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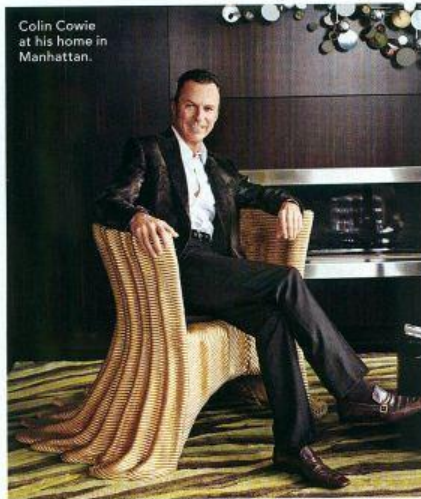
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## UNCONVENTIONAL WISDOM



Colin Cowie at his home in Manhattan.

# Cowie on Holiday Entertaining

Eggnog and mistletoe are fine traditions, but sometimes a holiday party needs a novel spin. Party planner extraordinaire Colin Cowie is never short of ideas; he is as adept at entertaining Oprah Winfrey's 500 closest friends (he orchestrated her daytime TV farewell extravaganza last May) as he is at hosting an intimate dinner party at home in his swank Manhattan penthouse. A native of Zambia, Cowie—who recently launched an ambitious online site, [ColinCowieWeddings.com](http://ColinCowieWeddings.com)—here shares his fool-proof holiday tactics. Think chic and, best of all, easy: “Light the candles, put on music, and make your guests feel welcome,” Cowie says. “Just relax, because everybody is going to have a good time.” *By Ingrid Abramovitch*



**FROM ABOVE:** A place setting for a recent dinner at Cowie's apartment. A bowl of ornaments adds an elegant, festive touch. A drinks station lets Cowie's guests serve themselves.



### LIFE OF THE PARTY

- If you want to show people your real sense of style, open your house to them. The key is to set everything up the night before. That way, the day of the party, I just have to put food and drinks out, and I'll still have time to shower, shave, and change into a new shirt. Dress up. If you're a hostess, buy new shoes and a lipstick, and put your hair up. A gracious host is unflustered and has a great story to tell.
- Be resourceful. It's not humanly possible to do it all. Buy the turkey and make the soup. Maybe you like setting a table, but food's not your thing. FedEx is one of my favorite entertaining tools. Order seafood from Joe's Stone Crab, ribs from Hickory House, or a ham from Harry and David. Serve it with wine and sourdough rolls. Let guests help themselves.

### HOLIDAY DECOR

- Start with a color theme: red, brown and gold, white and silver, or purple with turquoise and lime. Use the colors for your invitation and decorations. Create vignettes—groupings of candles, ornaments, and flowers.
- The artificial trees of today look so real, and you can reuse them next year. If you miss the scent, you can get fragrant candles that smell like pine. A tree should have at least 100 lights per foot. Try fresh flowers on a Christmas tree: Put red roses in test tubes and nestle them in the branches. Last year I did a turquoise tree and used green spider mums.
- For a dinner party, I set my table to the nines. One Thanksgiving, my theme was a secret garden, with moss and twigs at each place setting; or I'll go contemporary, with glass, manzanita branches, and miniature white pumpkins.

### FIVE ESSENTIALS

1. Serve a signature cocktail. Set up a drinks station with glasses and a beverage dispenser so guests can serve themselves. Or hire a mixologist—they're rock stars these days.
2. Play great music. Don't make it all about Santa. Take your best cocktail playlist and mix in about 20 percent holiday songs.
3. Set up food stations. I like charcuterie, smoked salmon and rye bread (with frozen vodka or aquavit), and one warm dish like turkey stew, chicken pot pie, or risotto. To serve, have a tray of espresso cups and spoons at the ready so people can have a taste.
4. Assemble a colorful guest list. Don't always invite the same people. Mix it up.
5. Good lighting is a must. Not too bright; use dimmers. There's no such thing as too many candles. Votives, pillars, tapers—use them everywhere.

### SOCIAL Qs

- Today, we live in a much more casual society: Some people text, e-mail, or use [Cocodot.com](http://Cocodot.com) or [Paperless Post](http://PaperlessPost.com) to send out invitations, and all are fine. If you e-mail an invite, send it two weeks in advance so people can plan. As long as good taste prevails, you can do anything.
- At a seated dinner, I don't do well with unexpected guests. I am to tabletop what Imelda Marcos is to shoes: I can't resist buying a good plate. But even I don't have 16 of everything.
- A guest makes an effort—dressing up, arriving on time, having something to say. So keep politics and religion out of it. Afterward, a timely flower arrangement, handwritten thank you, or phone call to the host gets big points.