

THE RADAR ENTERTAINING

PRODUCED BY TONY CONWAY

WRITTEN BY TRAVIS NEIGHBOR WARD

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES E. FITTS

SURPRISE!

The wow element is still the host's best weapon—even when the party is for adults

In today's über-organized world of BlackBerrys and Palm Pilots, life is often so scheduled there's little room for surprise. That's why Tony Conway, president of A Legendary Event and past catering director of The Ritz-Carlton, Buckhead, says that introducing surprise elements at parties is such a treat. "We're so hectic these days that we sometimes forget about entertaining," Conway says. "I cater 1,200 parties per year and of those I'm able to convince about half of my clients to introduce an element of surprise. Once people have tried it, they're hooked."

Coming up with ideas that walk that fine line between creative and gimmicky isn't always easy. Here are three of Conway's top ideas.

1. START THE SURPRISE WITH THE INVITATION. It raises guests' curiosity and establishes the mood or theme of the event in advance. For a springtime garden party, consider sending your invitation in a hat box or with a potted tulip. For a casual Sunday supper and board games, send Monopoly money with your invites so guests will know they'll spend the evening vying for Boardwalk and Park Place.

Conway says the sky's the limit with an invitation, as long as you keep it tasteful and include all of the pertinent information: date, dress code, R.S.V.P., etcetera. "The invitation we sent out for Lois and Jerry Blonder's 50th-anniversary party had a photograph of them that was taken in their convertible when they got married, around 1952," Conway says. "When the guests showed up at Puritan Mill for the 1950s-themed party, we had the same convertible there so guests could have their pictures taken in it."

2. CHOOSE A LOCATION THAT GUESTS WOULD NEVER EXPECT. For instance, it could be an unexpected area of your house—an unfinished basement, a pool house, a pergola or your media room. Conway says one of the best parties he's planned was in a three-car garage belonging to Carole and Dr. John Seffrin. "We draped the ceiling and walls with velour, set up six tables with white peony centerpieces and lit 700 candles that were reflected in



Tony Conway transforms Loft 600 for the Shlesingers' party

large mirrors to double the effect," he says. "It's not really the location. It's what you do with it."

If you're throwing your party off-site, choose an address your friends would consider out of character for you. If they'd expect you to have a party at your Buckhead home, try an intown, more urban location. "We threw a combination 75th birthday/costume party for Buckhead socialites Sonny and Joyce Schlesinger at the ultra-modern Loft 600 near Marietta Street," Conway says. "We decorated the room in red and hung chandeliers over every table."

3. GIVE GUESTS A SURPRISE GIFT WHEN THEY LEAVE. Great springtime ideas could include everything from tree seedlings and pretty bags filled with potting tools to individual boxed cakes and cookies. Conway's also a big fan of leaving his guests surprise gifts in their cars. "Leave a gift bag of lemons and a lemonade recipe in their car," he says. "Then give them a glass of fresh-squeezed lemonade while they're waiting for their car at the valet." You can localize your gifts, too. At a wedding held here, wedding planner Susana Branner gave all of the departing New York guests copies of *The New York Times* and Krispy Kreme Donuts. "Everybody loved it," Conway says. 📍

Tony Conway is the contributing editor of entertaining for *The Atlantan*.