

# San Antonio Express-News

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## How to host the perfect party

There's nothing like having a few friends over to celebrate the holiday season by breaking bread and enjoying each other's company. The warm chatter, the good food, the cheer and brotherhood — memories are made of this.

But if, instead, your gatherings are stilted, awkward affairs where you're stressed from running late and you barely get to talk with your guests because you're stuck in the kitchen all night cooking, then you need to read this, and you need to know the name Leland Stone.

Leland Stone is the man with the party plan. No, for reals, y'all. He has his party throwing down to such an exact science



**EMILY SPICER**

*The Spice of Life*

that he has a preparty organization checklist — with pictures — and it is *very* detailed.

Stone has the advantage of a house full of trained staff, including a chef, and they certainly make party setup easier. But he actually trains staff for others as part of his job, which also includes selling and sourcing luxury architectural fix-

**mySA**

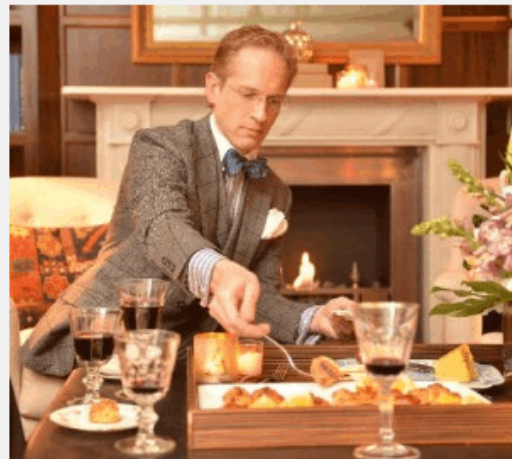
**Slideshow:** For more photos, go to [mySA.com/SpiceOfLife](http://mySA.com/SpiceOfLife).

tures, as well as some design work and general house-problem-solving, all through his company, Stone Standard.

So should you trust Stone when he says it's actually an imposition and disrespectful to the host to bring wine or flowers to a dinner party? Yes, you should. (See the note at the end for why this is so.)

And you should definitely follow his advice when it comes to how to throw a great shindig and make your guests feel comfortable in your home.

*Spicer continues on D3*



Stone serves appetizers to guests before dinner.  
(Robin Jerstad / For the San Antonio Express-News)

**SPICER**

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"I live the way I preach," Stone said. "I'm not someone who tells people to do something that I haven't done."

For him, the best part of a party is the conversation, so he makes sure all the party elements work together to provide a setting that inspires that. To demonstrate, he recently threw a dinner party at the home of his friends, Jeff and Andrea Almond Sibley, and invited me along (I am such a lucky lady!).

**The basics**

▶ There should be music, preferably something without many words, and it should play loud enough to provide a mood, but not so loud as to drown out conversation.

▶ There should be soft light from dim lamps and candles providing a warm glow from a variety of angles in the room.

▶ The host or hosts should stick with their guests all night — even during course changes at the dinner table. A host's job is to manage the guests, and thus, the evening. Provide introductions, interject to steer clear of possibly rocky topics, start a new topic when conversation ebbs.

As a host, you must make sure the evening is going according to *your* plan.

"It's your play, and the actors have to do what you want or they won't be cast in those roles," Stone said. But to achieve that, you have to be a good director.

**Then the details**

▶ Anticipate guests' arrival needs. If it's cold, have a plan to stow coats and bags. If it's a pre-announced gift-giving occasion, where will the gifts go? A cocktail should be close at hand upon arrival so guests can sip and mingle.



Photos by Robin Jerstad / For the Express-News

Guests dine under a candelabrum at a recent dinner party hosted by Leland Stone at the home of friends.

▶ As you greet guests, make sure they have a party road map and a starting point. "So good to see you. Help yourself to a drink there. We'll begin dinner/have a special toast at 8. In the meantime, do try the cheeses here. And you must meet so-and-so here; you have so much in common."

(I have taken some liberties with the script, but the ideas are solid Stone.)

Stone likes utilizing butler trays as serving stations at his events and said there's nothing wrong with letting guests serve themselves a drink. It's also nice to designate an area (likely the living room) for small appetizers and pre-dinner mingling, with small appetizer plates prepared by the host for each guest. Progression to dinner is signaled when you move into the dining area.

Stone recommends about an hour between arrival and dinner.

**How to serve dinner**

This really depends on the size of the group and whether

you have any help. Let's assume you're on your own.

A good, basic meal can be done in three courses: salad, entrée, dessert.

For smaller groups:

▶ Clear out your fridge and pre-plate your salads and store them there. Leave the dressing on the side; pass that around at the table, just please pour them into something pretty first.

▶ Have a braised dish or hearty soup already simmering on the stove. For sides, roasted veggies are good and can sit for a while in a warm (not hot) oven. Clear the salad plates, transfer the entrée into a lovely tureen or serving dish, same with the sides, and pass them around the table family-style.

▶ Dessert can be as simple as a bowl of good chocolates passed around and some more wine.

▶ Have wine bottles and bottles of cold water on the table or close at hand throughout the meal so guests can help themselves.

For larger groups:

▶ Stone swears by buffets. But again, you want to stay with



Stone pre-plates salads and keeps them cold in the refrigerator until serving. Dressing is served on the side.



Vegetables that can be kept warm in the oven, such as sautéed Brussels sprouts with sliced carrots, are good to have on the menu.

your guests, so have as much of the food already set on a serving dish and warming so all you have to do is set it out.

And even though it's your play, you're not the star; your guests are.

For Stone, few things can top a good party, regardless of the size. For him, parties not only honor your guests, but also your home.

"A home with candles and the smell of roast chicken and guests and lights, that energy stays with your home," he said. "And the memories of the awkward moments and the fun, to me those memories stay in those spaces. And so all of a

sudden, your home almost becomes this person who has a life. Your home is happier because you gave back."

Well, I am much happier for having had a gorgeous dinner with Leland Stone and some of his lovely friends. Many, many thanks.

What are your go-to strategies or food options for a great party? Email me the details along with your daytime contact number and be sure to include photos!

**Note:** Bringing something to a non-gift-giving party means the very busy host has to drop everything and deal with it. And if the host doesn't, the guest may feel offended. Flowers? Suddenly a vase needs to be found; they may not go with the décor, etc. Wine? If it's more expensive than what's being served, the guest may feel offended if it's not poured; less expensive, and the host may feel miffed.

The best is to send a gift before a party or after. And a nice thank you note is always appreciated.

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