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Save Money Enjoying an Evening with Friends

★★★★★ (2 votes, average: 5 out of 5)

March 11, 2009 by [Anna Comstock](#)



Dinner out is, well... out. Throw a fun, inexpensive dinner party instead.

The doorbell rings, and a smile sweeps across your face. Music is playing, candles are flickering, the table is set and your home smells wonderful. You open the door to let your friends in, relaxed and ready to enjoy a delicious dinner and an evening of fun.

OK, so maybe you haven't thrown a dinner party in years. (Does watching Food Network in your sweat pants count?) But even if your life is consumed by a busy schedule, throwing a fabulous dinner party *can* be a reality.

In 2003, Debi Shawcross started teaching cooking classes in her home a few evenings each month. "The idea came from wanting to share something I love with others, while still having time to spend at home with my daughters," Shawcross says. She also started a supper club with three other couples, combining her culinary skills with a fun night *in* with friends.

Eating at home is becoming popular once again. "With the economy crashing in on us, one of the first areas people are cutting back on is going out to dinner," Shawcross says. A November 2008 CBS News poll found that 43 percent of Americans eat home-cooked meals six or seven nights a week.

And eating at home to cut back on spending doesn't mean you have to cut back on food, fun or friends. "By entertaining at home, you're still able to enjoy fine food and great conversation, while cutting your expenses by at least half," Shawcross says. ([See Bring the Beach – and Dinner – Home below for tips on hosting a fun, themed dinner party.](#))

Let's Get Together

How to save money while hosting a memorable dinner party:

1. Invest in a standard set of white dishes, which you can buy inexpensively almost anywhere. "Food looks really pretty on white plates, and you can always dress them up with different colored napkins," Shawcross says.
2. Use the greens from your backyard to decorate. That way, you will only need to buy a few flowers rather than spending a bundle at the florist.
3. Consider asking each guest bring one dish. "That will save the host time, money and stress," she says.
4. Depending on your relationships with friends and neighbors, ask if they have grocery items you need before heading to the store.

"Everyone is busy, but even on a budget, it's important to take some time to slow down and enjoy each other," Shawcross says.

Bring the Beach – and Dinner – Home

What better way to shed the winter blues than to invite friends over for a beach-themed dinner party? "With a quick shopping trip to your local craft store, this is an easy look to pull together," Shawcross says. Save yourself some stress, and plan in advance. Get table decorations a few weeks ahead of time, and pick up these items:

- Light-blue tablecloth or flat sheet

- Fishing net
- Seashells
- Glass votives filled with sand and tea light candles
- White napkins
- Large white pebbles

Layer the fishing net over the tablecloth and create a tablescape of seashells. Scatter sand-filled votives topped with tea light candles. Then, write each of the guests' names on a pebble and place one at every place setting. Tell guests to keep their attire casual and to wear something they would wear on a summer vacation.

Complement the decorations with a mouthwatering, "under the sea" menu. Shawcross suggests lemongrass and ginger shrimp kebabs and crispy halibut with lemony basil sauce. She also recommends topping the meal off with ice-cold lemonade: Pour lemonade into a pitcher; splash in some vodka, if you choose; and let the fun begin!

Music adds the finishing touch. Put on *The Beach Boys' Greatest Hits*, *Surf Guitar Greats* or any other beach-themed music you own. Playing a beach or aquarium DVD on the television can add to the "under the sea" experience.

Lemongrass and Ginger Shrimp Kebabs

1 tablespoon chopped lemongrass
1 tablespoon chopped fresh ginger
2 garlic cloves, minced
1/2 teaspoon dried red pepper flakes
5 green onions, whites cut into 1-inch lengths and greens chopped
1/4 cup soy sauce
2 tablespoons sesame oil
1 tablespoon honey
32 large shrimp, shelled and deveined
Bamboo skewers, soaked in water for at least 30 minutes
1 red bell pepper, seeded and cut into 1-inch pieces
Peanut oil for drizzling
1 lime, juiced

Directions:

In a large bowl, combine the lemongrass, ginger, garlic, red pepper flakes, green onions, soy sauce, sesame oil and honey. Whisk well. Add the shrimp and toss to coat.

Marinate in the refrigerator for 15 to 30 minutes.

Meanwhile, soak the skewers in water for at least 30 minutes. Skewer the shrimp, the white portion of the green onion and the red bell peppers.

Place the skewers on a large baking sheet and drizzle with peanut oil. Grill skewers over high heat about three minutes per side (until shrimp curls and begins to pink). Remove skewers from the grill, and squeeze lime juice over each skewer before serving. *Makes 8 servings*

Crispy Halibut with Lemony Basil Sauce

Sauce:

1/2 cup unsalted butter, cut into tablespoons
 3 tablespoons minced shallots
 1 cup white wine
 Juice and zest from 1 lemon
 3 Roma tomatoes, diced
 1/2 cup chopped fresh basil
 1/4 teaspoon salt
 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground pepper

Zucchini Ribbons:

4 zucchinis, ends trimmed
 1 (14-ounce) can coconut milk

Halibut:

3 ounces panko bread crumbs
 1/2 cup milk
 8 (6-ounce) halibut steaks (or other firm white-fleshed fish)
 Salt and pepper
 Canola oil

Directions:

For the sauce: In a medium saucepan, melt 2 tablespoons of the butter over medium heat. Add shallots and cook until shallots soften, about three minutes. Add the wine and lemon zest. Increase heat to high and bring to a boil. Reduce by one-third. Reduce heat to medium, add the lemon juice and begin whisking in the remaining butter, 1 tablespoon at a time, to finish the sauce. Remove from heat and add the tomatoes and basil. Adjust seasoning with salt and freshly ground pepper.

For the zucchini ribbons: Using a vegetable peeler, slice the zucchini into very thin pieces. In a large sauté pan, bring coconut milk to a boil over medium-high heat. Add the zucchini and cook, stirring for two minutes.

For the fish: In a food processor, pulse panko crumbs into a fine powder and transfer to a plate. In a shallow bowl, pour the milk. Season the halibut with salt and pepper. Dip each halibut steak in milk and then into the plate of panko crumbs. Press the crumbs onto both sides of fish. Place a large sauté pan over medium-high heat. Add enough canola oil to just cover the bottom of the pan. Heat oil, then add halibut to the pan. (Cook's note: Be careful not to overcrowd the fish. Wipe out the pan and repeat the searing process in batches, if necessary.) Cook until a golden crust begins to form on the bottom of fish, about six minutes. Flip and cook on the other side an additional four to five minutes. *Makes 8 servings*

About Debi Shawcross

Debi Shawcross is owner of Signature Menus, a cooking business that teaches students to make “unique and savory” meals. She is also author of *Friends at the Table: The Ultimate Supper Club Cookbook*, which will be published in mid-2009. Her Web site, DebiShawcross.com, offers tips such as music playlist ideas, directions on how to properly set a table, and additional cocktail and food recipes.

