc from Dry Creek Valley that the Kings served at their reception and is a favorite of Granados. A bonus: Organic wine does not last as long as traditional wines when uncorked, so you'll just have to finish the bottle. Plus, no added sulfites (used as a preservative in regular wine) means gentler hangovers.

For the harder stuff, Joaquin recommends VeeV (a new, acai fruit liqueur from Brazil), or Square One Organic Vodka (up the stylish ante by making a peppermint martini, finished with an organic candy cane swizzle).

Green is hip, so don't be afraid to be wacky, Venokur says. She suggests giving parting gifts of compact fluorescent lightbulbs with a card reading "May Your Holidays Be Bright and Your Year Filled with Light."

And eco-music? Play tunes from downloads, which keep hard-to-recycle polyvinyl chloride CD jewel cases out of the waste stream.

On the downside, sustainable celebrations can get pricey. Venokur estimates that a fully green commitment can cost 10 to 15 percent more than a regular party.

His food is premium, Granados acknowledges. "It is more expensive than what you might find offered on a year-round catering menu using ingredients from mass-produced outlets." But in the end, "this is a decision based on more than economics."

And remember that parties are meant to be pleasurable for the host, too.

"We actually had a lot of fun with the planning because we felt good about what we were doing," said Suzanne King. "We enjoyed creating an experience for our guests that was meaningful and reflected our personal style. It feels good to support small businesses and people who are doing positive things in the community."

Find out what factors to consider when shopping for sustainable gifts this season. **F3**

Once you've purchased your gifts, how do you wrap them stylishly without adding waste to landfills? **F3**

Party tips

Here are tips for festivities with minimal environmental impact and maximum holiday cheer:

Invitations: Use recycled paper or reuse vintage postcards. Or send plantable cards embedded with wildflower seeds (www.botanicalpaperworks.com). And if it's a fancier affair that demands response cards, be creative. Suzanne and Ted King made table assignment cards out of theirs, decorated with bits of cork. "But if your holiday party is more hip and fun, then e-mail invitations are the most eco-friendly way to go," says Danielle Venokur. "Rather than an Evite (www.evite.com), why not create a custom design on your computer and e-mail it?"

Food presentation: Spice up service, says Venokur, by asking the local nursery or Christmas tree farm for pretty pieces of wood to use as serving platters. Caterer and event planner Mateo Granados bores holes in an old wine barrel rib, then presents fried tortilla "cones" of crab, avocado and radish tucked into the holes.

Drink: Tap into tap water, using a home water filter. According to green resource Web site idealbite.com, on average, tap water costs \$0.0015 per gallon, while a 16-ounce bottle can cost \$2 at the convenience store, and as much as 40 percent of bottled water comes from city water systems anyway. Further, Americans consume more than 2.5 million bottles of water every hour, and only about 10 percent are recycled.

Decor: Use live Christmas trees, for planting later. Display soy or beeswax candles instead of paraffin, which uses oil resources. Granados likes to decorate with seasonal garden bounty, such as winter centerpieces of persimmons and scattered golden-red grape leaves.

Dress: The Kings and some guests purchased designer wear on Craigslist and eBay for a fraction of the cost, plus selected clothes that could be worn at other functions.

Gifts/party favors: The Kings requested purchasing carbon offsets on their gift registry, while Granados offers edible favors with mini bottles of his El Yuca Mayan habanero sauce made of Sonoma County chiles and Preston Vineyards olive oil.

Cleanup: Disposable tubs and plastic bags clog landfills. Use non-staining, reusable ceramic and glass containers instead. For refuse, Backman works with a nonprofit in Cloverdale, the Compost Club, which has a sophisticated system that can even compost dairy and meat.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/12/14/LVQC14F6JO.DTL>

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