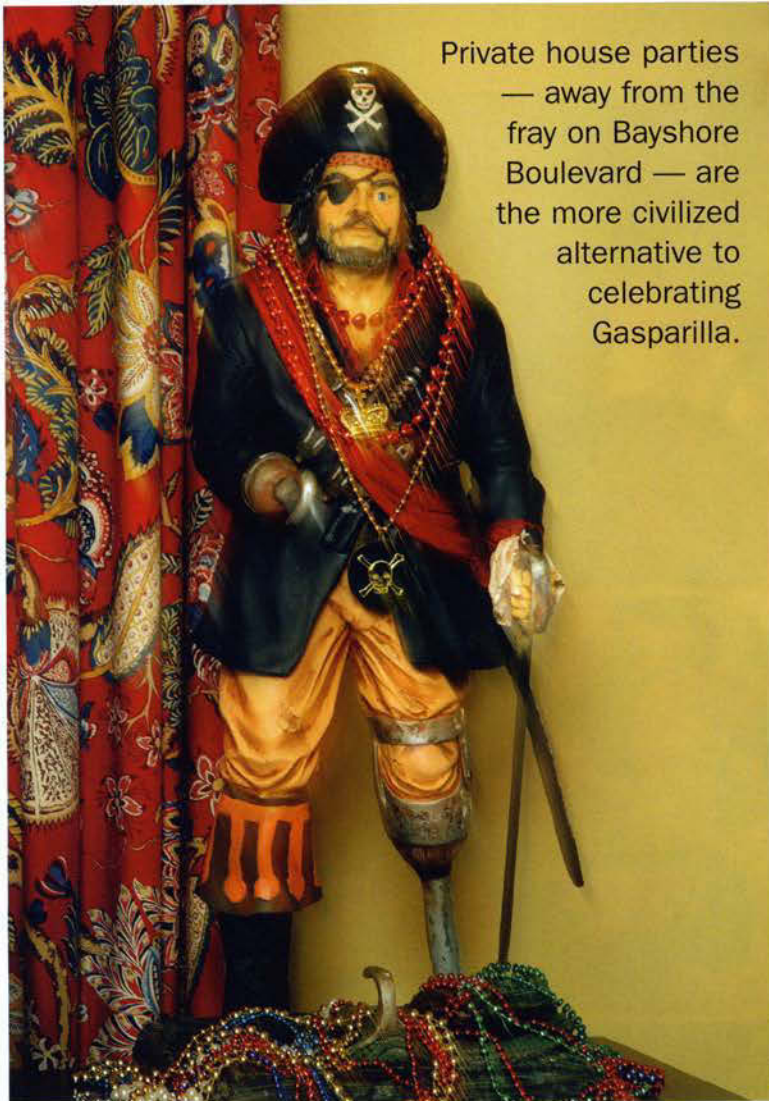


Pirates of Panache

BY MARY ELLEN COLLINS • PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOE TRAINA



Private house parties — away from the fray on Bayshore Boulevard — are the more civilized alternative to celebrating Gasparilla.

For a social scene filled with formulaic black-tie events, sit-down dinners and silent auctions, Gasparilla party hosts agree that there's nothing more fun than connecting with their "inner pirate" to put a personal spin on a unique and cherished tradition. Whether you prefer casual entertaining or a stylish affair, Gasparilla means creating a convivial atmosphere that's a feast for the senses.

"A Gasparilla party is the farthest thing from stuffy that I can imagine," says Leslie Jennewein, who has been hosting parties with her mother-in-law, Joan, since their husbands joined Ye Mystic Krewe, the organizing group behind Gasparilla, some 20 years ago.

Gasparilla is the ultimate theme party, and Tampa's proximity to the Bucs, Key West and Walt Disney World make it easy for hosts to amass extensive collections of parrots and pirate hats, flags and eye patches, gold coins and treasure chests, skulls and crossbones. For the requisite beads and plumes, many locals rely on Features Costumes and Bead Barn on West Barcelona Street in Tampa.

Inventive invitations set the tone for a Gasparilla gathering, and can range from a tiny rolled scroll in a bottle to a printed invitation tied with a pretty silk ribbon. Harrison Giddens, who hosts a party at her Hyde Park

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CARIBBEAN SHRIMP STEW

½ cup fresh ginger, minced

½ cup fresh garlic, minced

Olive oil as needed to sauté

4 cups onion, chopped

½ cup dark rum

6 cups chopped tomatoes, in juice

8 cans Thai coconut milk

1 tablespoon kosher salt

½ cup jalapeño, chopped

½ cup fresh lime juice

1 cup cilantro, chopped

8 pounds large shrimp, peeled and deveined

4 cups cooked black beans

½ pound roasted peanuts, chopped

Cooked rice

In heavy pot, sauté ginger and garlic in small amount of olive oil. Add onions; cook until transparent. Add rum; simmer 3 minutes. Add tomatoes, coconut milk, salt, jalapeño and lime juice; simmer 10 minutes. Add cilantro, shrimp and beans; cook until shrimp are opaque. Serve immediately over hot rice, garnished with peanuts. Serves 24.

Provided by Bay area party planner Laura Schmalhorst

Photography by Mark Sickles

home before the formal Captain's Ball at the Tampa Yacht and Country Club, describes the invitations she designs as "formal but festive." Her favorite invitation featured red and purple edging and a gold embossed ship with an envelope lined in red and purple tissue.

Jennewein's approach to invitations is "the flashier, the better." In addition to sending invitations containing feathers or beads, she has burned the edges of printed invitations to make them look like authentic treasure maps.

Vivid Gasparilla colors — reds, golds, greens and purples — reign in all aspects of the decorating scheme. At the Jenneweins' South Tampa house, bright lamé table runners drape over black tablecloths, shiny Christmas ball ornaments fill bowls, and hundreds of strands of beads hang on everything from tree branches to patriarch C. Paul Jennewein's classical and art deco sculptures to their black lab, Taylor.

Sandra Tuttle enhances her pre-Captain's Ball dinner party with bright plumes in her chandeliers and her favorite design element: a set of 12-inch china pirate figurines draped in pearls and surrounded by coins, which she gave to her husband for Christmas and displays only during Gasparilla.

Her Sunset Beach neighbor, Hedy Cook, who hosts a post-parade "crazy dance party" on her large Key West-style deck augments the already-casual Jimmy Buffett ambiance with ornate beads, pirate flags, tiki torches and hurricane lamps.

In addition to pirate props, anything sea- or sailing-related adds an authentic Gasparilla touch. Over the years, the Jenneweins have set the stage with sand, shells, starfish, spyglasses, compasses, palm fronds, sand dollars, old boat wheels and barrels, and bowls containing real fish.

Deciding on the entertainment for a Gasparilla party is a matter of choice, taste and timing. Cook and her husband, Ward, a former professional musician, always hire a local band to play blues and rock 'n' roll.

"We're big believers in having live music," Cook says. "We just don't think it's a good party unless people are dancing. Our party is at the end of a long celebration, and it's a time for everyone to kick back and have fun."

Since Rosemary Henderson schedules her party for the Saturday evening of the children's parade, the post-parade fireworks provide the perfect entertainment for guests on the porch and in the yard of her Bayshore home.

Jennewein prefers live calypso music to enhance the tropical ambiance, and likes the musicians to be dressed in island



✦ For their Gasparilla parties, Bay area residents can't hang enough red, purple, green and gold beads and feathers. Also popular are pirate-themed decorations such as ships, colorful parrots and menacing Jolly Rogers.

wear. At Giddens' parties, lively conversation and laughter substitute for music. "We're a party all by ourselves!"

Food choices vary, but buffet-style works best for big crowds and for drop-in parties attended by people who are making the rounds of other events in the same evening. No matter what's on their menus, hosts stress the importance of providing substantial food when drinks are flowing freely.

Joan Mickiewicz, of Joan's Catering Inc., often translates the Gasparilla theme into a seafood buffet of cold shrimp, crab claws, marinated scallops, oysters on the half shell and a whole smoked salmon. Henderson sticks with a spicy fried shrimp appetizer and a hearty main dish, then goes all out on the dessert menu, offering a half-dozen treats such as Plant City strawberry trifle, fresh coconut cake and banana cream pie.

The Jenneweins suggest "anything Caribbean or indigenous to Tampa." They have served barbecue, jerk chicken, Cuban sandwiches, and black beans and rice. They've even spit-roasted a pig in the back yard. Drinks such as Bloody Marys, spicy rum punch, beer served in heavy mugs, and a punch made with milk, rum and cinnamon add to the tropical theme.

Whether guests are staying for the whole evening, or passing through on their way to another fete, some hosts add a nice parting touch by handing out small gifts and party favors. As the costumed guests leave the Tuttle's party and head to the Captain's Ball, each "pirate" gets one of Ward Tuttle's homemade, dangly cork earrings.

Lynn Donohue, partner and co-owner of Soirées in Style, recalls one client who gave everyone a beautifully wrapped glass, etched with the date of the party and containing a packet of hurricane drink mix and Gasparilla party beads.

Jennewein has given eye patches to the men and big, gaudy rings to the women, and suggests that "crafty people" could design a medallion or hand-paint a sand dollar and attach it to a strand of beads. The Woods rely on their professional photographer-friend to capture candid moments of their festivities, which they share with their guests via e-mail or CDs.

Gasparilla parties provide an opportunity to pull out all the creative stops and share a swashbuckling sense of fun with friends and family from down the street and across the country.

"This is a great party to invite out-of-towners to. It's Tampa's time to show off," Jennewein says. "The beautiful thing about Gasparilla is that it doesn't matter if you're in a krewe or you're not. Everyone has a great time." □