

Designing the Buffet

Master the six key elements of composition to create dramatic spreads for every occasion.

To create dramatic buffets, plan a menu full of vibrant colors and textures so the food is the star and the table decorations complement it, rather than distract from it. Non-traditional surfaces and items from nature such as nuts, berries, and greenery bring visual impact to the party.

SCHIFT into Buffet Mode

Consider the six main characteristics of food when laying out your spread. At the CIA, we often use the acronym SCHIFT for creating buffets, so the students will recall these critical points: Shape, Color, Height, Items, Flavor, and Texture. Use a variety of shapes of platters and combine earth tones and vibrant colors. The back or center of the buffet should be the tallest food items, which should all be of practical portion sizes. There should be a variety of dishes, complementary flavors, and varied textures. All of these guidelines allow the food itself to be decorative; you can then enhance the overall effect by decorating the buffet.

When arranging foods, a certain amount of repetition, such as shingled slices of a roast, or neat rows of hors d'oeuvres, is comforting and appealing, but too much repetition can become dull. Inject excitement with a dynamic display that

combines some regularity with one or two dramatic centerpieces. Slices of terrine should fall from a larger, uncut *grosse pièce*—a large piece of the item you're serving. The taller *grosse pièce* should be behind the lower slices, inviting the guest's eye into the display.

When a Table Is Not a Table

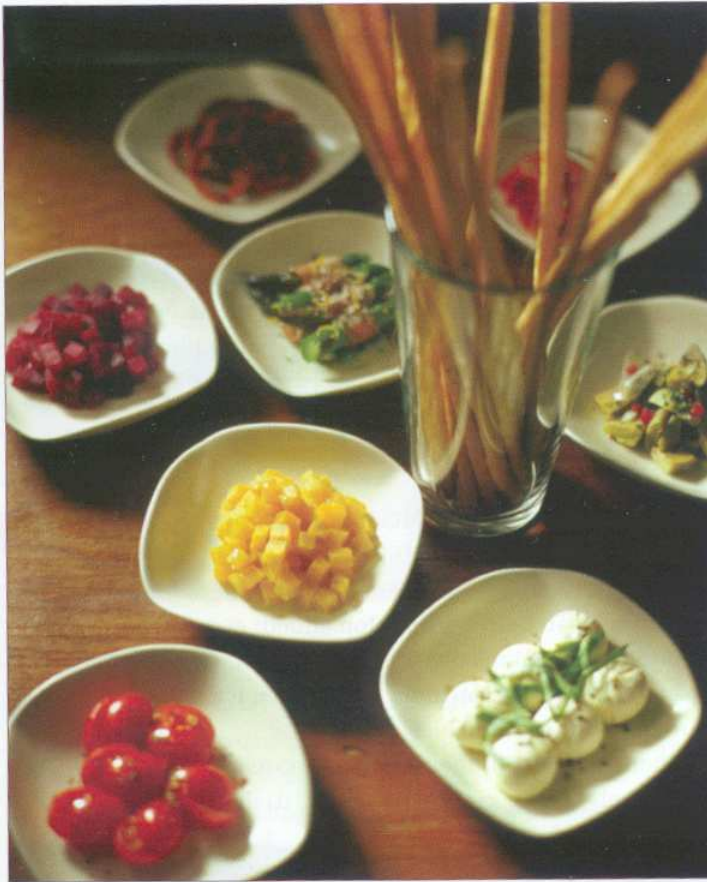
Hinnerk von Bargaen, CHE, likes to use “cool table”—something that's not actually a table at all, such as a clean barrel with a top added; even plywood works if a tablecloth is used over it. Or use an old door as a platform for food items. It creates a unique long buffet table.

When planning a menu, also choose a platter or vessel that's right for each dish. Stone

Large, unsliced grosse pièces and thoughtful use of line design create a dynamic composition for these seafood appetizers.



Photos this article: The Culinary Institute of America



Tall, slim centerpieces add drama. For eye appeal, "shingle" sliced foods away from the guests, like the pâtés below.

slabs, butcher-block carving boards, and glazed ceramic tiles are all great surfaces for displaying pâtés, roulades, and cheeses. Before the food is ready, pair each vessel with the correct utensils and label it with a Post-it or masking tape, so it's clear where it should be placed when the food is ready.



Where to Garnish

Oliver Andreini, CHE, CMC, points out the CIA's use of "nonfunctional" garnishes (those that are not easily palatable, such as rosemary stalks) around platter arrangements, but off the actual dish. At this time of year, fallen leaves, twigs, trimmings from the Christmas tree, fresh fruit, or winter squash can all be placed around the platters on a buffet surface.

He also brings elements of the earth to the table, such as hand-selected rocks and sand. Although it should be kept well below the food, sand provides a great platform for bowls and platters. For a dynamic look, tilt bowls in different directions. A flowing filling of polished pebbles also can be used in between the platters. Washed rocks and pebbles (available at aquarium stores) provide a soothing, natural look. Small branches of trees or bushes with leaves still attached—even pinecones and acorns—can be suitable for the table. The canned air used to clean computers is useful for removing excess dust and dirt.

Foods and spices make appetizing decorations too. Pick up extra bags of cranberries and scatter them on the tables; nuts in their shells make attractive flowing table fillers, as do holly leaves. Dried fruit, scattered cinnamon sticks, paths of cloves, black peppercorns, and other whole spices add an aromatic touch that doesn't conflict with food aromas.

Go with the Flow

Planning the buffet's flow enables you to conceptualize the color and texture contrast of the presentation, and ensures that the guest can move through the buffet at a comfortable pace. Depending on the number of guests and the layout of the room, the buffet may be accessible from both, or only one side of the table. Arrange dishes in the logical order for the guests to build the plate (the gravy comes after the mashed potatoes, utensils at the end so guests don't need to fumble with them). Set a separate table for the drinks and another for the dessert. Most of all, present a balanced buffet, with flavors, textures, shapes, and colors that please all of the senses.

— Robert Danhi '91, CHE, CCP