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PARTY CENTRAL

Some women seem to waltz through the party scene with invisible focus on them. Now they share their secrets. By Jennifer Tung

When Houston socialite Becca Cason Thrash held a benefit for the Stages Repertory Theater in her house last spring, she stole the show—which was quite a feat, given the competition. Hundreds of the city's power elite filled the rooms. At one end of the house, a band played Frank Sinatra and Enrique Iglesias covers; at the other end an actress performed a scene from the repertory's latest production on a stage suspended over the pool—the same pool that three guests would tumble into after dinner. Throughout it all, Thrash floated through the crowd, waving a glass of chilled vodka and tossing off playful one-liners in her booming Texas drawl. "I love a party the way an actor loves a stage," says Thrash, who is famous for wearing three outfits in one evening (that night, she changed from a long-sleeved white jersey gown to a black Jean Paul Gaultier gown to red silk pajamas). "I suppose it helps that I'm naturally outgoing—and maybe slightly extroverted." Dazzling a room full of people doesn't require a closet of designer gowns or an outsize personality. Warmth, cheerfulness, and thoughtfulness are much more important. "The life of the party has positive energy and the desire to make people feel comfortable," says Noelle Cleary, coauthor of the guide to good living *The Art and Power of Being a Lady* (Atlantic Monthly Press). She's asked over 25 renowned hosts, revelers, and style experts for their secrets to everything from making an entrance to making lively conversation to recovering from making a mess out of yourself. Now let's get this party started.

IN AND

Humans, like airtight seals, need a little assistance when it comes to arrivals and departures.

1. For cocktail parties, stick to a fashionable late arrival limit. "Forty-five minutes is a good limit," says screenwriter [Stewart, Tabori & Chang]. "One hour is a hard limit. If you're a minute late, you're a minute late." Adds that screenwriter, "One hour is a hard limit. If you're a minute late, you're a minute late."
2. At tight parties, arrive later than you expect. "You don't have to be a stand-up comedian. Just keep it short and sweet."
3. ...

2. But don't write it down verbatim. Have a general idea in mind. "Know your audience and remember the toast isn't about yourself," says Andrew Frothingham, author of *Great Toasts* (Career Press). "It's about the person of honor. So don't talk about events the group doesn't know about."

3. Speak from the heart. "Sincerity beats wit," Frothingham says. "Women often have the advantage here because they're willing to express their feelings." Etiquette expert Lesley Carlin says, "You don't have to be a stand-up comedian. Just keep it short and sweet."

4. Keep calm. "Breathe deeply and make eye contact with a few people you've selected in advance," suggests Alexandra Angle, coauthor of *Cocktail Parties with a Twist*. For good measure, says Frothingham, "make sure your glass is only half full, so there's no fluid sloshing around."

TOAST TIPS

Many women would rather watch NASCAR than get up and make a toast at a party. A few easy steps will eliminate the torture factor.

1. Jot down your toast on a cocktail napkin. Here's a time-tested formula: "Start with a humorous or slightly embarrassing anecdote about the person you're toasting," says Eliot Angle, coauthor of *Cocktail Parties with a Twist* (Stewart, Tabori & Chang). Next, mark the occasion by wishing him a happy birthday or congratulating her on her new baby. "End with something personal," says Angle. For example, "Here's to a beautiful and trustworthy person we're all so lucky to know." Make the person feel special, but don't be too sappy."

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