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Any party that requires a spectacular hat, well, that's a party I want in on.

No, another royal wedding is not on the calendar. At least, there isn't one on my calendar. However, The Kentucky Derby, The Run for the Roses, is this weekend. Admittedly, the Kentucky Derby is about many things, most notably horses and bourbon but it is also hats.



At least in the United States, it's been a while since we all wore hats. President Kennedy is generally credited with the demise of the men's hat industry but Jackie did great things for the pillbox. In any case, it was a losing battle. No matter how jaunty the First Lady looked in them, hats joined the hoop skirt and shoulder pads on that long list of obsolete fashion statements. Besides, a pillbox is not nearly spectacular enough for the Kentucky Derby.

Hats and all, a Derby Party is a fabulous excuse for a get-together. And thank goodness, we could use a break about now. Even when the sun is shining, New Hampshire is not at its best during Mud Season. The garden is a muddy mess, there is sand everywhere and it's still too cold for shorts, let alone flip-flops. Mint Juleps, pretty hats and a few friendly wagers are bound to cheer us up.

There's no need to head down to Louisville. Leave Churchill Downs to the rich and famous-for-being-famous. Instead, create your own special combination of red carpet glam and southern charm.

Here are a few ideas for a fabulous Derby Party:

First and foremost, forget optional, hats are de rigueur. Whether you sport a wide brim or a fascinator, the more elaborate the better. Feel free to offer a prize for the Best Hat as well as a few more for Best Channeling of Carmen Miranda, Best Elucidation of an Aviary and, of course, Best Interpretation of a Southern Belle.

Next, the Kentucky Derby is not a day to invent a new martini. Don't get clever and whip up a special Mint-Tini or invent a Kentucky Daiquiri. Only a traditional Mint Julep will do. In a silver cup if you can find one. That said, many old school Kentuckians recommend that you to leave the mint, sugar and ice out.

It is a horserace so a friendly wager or two would not be amiss. Two dollars is the minimum for most racetracks but I leave it to you decide the stakes. It's a win-win if you let the horses race for charity. Instead of paying off the winners, donate the kitty to a favorite cause. Winners get bragging rights for their astute choices and the satisfaction of helping others.

Don't forget the roses. Traditionally, the first over the finish line is greeted with a blanket and bouquet of beautiful red roses. You can get into the spirit by decorating your table and bar with vases of long-stemmed beauties. For a truly lovely end to a wonderful evening, hand a rose to each of your guests as they say good bye.

With post time at 6:24, give everyone plenty of time to arrive, chat a bit, sip a mint julep and place all bets before the announcer shouts: AND THEY'RE OFFFFFF. But don't blink, there's a reason the Derby is called the Fastest Two Minutes of Sports.

Have great party and bon appétit.

Cheddar-Sage Biscuits

A southern tradition, biscuits will make a great addition to your Derby Party. Enjoy!

Makes about 2 dozen biscuits



3 cups all-purpose flour
1 tablespoon baking powder
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon paprika
1/2 cup cold butter, cut in small pieces
About 12 ounces sharp cheddar cheese, grated
2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh sage leaves
1 cup sour cream
1/2 cup whole milk or half & half

Preheat oven to 425 degrees and line a large baking sheet with parchment paper or a silicon mat.

Put the flour, baking powder, baking soda, salt and paprika in the bowl of a food processor and process until well combined. Add the butter and pulse until the mixture resembles coarse meal. Add the cheese and sage and pulse a few times to combine.

Transfer the mixture a large bowl, add the sour cream and milk and stir to combine. The dough will be lumpy and sticky. Gather the dough in a ball, transfer to a flour-dusted workspace and knead 6-8 times. Pat the dough into 2 rectangles about 2-inches thick. Cut the dough 24 biscuits* and transfer to the prepared baking sheet.

Bake the biscuits until a toothpick inserted into center comes out clean and the tops are golden, about 8 minutes. Serve warm.

Can be made in advance. To reheat: cover and bake for about 10 minutes in a 300 degree oven.

** If you are making the biscuits to serve as 1-2 bite hors d'oeuvres for cocktail time, roll the dough out about 1-inch thick and cut 48 biscuits.*

