



Dining Under the Stars

ENTERTAINING FRIENDS AND
FAMILY OUTDOORS BY MOLLY WATSON

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In the summertime, when the scorching heat of the day lingers well into evening, the balmy weather beckons us to enjoy our meals outdoors.

"If you live in California, you're crazy if you don't entertain outdoors in the summer," says Sally Van Slyke from Wild Thyme Catering in Walnut Creek. "Why else do we pay all this money for land with beautiful weather if we're not going to use it?"

The key to outdoor entertaining, according to both Van Slyke and Gloria Atherstone of Glass Onion Catering in Berkeley, is simply to schedule the entire event outside. They suggest doing whatever you can to keep yourself and your guests, who like to congregate in the kitchen, outdoors. This means bringing everything you'll need (coolers, tubs of ice, extra tables and chairs) outside in advance, and in essence, designating an outdoor kitchen.





Candlelight dinners are no longer relegated to indoor dining rooms. East Bay home owners take advantage of the magnificent views of rolling hills and warm evenings to dine outdoors.



LIGHT AND BRIGHT

- Candlelight is great for adding ambiance, but doesn't necessarily provide enough light for everyone to see their food. Add a beautiful (and useful) glow with battery-powered paper lanterns or electric, rechargeable lights in a variety of shapes and colors.
- Shoo away those pesky bugs by using pretty striped citronella torches available at many home stores.
- For a burst of color and easy clean-up, use brightly printed oil cloth (no need to hem it, just cut with pinking shears) to cover your tables.

To do this, Atherstone advises that you “have 150 percent of everything done ahead of time. Have meats marinated, appetizers assembled and salads ready to toss.” To do this, you must choose a menu that lends itself to advance preparation and outdoor cooking.

Those with outdoor built-in kitchen equipment will have less strategizing to do. For those who will be working from a simple grill in the backyard, it's best to create a menu that balances grilled food, salads and dishes that are cooked ahead of time and served slightly warm or at room temperature.

For entertaining purposes, Atherstone suggests setting up a seating area that doesn't focus only around the dinner table. Think outdoor living room: Encourage your guests to relax by bringing a lower table outside and group chairs around it. Or go a step further and set up a fire pit or contained stove to create an inviting hearth. This will guarantee a party well into the evening, even as the cool nighttime wind picks up.

Whatever kind of seating you create, the experts suggest keeping them close together. “Parties are not terrifically successful if they are too spread out,” Van Slyke says. “People want to be close and kept together.” They also want to be near the food, a lesson Atherstone has learned the hard way. “I've given up trying to seat people away from the food and drink, it's where everyone ends up anyway!” she says. This is especially true for small dinner parties.

If your gathering includes children, Atherstone recommends setting up a designated kids' area with a fun activity — tools in a sand box, outdoor art projects like painting — that will keep them busy and allow their parents to relax.

Whether you're just heading out to the yard with the family or inviting a crew over for weekend fun, make use of the land, enjoy the weather, and bring it all outside. ■

RESOURCES

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