

"From Hollywood glam to pot-luck dinners, holiday office parties run the creative gamut"

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Paparazzi aiming flashing cameras swarm the fashionably dressed females and tuxedo-clad gents who saunter coolly past them, making their way toward the lure of a distant orchestra playing inside.

Move over monogrammed napkins and multicolored balloons -- Hollywood-style panache and cutting-edge cuisine are in at this year's company-hosted holiday parties.

The "Oscars at Hollywood" is just one of an endless array of novel party themes that caterers and event planners are staging this season, complete with human props like paparazzi. "Guests knew the instant they arrived this was going to be fun," says Lynette Nelson, sales manager for catering legend Don Strange of Texas Inc. of the first time they threw the ritzy event.

Fun it was, as celebrity look-alikes Marilyn Monroe, Humphrey Bogart and John Wayne mingled with party goers who sipped big blue, green and pink martinis garnished with chunks of skewered fruit, and helped their eyes and appetites to a feast of dishes spread elegantly along tables topped with sculptured ice.

Today's office bashes are often lavish, like silver-screen productions that titillate guests' senses with bigger-than-life effects.

"A successfully themed event invites guests to experience a completely different and stimulating world, if just for a few short hours," says Denise Goral, owner of San Antonio's Leave It To Us Catering.

Lavish venues

This fall, companies are hiring the pros to showcase their appreciation of employees and clients via holiday parties. Many companies choose to host their parties outside of the office, where employees typically spend most of their weekdays. Museums, hotels, restaurants, historic sites and convention centers offer accommodations for social settings, but so do many untapped finds being uncovered by party planners.

One such discovery is Aztec on the River. Out of the Box Events will transform all four levels of the expansively renovated antique theater multiplex into a 19th Century masquerade ballroom for United Apartment Groups' annual holiday bash.

Guests will travel back in time as costumed models clad in full period gowns, feathered plumed masks and brightly hued headdresses circulate about, while fire dancers, jesters and jugglers entertain at intervals throughout the night. In addition, human statues painted gold to resemble Greek gods and goddesses will also add to the ambience.

Meanwhile, the real estate management company will announce the winning employees' names of those awarded exotic trips to places like Hawaii and Jamaica for jobs well done, and snapshots of the previous year's accomplishments will roll on the giant screen in the theater's auditorium. "We believe a party should be a complete experience for the guests," says Jackie Heiman, Out of the Box events coordinator. "As event planners, we're constantly trying to outdo ourselves."

One of San Antonio's most prestigious holiday parties is hosted by Linebarger Goggan Blair & Sampson law firm. Traditionally held at the Witte Museum, the event's venue was recently switched to better accommodate parking for the more than 600 guests. The elegant Victorian Pearl Stable fits the bill perfectly.

Even hotels are getting in on the action. The landmark Emily Morgan Hotel, for example, has unveiled inventive themes this year that include "Dancing with the Stars," a play on the popular television show; "Viva Las Holidays" featuring Elvis impersonators, and "Magical Holiday," complete with a magician.

Not to be outdone, caterer Don Strange has created a "Biker Bar" at his 125-acre Hill Country ranch/event venue and outfitted it with Harley Davidson parts transfigured into serving tables and seating. The scene is so realistic, Nelson noted, "One guest asked if the bar was open all the time."

Strange's other concepts range from a safari motif with camouflage and mosquito netting, to a space theme that includes musicians performing on nine-foot stilts and the drummer suspended from the ceiling, to a high-tech extravaganza inundated with neon signs and caterers dressed up in white painters' suits and goggles.

Nostalgia is also making its way into current holiday themes. Leave It To Us Catering has contrived a 1940s Big Band Casino Night where guests dressed in vintage costumes dance to classic tunes of the likes of Tommy Dorsey and Glen Miller, as images from "Casablanca" trail across the walls and a foggy haze floats near the floor. Completing the scene is a 1940 Studebaker that sits prominently propped so guests can hop in and take pictures as a keepsake.

While many events unfold in a diverse variety of leased settings, some companies keep their parties at the office.

Strange, who has hosted events for the likes of Walt Disney, says companies often throw holiday events in their own buildings. "Many find they can use lobbies and offices they decorate themselves," he says.

John H. White & Associates is one such company. The property management firm has a small staff but owns its own building. Every December, the Whites go all out with Christmas decorations and hire Don Strange to fill the menu for 120 people.

"Don has catered our Christmas brunch for many years so we schedule ahead every September," says Barbara Stueve, White's administrative assistant. "They come in and decorate all the tables with rich linen tablecloths in red, green and white and wait on everyone. And when it's all over, they clean up and they're on their way, and it's wonderful."

Even traditional gatherings held by smaller companies in a private home can be entertaining. White elephant gift exchanges, pot luck and contemporary music have been the mainstay of holiday parties put on by the Denim Group, a technology company on the grow.

"In the past we've held our company's holiday party at one of our principal's homes and kept it casual and fun while celebrating our successes of the past year," says John Dickson, Denim Group principal. "But our company is getting bigger, so we'll have to do a full-blown holiday party in some other venue this year."

Prices for simply catering a 200-person party range from \$15 to \$50; fees for an all-inclusive event that includes a theme, food and decorated venue range from \$85 to \$120 per person, according to a sampling of local caterers and event planners.

Keeping it simple

For companies that prefer more traditional parties, celebrations don't have to be extravagant to be fun. "It's more about variety, creativity and paying attention to all the little details," says Janet Holliday of The CE Group. "Creating interaction with the food, entertainment or decorations can make an event great fun."

Holliday says any party can be crafted to include sophistication and surprise. She once arranged a progressive evening outing for a group of corporate executives that began at the exclusive Club Giraud, transported guests to the festively decorated River Walk for barge rides, and paused for entertainment along the way. The affair continued with a return to Club Giraud for an elegant dinner and concluded with dessert at the Southwest School of Arts and Crafts Gazebo.

Absolutely Everything Catering delivers elegant fare no matter what the venue. Owner Diane Cortez incorporates the latest trends in all of her parties. "People are asking for much more glass in vivid, jewel-toned colors and clean presentations displayed in elevated layers," she says. "One of the most unique corporate parties we've catered featured exclusive chocolate desserts and fine champagne with loads of fresh strawberries."

Today's catered cuisine should exceed expectations. Mango, blue cheese and avocado quesadillas; asparagus spears with prosciutto; pomegranate and pistachio relish are but a few examples of offerings by local caterers. What's more, clients expect creative presentation. "The old adage, 'people eat with their eyes,' is true," Cortez says.

Cuisine is a headliner for Linebarger Goggan's holiday ball. "We send out hundreds of invitations to this grand annual event where guests dress to the nines and dance to a lively orchestra, but everyone calls ahead and says 'Save me some of Don Strange's bacon ribbons,' " says Carrie Wells, the firm's director of operations. "The menu has changed over the past 20 years, but the bacon is a signature item we must have every year."

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