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The Holiday Office Party & Rosemary Cashews

Happy Holidays 2013/Volume 377



The wheels of industry will soon come to a grinding halt. Well, at least for a few hours. Yes, the annual holiday office party season is upon us. For many years, I worked for a big computer company in Switzerland so I've attended (or endured – you choose) my fair share of office parties.

The festivities began on the first Friday night of December. Hardly an intimate affair, more than 600 employees gathered in the oversized lobby and cafeteria for food, drink, dancing and merriment. The frivolity continued throughout December with each work group celebrating with a holiday lunch. The definition of group was rather fluid and most people attended at least three, often more, lunches.

The company was famous for its matrix organization so for several years I had two, even three, bosses. Two or three bosses meant two or three lunches. They, in turn, each had a boss or two for a few more lunches. One year a colleague invited a bunch of us out again. He was always looking for something to celebrate and dreamed up some excuse for a party. I think that made a total of six; or was it seven? As far as I remember, no one donned a lampshade but a few revelers came very, very close to dancing on the table.

All this frivolity was squeezed into the first two or three weeks of December. At least once or twice a week, people drifted out of the office around 11:30. No one ever wandered back before 3:00 and it was generally closer to 4:00. Feeling logy and full of too much good food and fun, few stayed long and headed home early. Eventually someone figured out that all of these lunches were costing the company a whole lot of money and even more time. The cumbersome matrix didn't come down but the profusion of holiday lunches was reduced to a paltry few.

When I became a boss, I reinvented the holiday lunch for my group. I moved it to the weekend, brought it home and invited spouses and significant others. The result was a relaxed and elegant evening. We sipped champagne in front of a crackling fire and then enjoyed a lovely dinner around my farmhouse table. Most of my team had children, so a few years later, we reinvented again. Children came along; we started by bowling a few frames and ended with a casual Sunday lunch.

Then the company transferred me to California. The internet boom had just gone bust and the powers-that-be cancelled any and all year-end celebrations. I decided my team deserved a little fun anyway. With the help of my assistant, Bonnie, we organized a family party. It was potluck and I encouraged everyone to bring a traditional dish from their holiday table. As host, I decked the halls, cooked up a few treats and made goodie bags for all. For entertainment, we held a Yankee Gift Swap for the adults and Santa graciously agreed to come and discuss wish lists with the kids.

With holiday music playing in the background, the conversation flowed. And with children and spouses around, we were less tempted to talk shop. Holiday tchotchkes, dust-catchers and boxes of chocolates were swapped. The kids got up close and personal with Santa. Riddling him with questions and requests, they barely let him out the door. Luckily, as if on cue, a family of deer arrived and created both a note of authenticity and a diversion to help for Santa escape. I may be biased but I'm pretty sure it was the best office party ever!

If an office party is in your holiday plans, enjoy. But beware, if you get the urge to dance on the table, put a lampshade on your head or tell the boss exactly what you really think of him; it's time to go home!

Bon appétit!

Rosemary Cashews

I am constantly roasting up a batch of these delicious nuts during the holidays. They are a great addition to any party and make wonderful hostess gifts. Enjoy!

1 pound raw cashews
1 tablespoon finely chopped fresh rosemary leaves
About 2 teaspoons kosher salt
1/2 teaspoon smoked paprika
1 tablespoon butter, cut in small pieces

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees.

Place the nuts in a single layer in 1-2 heavy skillet and, stirring once or twice, roast at 375 degrees until lightly browned, about 15 minutes.

Meanwhile, combine the rosemary, salt and paprika in a small bowl and whisk to combine.

Remove the nuts from the oven and combine in one skillet. Add the butter to the pan and toss until it melts and coats the nut. Sprinkle with the rosemary and spices and toss again. Cool in the pan. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Store leftover nuts in an airtight container at room temperature.

