



# Party season



A PR guru and a local celebrity chef have the know-how for hosting the perfect Christmas dinner party. **Pip Miller** and **Craig Squire** share their tips and tricks



Get-togethers should be more about pleasure than spending the afternoon or evening in the kitchen trying to impress. After all, if you decide to play host, that is exactly what you should do. Plan a menu that suits the occasion and won't keep you chained to a hot oven. Make your guests feel special and this means being ready in time to welcome them into your home. Unless you know them really well, being caught in the shower when the knock on the door happens is not a great start.

Something else to consider is introducing new people into your circle of friends.

Dinner parties are a great opportunity for this but can end in disaster. Don't expect people to hit it off, just because they're your friends.

Christmas with family and friends tends to be a little different from your standard dinner party. However, the fundamentals of planning, partnering and of course, great food and wine, are still the same. When it comes to food, we have that well and truly sorted thanks to Red Ochre Grill owner and executive chef Craig Squire. Craig and his wife Gabrielle are seasoned entertainers and can really throw a party.

## Planning the party

As tradition dictates, our group of close friends gets together a few weeks before Christmas over a few drinks where plans for a fine festivity are made. It is at this stage where we decide whose balcony, backyard or airconditioned living room will provide the perfect dinner party venue.

It tends to be a 'take it in turns' situation, however, Craig prefers to create in his kitchen so it's their place again in 2007. We are all happy to be guests but unlike other dinner parties, Christmas doesn't mean visitors are off the hook. Everyone



Votive candle holder, \$4.95, candle, \$11.95, acrylic beads, \$19.95, starfish, \$5.95, Samsara

Knife and fork, \$1.95ea. Dragonfly, \$15, placemats \$9.95, Samsara

## Pip's table tips

- If your event is taking place after dark, pull the fairy lights off the tree and put them on the table or verandah railing.
- Candles, from those that adorn a giant candlestick to ambient tea lights, are a must.
- Don't be afraid to copy from magazines or in-store displays.
- Do try to add your own personality and deliver the unexpected.
- Instead of using linen cloths on the table, go for gorgeous wrapping papers.

occasion. While this may conflict with some people's view of relaxed entertaining, it needs not be extravagant. Start with some simple touches and let your imagination flow.

Christmas tables are easy. For starters there's Christmas crackers and the cliché red, green, silver and gold to guide. However, this year, why not break from the convention of clichéd holly and tinsel and opt for a themed table using nature as your guide. After all, we are living in the tropics and a snowman on the table is totally incongruous with the climate.

A beachy theme is more relevant and would come to life with little touches such as starfish and shells. Or gather some palm fronds and greenery from the garden to lay on the table with hibiscus or berries for colour. Tie it all together with red and white for a perfect Cairns-style Christmas table.

Bright runners down the centre or on either side of the table make an excellent foundation as do quality placemats in interesting fabrics or textiles such as rattan.

There are just so many ways you can go for a perfect Christmas dinner party. While one part of me was busy designing a red and white-themed table (set off by a topiary tree in the centre of the table complete with ceramic stars) with a pom-pom trimmed cloth I was going to make using fabric from Spotlight, another side of the table was going all crystal and silver for a more contemporary feel, thanks to my discovery of this gorgeous crystal and silver bird tree in the window of Shelena Russell Galleries at Edge Hill.

With limited time, I knew I could not fail in my quest if I visited Samsara. One of my favourite and most inspiring places to visit, I just love the way it marries contemporary style with the richness of ethnic cultures. Robbie and his team were keen as mustard to help out and made light work of my task, despite a vague and varied brief as to what I would like to see. The end result makes a stunning statement equally suited to Christmas celebrations or any occasion. A marriage of silver, red, glass and bright white, everything you see on the table

is by Samsara with exception of the Kickarts' ceramic stars and birds and the gorgeous tree in the background. The table and chairs, which are Craig and Gabrielle's, were signature Samsara for a total look.

### Create the mood

Music is a must and can be so easily overlooked between cleaning the house, buying the groceries, laying the table and finding an outfit to wear. This is one of those little details you can organise well in advance. If you want to get the party started, choose something a little more upbeat but definitely avoid anything heavy metal or offensive. You are guaranteed a winner with such favourites as Jack Johnson, Harry Connick Jr and Michael Buble.

When the mood settles later in the night and the candles become a faint flicker, softer melodies by Nora Jones are a good choice or you can really get into the festive season with traditional Christmas songs by Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby, which are on sale now.

### Final touches

Finally, you are ready and there's 10 minutes to go before the first guests arrive. Take one of the chilled flutes from the freezer, pour a glass of bubbly, crank up the music and enjoy!



Photographs // Veronica Sagredo

will contribute to the feast and the decision about who brings what varies each year, albeit the Christmas trimmings of turkey, ham, pudding and trifle are commonplace. Then we talk about the finer details such as what time the festivities will begin, what wine to bring and of course, present giving. With a large group of people, Kris Kringle is a good way to avoid embarrassment and unnecessary expense. Make it fun by deciding on a dollar amount. Each adult guest is then expected to turn up on the day with a wrapped present for the tree. This should not be a serious exercise and it is best to buy something fun or if you must, make it practical.

### In the kitchen with Craig

In these enlightened times we have become aware that buying as much locally grown and processed food is one way of reducing greenhouse gases. Through the reduced transport emissions, this is another reason to support local produce. Although the majors do stock some local product, their priority is margin which does not always mean Australian produce gets a fair go. So support independent stores that in turn support local produce which is not only good for the environment but good for our local economy and culinary development. So think ahead, make a list and buy only what you need. Try and avoid

the last-minute supermarket scramble where one tends to buy too much and then ends up wasting a fair percentage.

In the tropics at Christmas think Asian cuisines, cooling foods and drinks that are traditional in our part of the world, which is definitely not Europe.

### Craig does drinks

For cocktails we make mango and mint daiquiri and lychee martinis. As for wines my favourites for hot weather are pinot grigio and semillon sauvignon blanc for whites, pinot noir and for a slightly heavier red try shiraz viognier. Make sure you chill your reds as well. Red wine should be drunk at 12 to 16C but in this weather it will heat up pretty quickly in the glass. For a good, cold beer Tooheys extra dry is very refreshing and good value or peroni and corona are both good imported beers.

### Pip creates the look

Give in to temptation and make a splash with your Christmas theme. For the ultimate table, a little shopping around may be in order. There is no harm in investing in good-quality table decorations and accessories that will stand the test of time and play their part in a multitude of themes. For me, dinner parties are made all the more special if time is taken to create a table that signifies celebration and a sense of