

Gifts *and* Guests

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*A*s the holiday invitations roll in, spread your own brand of cheer by being a thoughtful guest and bringing a token of your appreciation for your host's hard work. Flowers are always nice, but for a special treat consider bringing joy to your host's world with an irresistible, edible gift. Put your culinary creativity to work with these delectable delicacies and you'll be sure to score a return invitation next year:

* Fill cellophane bags with cookies, candies, nuts or dried fruits. Attach a gift tag with a festive ribbon. * Cookies or other sweets can be presented in decorative tins or small gift boxes lined with colorful tissue paper and tied with ribbon. For an added touch, loop the ribbon through one or two small Christmas tree ornaments or holiday-themed cookie cutters before attaching to your tin or box. * Make delicious compound butters by adding fresh herbs like tarragon, dill or chives to softened butter. Spread the mixture into clear glass jars and cover the tops with brightly colored fabric or wrapping paper. Use string or ribbon tied to a small butter knife to hold the fabric or paper in place. Create a personalized label to identify your tasty treat and place it on one side of the jar. This is also an excellent way to package

homemade jams or preserves. * Infused vinegars will add a splash to your host's pantry, whether spicing up vinaigrettes or used as marinades. Add white wine vinegar to tall glass bottles until they're three-quarters full. Complete your gift by adding fruits like raspberries, blueberries or orange slices. For savory vinegar, add whole peppercorns or fresh herbs. Seal the bottles with corks or screw-on tops. * Consider including the recipe for your offering as part of the gift. You can print it neatly on a card or use your computer to make a sticker that can be applied to the tins or boxes. Your host can decide whether to serve your gift during the party or to save it for later. * All you need to do is arrive on time and to remember that the host with the most deserves the best guest.



A good host deserves good guests

Food Network Kitchens

*d*on't forget to R.S.V.P. promptly. Your host will need to count guests, shop and prepare food ahead of time. If you would like to bring a guest, clear it with the host when you respond to the invitation.

* Call a couple of weeks before the party to ask what you can bring. * Dress for the occasion. If you are uncertain about appropriate attire, don't be afraid to ask. * Bringing flowers? It's a beautiful gesture, but go a step further and present them in a container that's ready for display. That way you don't occupy the host's time with snipping stems and searching for a suitable vase. * The kitchen tends to be the hub of most parties we've hosted. When preparing a large party, some hosts need space to concentrate, while others like to have their guests in the kitchen to lend a hand and keep them company. If your host looks frazzled, ask if you can do something to help. If your host says no, join the others in another room of the party. If the answer is yes, roll up your sleeves and assist. * Bring your food contribution in a dish in which it can be presented. It saves time and ensures that the host won't run out of serving vessels. If desired, go one step further and bring your dish in a vessel you can leave with your hostess. An attractive casserole dish or cheese board are nice ways to minimize her work and to say thank you. * If you bring something that requires reheating, bring it in something microwavable. That way, you can save room in the stove for the host and minimize kitchen traffic. * If coasters are provided, use them. * Come hungry. Preparing a holiday meal is hard work. Part of the reward is seeing your guests indulge themselves. * Make your mother proud and offer to help clean up.

