

# [Brandywine Table]



John Serock in his kitchen

## Prepared to Party

### PRO TIPS TO LIGHTEN YOUR LOAD FOR A HOLIDAY PARTY WITH HEAVY HORS D'OEUVRES

Alyssa Thayer

FOR MANY OF US, JUST THE THOUGHT OF COOKING for company is enough to make us reach for a paper bag to breathe into. The reaction can be more severe when considering a holiday party—even one that involved only hors d'oeuvres. But for John Serock, that's a welcomed challenge.

You've probably heard the name. John is the owner of **John Serock Catering**, a full-service catering company based in West Chester. They do it all—from food to rentals—and they do it well, winning numerous awards and accolades from happy clients.

John found his passion at an early age (12, to be exact), at his uncle's club/banquet hall. It was a family affair, where Grandma cooked, his mom and aunt waitressed, and John bussed tables. "I loved serving people and always knew I wanted to end up in catering," he says.

After graduating from Johnson & Wales University and spending

time in many restaurant kitchens, John was ready for a change. A call from a friend asking John to cook for a family gathering, and he was back to his first love of catering.

For the first few years, John was a one-man show, doing under 100 events a year and bartending on the side. "I figured out early on that catering isn't like a restaurant, where you just hang an 'Open' sign and people start flowing in," he recalls. In 2006 he was finally able to hire his first employees and open a storefront.

Today, the company does well over 1,000 events a year, ranging from 25 to 800 guests at everything from simple cocktail parties to lavish 9-course dinners.

When asked how he and his staff keep track of all the details, John answered, "We plan, review, plan, plan and plan." They start with worst-case scenarios and work backwards. "We try to think of every disaster that can happen and how we'd handle it," explains John. Sage advice for all hosts.

Catering is a high-pressure industry. "There are no do-overs ... every event is that client's most important day," he says. But John loves the challenge, variety and adrenaline high when it all goes right. His favorite part is seeing it all come together. "We come in, completely transform a space and a few hours later we're gone as if we were never there. We're like magicians," he chuckles.

As we approach peak entertaining season, John urges us to remember, "People are thrilled to be invited to your gathering. Don't overcomplicate it." So, whether you DIY or hire a pro, have fun!



No detail is too small—down to microgreens on appetizers.



The John Serock Team matches food and uniforms to the event theme. Pictured here for Brandywine Health's "Night in Greece" Garden Party.

## Recipes

While the terms appetizer and hors d'oeuvres are often used interchangeably, appetizers are traditionally the first course coordinated with courses of a larger meal, while hors d'oeuvres are 1-2 bite, stand-alone snacks.

Heavy (or hearty) hors d'oeuvres are hot or cold, and are enough to pass for a meal. Skewers of meat or fish, lollipop lamb chops, mini beef Wellingtons ... pretty hearty fare. Add stuffed mushrooms, mac and cheese bites, puff pastry with savory fillings, and you've got a meal. The choices are endless. And, don't forget dessert!

The recipes below are an assortment of crowd-pleasing favorite hors d'oeuvres from John Serock Catering. They're a breeze to both serve and eat (no cutlery required), making them perfect for any occasion, especially for holiday parties when guests want to mingle.

We've added notes at the end of each recipe telling you what steps can be done ahead of time. Happy holiday hosting!

### Fig Crostini

The perfect pairing of sweet and savory, these little bites will make you the toast of the town.



- 1½ C. fig jam (store-bought or recipe below)
- 1 large Granny Smith apple, unpeeled
- 3 oz. shaved pecorino cheese

\*Tip: Pecorino tastes best when purchased in a wedge and shaved into long slices at home using a vegetable peeler.

- 12 slices toasted baguette

\*If bread is not toasted, place slices on a cookie sheet and toast in a 375° oven for 8–10 minutes until crisp.

Slice apples into long thin slices. If not serving immediately, place in a cup of cold water with a squeeze of lemon juice to prevent oxidation, which turns the slices brown.

Spread 1 tablespoon of jam on each slice of bread, top with a thin slice of apple and sprinkle with shaved pecorino pieces. Arrange on a serving platter.

Makes 12 pieces.

## Be the host with the most!

Tips and tricks from the pros to help take the stress out of entertaining.

**1. Create a Timeline:** Write out your menu and develop a full prep list, separating any steps that can be done ahead of time. If you find you have too many day-of To Do's, you may want to make adjustments.

**2. Think About Shelf Life:** When designing your menu, think about how long a dish will hold up (based on room temperature and people eating from the presentation). Choose items that do not need to be "refreshed" too often.

**3. It's Okay to Supplement:** You don't have to make everything from scratch. Find shortcuts that won't compromise the finished product. Example: Doctor up frozen cream puffs with a drizzle of chocolate and a dusting of powdered sugar. Or just buy the fig jam rather than making it from scratch.

**4. Ask for Help:** Hire a server for the night, or enlist the support of local high school or college students. Give your helpers a detailed list of all the jobs that need to be completed and the timing, so they can work independently.

**5. Craft a Cocktail:** Specialty cocktails are in vogue for a reason! Instead of needing a full bar of liquor and mixers, which takes up space and budget, come up with one or two premixed drinks that guests can pour themselves. If you know some guests prefer non-alcoholic options, create signature mocktails with the recommended liquor on the side.

*Bonus points:* add a sign that says "Spike as You Like."

**6. Enjoy Your Party:** Everyone has more fun when the host is relaxed and joining in the fun!

### Fig Jam

- 1, 16-oz. package dry figs
- ¼ C. sugar
- ½ C. water
- 1 oz. brandy

Place all ingredients in a small sauce pan and simmer for 10–12 minutes until figs soften. Remove from heat.

Add all contents into a food processor and process until smooth.

\*\*Fig Jam can be made ahead and will keep in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks.



### Onion Soup Bites

A cozy winter favorite all dressed up and ready to party.



- 2 Tb. butter
- 2 large onions, sliced thinly
- 2 oz. sherry or white wine
- 1 C. water
- 1 chicken bouillon cube
- 1 pinch black pepper
- 2 packages frozen phyllo cups (available in the dessert section of the grocery store)
- 8 slices Gruyere or Swiss cheese, each cut into 4 pieces

Preheat oven to 375°.

Melt butter in a saute pan over medium heat and add onions. Cook for 20–25 minutes without stirring, or until onions start to brown.

Once onions begin to brown, stir in wine, water, bouillon cube and pepper. Simmer until liquid evaporates (about 15 minutes).

Place a tablespoon of onion mixture into each phyllo cup and top with a square of cheese. Arrange on a cookie sheet and bake for 7–9 minutes, until cheese is melted.

Makes 30 pieces.

\*\* Onions can be done in advance and will hold in an air-tight container for up to 2 weeks in the refrigerator.

### Bacon Wrapped Brussel Sprouts

Let's face it, bacon-wrapped anything is usually a winner, but this unique combination of flavors and textures is borderline addictive.

- 12 bacon strips
- 24 Brussel sprouts
- ¼ C. packed brown sugar
- 2 T. smoked paprika

## Planning for the Party:

An all hors d'oeuvres party, while it sounds like great fun, can be daunting when you have to decide just how much to serve. What time of day will it be? Dinnertime? In between lunch and dinner? How long do you expect your guests to stay and will you be serving alcohol?

Here are a few guidelines to help:

- If it's a dinner or lunchtime affair, guests will be hungry and probably expect to be satisfied. Figure 12–15 pieces/servings per person.
- For a pre-mealtime party, 8–10 pieces will probably be enough.
- If alcohol is served or if the party is going to last several hours, add a couple of pieces per person.
- And, an important reminder: Be sure to have plenty of plates, napkins and flatware, as guests will grab new ones a few times during the party.

Preheat oven to 375°.

Cut bacon strips in half crosswise.



In a large skillet, cook bacon over medium heat until partially cooked but not crisp. Remove and place on paper towels to drain.

Boil Brussel sprouts in a small pot for 4 minutes, then immediately place in an ice water bath to cool.

In a small bowl, mix brown sugar and paprika. Dip one side of each bacon piece in brown sugar mixture. Wrap each sprout with a bacon piece, sugar side out. Secure with a toothpick.

Transfer to a greased baking pan. Bake 12–15 minutes or until bacon is crisp.

Makes 24 pieces.

\*\* Bacon wrapped sprouts can be rolled up to a day in advance and finished in oven day-of.