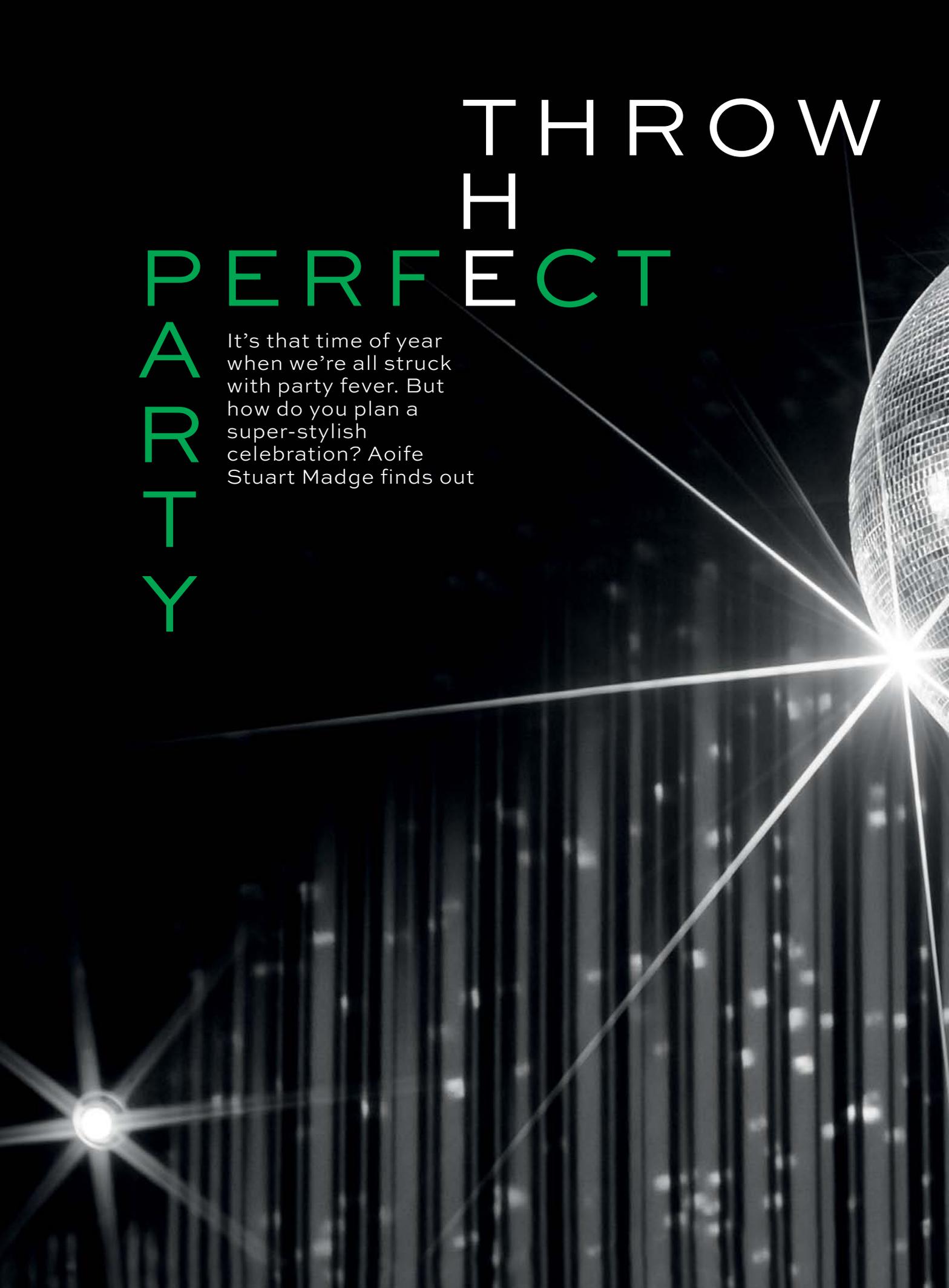


# THROW H PERFECT

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It's that time of year when we're all struck with party fever. But how do you plan a super-stylish celebration? Aoife Stuart Madge finds out





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osting a memorable night doesn't have to mean blowing a stack of cash and spending the evening slaving over a hot stove. We rounded up the region's party experts –

foodies, musos and event planning whizzes – to share their secrets on pulling off the perfect festive bash. From invite etiquette to last-minute canapés, they've got you covered. With the pressure off, all that's left for you to do is party like a rock star.

### PLAN IN ADVANCE

"Don't fall into the trap of thinking the host shouldn't have fun at their own party; if you don't, it's pointless," says Anna Frankowska, CEO of Party Hype, a new party and nightlife app. "So get the bulk of the planning sorted in advance, leaving you free to fix any unforeseen setbacks and to mingle with the guests."

### ROPE IN OUTSIDE HELP

"It's fine to ask a few close friends to come over early and help you out with preparations," says Anna. "With the right people prep isn't a chore and the anticipation of the party, along with the camaraderie of putting it all together, is exciting. Plus you'll all be there when guests start arriving, which avoids any initial awkwardness. I tend to have a small group of friends join me before a party, who talk to absolutely anybody, engaging people and making them feel welcome from the moment they arrive."

### CONSIDER THE AMBIENCE

"The right decor can change the ambience of a room completely and transport your guests to another world, turning a normal living room into 1950s New York, or your garden into Eden. Whether it's an intimate dinner party or a crazy house party, lighting is key. Even with a house brimming with guests, a soft, flattering light puts people at ease, rather than feeling like they're in a dentist's chair," adds Anna.

### REFINE THE GUEST-LIST

"Parties are all about the people. If your guest-list isn't right, your party isn't going to flow," says Anna. "Invite a wide range of personalities to the party, the more varied the better. But don't bother with people you know will be judgemental, who aren't open to meeting new people, or who make you or any of your guests uncomfortable in any way."

### LAY A QUIRKY TABLE

"There has been a shift in entertaining serving styles towards sharing platters – they are an easy ice breaker for guests and are used more widely now," says Lucy Townsend, founder of Wilds catering. "As for setting the table, do not be afraid to try something different: brushed gold cutlery makes a beautiful addition to any festive party. Symmetry has been a huge trend this



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year, so invest in some geometric-patterned crockery as a welcome break from traditional patterns. No table is set without candles, and a gold-plated candleholder can make an understated centre piece."

### PREP THE NIGHT BEFORE

"I have spent too much time over the years in the kitchen and not enough time enjoying the celebrations, so now I try to do as much as possible the night before, like preparing vegetables and meats for roasting," says Lucy. "Chutneys and dips can be displayed in beautiful dishes and refrigerated ahead of time. I also take shortcuts like using disposable trays on the big day, as this will drastically reduce the amount of washing up!"

**"YOU WILL ALWAYS GET PEOPLE WHO THINK THEY CAN DO A BETTER JOB WITH THE MUSIC"**

### COOK AHEAD

"I'm definitely into dishes that can be prepared ahead of time, such as quiche," says Dubai-based food writer Sally Prosser, from [mycustardpie.com](http://mycustardpie.com). "Consider well-behaved recipes that won't suffer if they aren't eaten immediately like rice-based salads with nuts, and dried and fresh fruit. My failsafe sharing dish is an enormous pot of chilli with sour cream and either rice or baked potatoes. I make a vegetarian version too so everyone can tuck in. A huge cheese board makes a great centrepiece and looks a bit bacchanalian if you festoon it with bunches of grapes and figs," says Sally.

### GO-TO CANAPÉS

"A great fail-safe canapé is button mushrooms stuffed with some soft, melty cheese like Fontina. Pop on to a baking tray and into a preheated oven (180°C) for 10-15 minutes," says Sally. "Alternatively, for a healthy light bite try cubed watermelon with some feta cheese sprinkled with a bit of black pepper. I also like red peppers cut in half, drizzled with olive oil and roasted with cherry tomatoes and black olives inside."

### BE A FRUIT AND NUTCASE

"I always have pre-cut vegetables, a wide variety of delicious seasonal fruit and a healthy selection of nuts ready in the fridge or pantry for guests to eat. I love making fruit platters, which are definitely a crowd pleaser," says Dubai-based food blogger Zahra Abdalla from [cookingwithzahra.com](http://cookingwithzahra.com).



### KEEP THE MENU SIMPLE

"I favour one-pot meals that are fuss-free and easy to clean after," says Zahra. "When I have a small dinner party, my one-pot roasted chicken and vegetables with a large side of green salad is an absolute hit."

### GO WITH A THEME

"I love hosting themed parties: I find it easier to create a fun menu. Recently, I hosted a pizza party and my guests loved it. You can rent an outdoor wood burning pizza oven to make delicious homemade pizza," adds Zahra. "For starters, you can serve mini calamari cones, mini Caprese salad skewers and quinoa salad shooters. For dessert, you can make mini tiramisu cups, mini fruit salad

cups and mini panna cotta cups."

### GET PERSONAL

"Personalised food always goes down well. Put a gingerbread man or woman by everyone's place which has been iced with their name. Or you could serve them for dessert and get the men to give the women theirs and vice versa," suggests Sally.

### CURATE YOUR PLAYLIST

"Forget your iPod on shuffle, it's better to have a party set list prepared so you can play the right music at the right time," says Dubai-based DJ Miss P.M. "Music is very important to set the mood. It's your



job to make sure that the crowd enjoy the music that is being played. Unless you know your guests share an eccentric and eclectic taste in music, steer clear of skippable, quirky tracks or slow-tempo numbers. You don't want your crowd left baffled in the middle of the dance floor while you're playing niche tunes," says Miss P.M.

### DON'T PEAK TOO SOON

"Nobody really comes to a party at 8pm already set to jump around on the dance floor. People like to socialise first, get some drinks, and ease into the party. Play some warm up tracks first and don't make the mistake of dropping big room tracks early on thinking that the crowd will go straight from the door to the dance floor," says Miss P.M.

### READ THE CROWD

"You will always get one or two people who think they can do a better job with the music and will hand over their phones and demand that you play their playlist," says Miss P.M. "The key is to be prepared. Try and anticipate what kind of crowd will be there and what sort of music would fit their tastes. It's all about crowd reading. And if you get some requests, try to accommodate if it fits the theme and if you do have the tracks."

### NIX THE NICHE STUFF

"If you do want to play a niche genre, like country, it can work over dinner as background, but know that before long your guests are going to want the classics like

Michael Jackson," says DJ Sister Rock. "The odd quirky track is fine – things like *Gangnam Style* usually go down well later in the night!"

### SURPRISE YOUR GUESTS

"My personal style is like a jukebox: I keep it fresh and play a 1980s track next to Frank Sinatra, then RnB. It works, as the dance floor doesn't get bored. You want to play sing-along songs and have people surprised at the next choice and enjoying themselves. Play anything that's charted," says Sister Rock. 

## GUEST ETIQUETTE 101

### RSVP promptly

"Whether an invitation is an informal text or a formal printed card, it is essential as a guest that you RSVP promptly. It allows for your host to plan accordingly. Once you have committed to attending an event, you should only cancel due to illness, not because you received a better offer," says etiquette expert Jo Bryant ([jobryant.com](http://jobryant.com)). Jo adds, "And never turn up with an unexpected plus-one."

### Give a realistic ETA

"If you are running late, give your host a true ETA and, if possible, call rather than text so they can get information quickly without dealing with a string of text messages," says Jo. "Never arrive early as you may embarrass your host while they are rushing around doing some finishing touches."

### Be smart with your phone

"Check with your host before posting pictures from the party online, especially for a small gathering when other people might digitally discover that they weren't invited," says Jo. "Smart phones are a no-no at the dinner table; the people you are with should have your attention, not your technology. If you have an urgent communication, excuse yourself and check your phone away from the table."