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Ready, Set, Fête!

Your focus may be squarely on your upcoming wedding, but you will likely be the honoree at many events leading right up to it. Here, the ins and outs of engagement parties, showers, and bachelorette bashes headed your way.

TEXT BY BECKY MICKEL

The Engagement Party

WHO HOSTS Traditionally, the bride's parents gather together people to announce the happy news and introduce the groom to everyone in the family, but if yours decides to pass on this fun, yet totally optional, kickoff event, it can be planned by your groom's folks or by friends instead. Whoever hosts will pick up the tab. When you're asked to weigh in on the plans, remember the energy and expense already being expended in your honor, and make soft suggestions that don't have budgetary implications. This party, the first of the prewedding events, tends to take place within three months of the engagement.

WHO ATTENDS You may not have whittled down your final wedding guest list just yet; however, bear in mind that whoever makes the cut for the engagement party must also be invited to the main event. For that reason, it's best for this shindig to remain small, including only those loved ones you know you'll ask to the big day.

HOW TO CELEBRATE There's no one way to enjoy this soirée—cocktails and hors d'oeuvres, an intimate sit-down dinner, a lively weekend brunch, or a casual picnic in a park are all options. "My current favorite is garden parties," says planner Kristin Newman, founder of Kristin Newman Designs in



Though your main role at an engagement party is simply to enjoy yourselves, it's a nice gesture to say a few words of thanks to your hosts come toasting time.

Charleston, South Carolina. "Classic outdoor décor, such as lanterns, string lights, blooming plants, and potted herbs, always wins over guests."

PREP FOR PRESENTS Gifts aren't called for, but some people will likely bring them. To make life easier for those guests, set up your registry beforehand. Since presents are the exception, not the rule, wait until you get home to unwrap any.

Social Security

"Come up with a hashtag for snap-happy guests to use at your prewedding parties," suggests Newman. "That makes it easy to compile photos of all the events surrounding your day."

Favors from the hosts are a fun (but not mandatory) finish, especially if a shower has a theme or an activity, like these bags of granola on offer after a morning cooking class at New York City's Haven's Kitchen.



The Bridal Shower

WHO HOSTS These get-togethers, classically all-female affairs, are meant to “shower” the bride with gifts that help her set up her new home. In the past, families were hesitant to throw one for fear they’d come off as gift grubbers on the honoree’s behalf. Happily, that belief has fallen by the wayside, and today anyone can take the lead, whether it’s your mother or maid of honor. There’s also no limit to how many showers you can have; your relatives may host one in your hometown, while attendants fête you in the city where you currently live. (Throwing your own is still a definite no-no, though.) Anyone who’s listed as a co-host on the invitation is expected to pitch in, cost-wise. Ideally, showers take place up to six months before the wedding; that way, people aren’t buying multiple presents at once.

WHO ATTENDS The women you’re closest to should be asked. If there are multiple showers, check with the hosts to ensure that the invitees differ

for each (you don’t want people to get partied out or weary of giving presents). The exception: Your mom, sisters, future in-laws, and bridesmaids are usually asked to all, but let them know that it’s okay for them to sit one out, and that they’re not expected to gift you more than once.

HOW TO CELEBRATE A shower is being thrown for you, not by you; the hostesses get to pick the theme. Framing the event around a meal, such as a brunch, is a traditional choice, but activities are popular as well. “The focus should be on the bride’s favorite things,” says bicoastal planner Angel Swanson, of Love & Splendor. “If she adores *Downton Abbey*, maybe that inspires an English tea party.” For a creative bride, Swanson suggests heading to a pottery studio for a class, after which everyone leaves with a self-made masterpiece.

END ON A HIGH NOTE Don’t count your groom out; fiancés often show up after the gift opening so that any unacquainted guests can meet them.

Coed Themes

Include the groom with these fun ideas for couples’ showers:

Get active. Register for board and lawn games, and let the good times roll.

Stock the bar. Guests bring gifts of barware or liquor to a cocktail celebration.

Double date. Invited couples come with gift certificates to favorite restaurants; you and your fiancé then meet them later on for dinner for four.

Lingerie is an expected bachelorette gift, says Lake. What's not? "Something else that makes the bride feel pretty and pampered, like a gift card for a massage or a blowout," she says.



This final soiree happens the closest to your wedding, so a relaxing escape, rather than a wild weekend, may be how you prefer to toast single life.

Give Thanks

Pen-and-paper notes—not e-mails, texts, posts, or tweets—are the only polite way to show appreciation for gifts. (Ask your MOH to help by keeping a list of who gave what.) If the hostess has been working with you on the theme, menu, and details, send her a thank-you gift in advance that could be used for the party, like a flower arrangement that can serve as a centerpiece.

+ Get more ideas for celebrating the bride at marthastewartweddings.com/pre-wedding-parties

The Bachelorette Bash

WHO HOSTS Whether a cocktail party, a night at a club, or a weekend at the shore, the maid of honor is most often the party planner, but anyone can pull together this girls' gathering. Everyone pays her own way, with the hostess covering the cost for the bride (unless 'maids or invitees are asked to chip in). The organizer should talk to attendees first about how much they can spend.

WHO ATTENDS Whoever throws it will likely consult with you on the guest list, which should include the wedding party (minus junior 'maids), sisters, and close girlfriends.

HOW TO CELEBRATE Surprises are fun, but the host should keep your personality in mind. There's no need to plan a raucous escapade if you would prefer an activity like a private cooking class led by a personal chef or a ski retreat at nearby slopes. If you're looking for an evening out, Julia Lake, owner of Napa



Valley-based event planning and design company Julia Lake Parties, likes a "bubbles and blowouts" theme: Friends meet at a salon, get their hair and nails done and, perhaps, makeup. "You primp, sip Champagne, then hit the town."

SPREAD THE NEWS Formal invites aren't necessary; hosts can get the word out via e-mail, phone, or a site like Paperless Post. The event usually happens around two months before the wedding but can be thrown within weeks of it, too—just not the night before, unless you want to relive *The Hangover*.