**Three Weeks Before**

* **Choose a theme, if you want one.**

Decide whether it will be an elegant soiree or a cozy supper, then think about a theme in terms of season, occasion, and guest list. Make, buy, or borrow any related decorations you might need.

* **Extend invitations.**

Mail, phone, and e-mail invites are all acceptable; the more formal the dinner, the more appropriate a written invitation, perhaps tied into the theme. Include such details as the date and time (typically 7 p.m., which allows an hour for cocktails, appetizers, and mingling), the deadline to RSVP (a week before party day), your address, and suggested attire if formal.

* **Plan the menu.**

Keep it fairly simple, including make-ahead dishes if possible (so you don’t spend too much time running in and out of the kitchen), and take the weather into consideration.

**Two Weeks Before**

* **Come up with a playlist.**

It should be long enough to last for the duration of the dinner, coordinate with the party’s theme if there is one, and be kept at a level that doesn’t hinder conversation.

* **Clean any crystal, china, and silverware you’ll be using.**

And launder and iron linens.

**One Week Before**

* **Clean the house thoroughly.**

To maintain it for the rest of the week, do a quick daily routine.

* **Take inventory of tableware, cookware, and serving dishes.**

If you don’t have enough for every dish you’re serving, consider purchasing inexpensive pieces from a discount or thrift store or borrowing—don’t be afraid to mix compatible patterns. Allocate a serving dish for each menu item, and label the dish with a Post-it note.

* **Make a detailed shopping list and cooking schedule.**

Map out where you’ll buy each ingredient or beverage to streamline your shopping route. Rule of thumb: Calculate three bottles of wine for every four guests. Place an order with the local butcher, fish shop, baker, or liquor store as needed.

* **Set the stage.**

Arrange the furniture as you’ll want it for the party, checking for the flow and removing any clutter. Designate a coffee table or side table for coffee and dessert if you wish. Figure out the lighting: Using low-wattage bulbs or candlelight will create the right mood.

* **Create a seating plan if desired.**

Mix together people who aren’t familiar with one another, and set out placecards.

**Three Days Before**

* **Decorate.**

Lay out all decorations but the flowers.

* **Check the medicine cabinet.**

Remove any personal items you wouldn’t want guests to see.

* **Designate a place for coats.**

Make space in a front closet and fill it with hangers, or designate a bed for coats (and make sure the room’s especially tidy and clear of valuables, so you won’t need to worry about them).

* **Shop for food and beverages.**

**One Day Before**

* **Set the table.**
* **Buy flowers.**

Arrange and set out around the house.

* **Do as much of the cooking as you can.**

Also, for any foods that require cooking on party day, do as much prep (dicing, marinating, rinsing lettuce, etc.) as possible.

* **Make a sweep through the house.**

Do cleaning touch-ups where necessary.

**One Hour Before**

* **Be sure the dishwasher is empty.**
* **Change into your party clothes.**

**30 Minutes Before**

* **Light the candles.**

And turn on the music.

* **Uncork the wine.**
* **Toss the salad.**
* **Sip a glass of wine.**

And relax!