

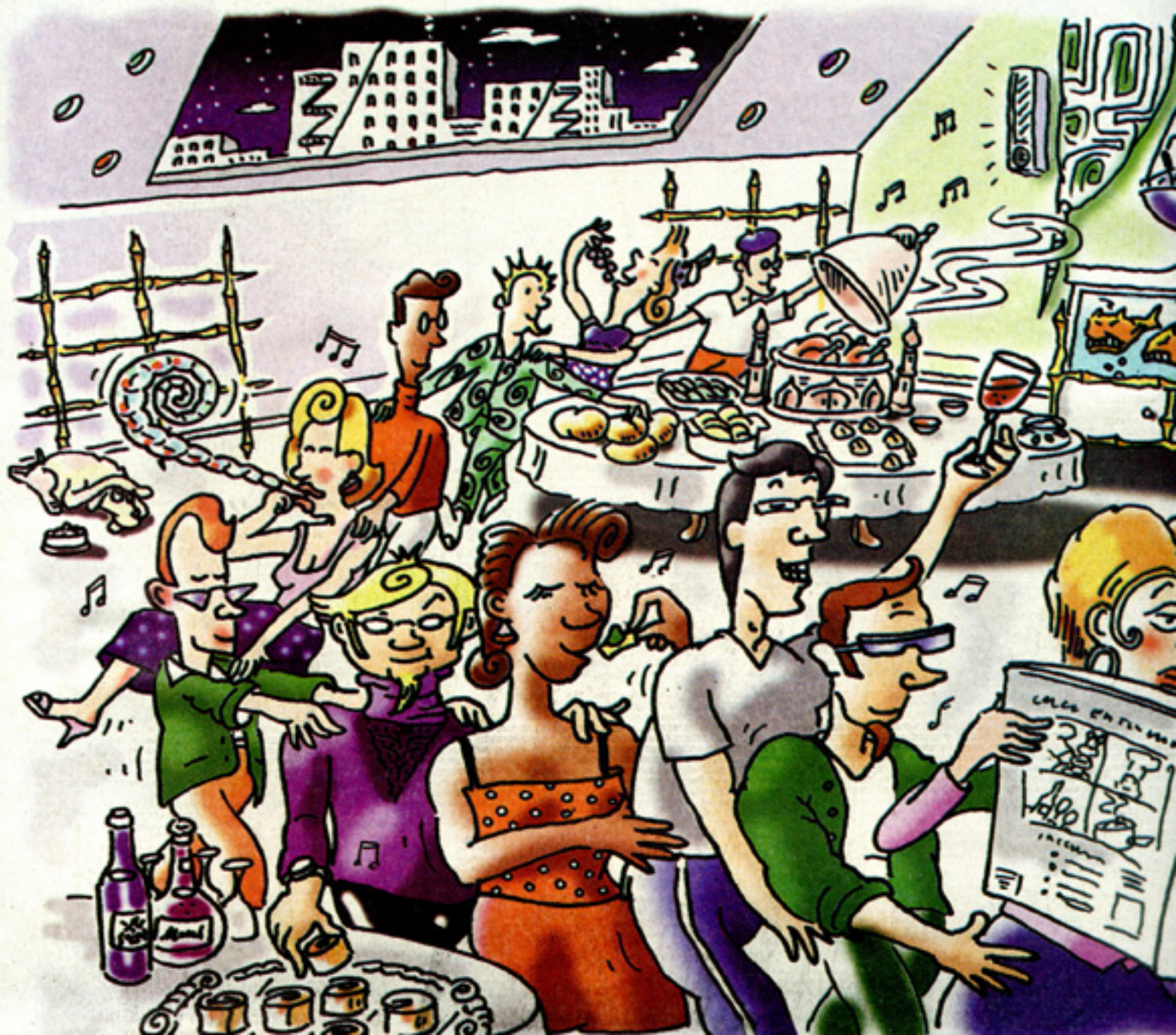
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# Sunday Styles

ENTERTAINING BY THE BOOK

## You Can't Judge a Party by Its Cover

Our hosts find inspiration (but not platefuls of practical advice) in entertainment gurus' how-to



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## You Can't Judge a Party b

Amateur hosts find inspiration (but not platefuls of practical advice) in en



### Cocktails Fit For Banana Republicans

By WILLIAM L. HAMILTON

**H**ERE'S a piece of advice from Arnaldo de Villanova, a 14-century Spanish alchemist, cribbed by Alexandra and Eliot Angles for their book, "Cocktail Parties With a Twist" (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 2002): "Never to stop searching for the water of life."

Par-ty!

I spent two weeks, 12 hours and \$500 searching for the water of life, ultimately serving it as martinis accompanied by Japanese egg custards and endive-based tuna tartare to two dozen friends and acquaintances last Saturday.

I staged the Urban Loft party from the Angles's book, whose 160 pages constitute a perfectly sealed, solipsistic universe of Banana Republicans wearing cashmere underwear (I would put money on it), living large but easy in the New Age.

Like the other parties into which the Angles divide their world, like Glamour by the Pool's Edge (I thought briefly about filling my tub and giving that one), the photographs feature people who have absorbed the ethos of lifestyle advertising so thoroughly that I started expecting magazine articles between the pictures.

By their own jacket-flap description, the Angles run an "event catering company and interior design service" in Los An-



geles and have been called that city's "sexiest cocktail caterers" by Los Angeles Magazine. Make that the "coyest" too.

"How to throw a party?" they ask.

"Wish we could tell you." I thought that was pretty breezy for 30 bucks. But as Yoda would say, ahead I went.

If entertaining is attitude, not ability, why not have a loft party in a small one-bedroom apartment? Sophistication is a state of mind, not square footage, as any New York real estate agent will tell you.

The Angles's book offers no hard advice on Old Age quandaries about how much food and liquor to buy for how many people, or how to make a room look festive, or what music might work.

My housecleaner, Luis Hincapie, and I pushed my furniture to the walls to create a loft. I pulled out every glass I own, including the Nutella jars. In six Saturday shopping trips, I searched for, not the water of life, but caperberries and mirin, a Japanese sweet rice wine. I bought two

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pounds of sushi-grade tuna, an experience that came a little too close to actual fishing for me.

At 7:30 that evening, I skidded out of the shower to greet guests. My apartment looked sexy, if you squinted. I lit candles and turned off lights. I hacked up six nuclear-garden-size endives. I glooped smoked salmon and raw eggs into demitasse cups. Like running prayer beads through my fingers, I reviewed the Angles's five tips for being a successful host.

They are: plan ahead, don't overdo it, keep it simple, be sure to relax and enjoy yourself. Roger that, good buddies. (The chapter's other instruction to the host is to concentrate on "chatting, laughing and flirting," something that caused at least one guest to excuse himself from my company.)

The doorbell buzzed.

I was on stage.

Real people, not pictures of happy partygoers, walked into my apartment, handing me their expectations for a good time like coats. That's when I started writing my own advice, in minute detail, which I'm happy to share.

My advice: have empty vases at the ready, because your guests show up with flowers, and you have to deal with them there and then or you get a look like you've misplaced a child.

The door buzzed again; the room filled. I had a cocktail, the one piece of news you can use in the Urban Loft chapter.

The Angles called for martinis, which is braille in the New Age for "drink that the urbane sip fashionably." The book gives you a basic martini recipe, then nine versions of garnish, so if you offer gin and vodka, you have 18 drinks to shift between as bartender. And no advice on how many bottles will booze how many people, how severely. Do you want your guests lightly fried, or burned?

My advice: premix gin and vodka martinis in distinctly shaped pitchers, so that you can distinguish between the two quickly, and ice the drinks in a shaker as the orders come in. Have guests choose their garnish, set out in bowls, then step forward with their glass for a drink.

There was not a nonalcoholic drink recipe provided, and though there were meat and fish finger foods to make, there were no vegetarian dishes — strange Old Age lapses from La-La Land caterers.

The book said, "Attractive singles are a must." And there seemed to be a gentle discouragement, like a voice mail message for a swingers' club, against couples.

Well, forget it. I tried. Commitment happens.

I invited close friends first (yes, every one of you is attractive in your own way, alone and in pairs). Seized with an 11th-hour panic that not enough people would attend, I called

intriguing acquaintances several days later (yes, you were the genetic boosters). My advice: this strategy is a keeper. Everyone invited appeared. Rational planning and improvisational anxiety created two waves of guests who crested beautifully at the party, talking hard and trading numbers out of sheer unexpectedness. There was good social balance, with a little vertigo, that created a "tribe" for the night.

The crowd was attractive (its doing, not mine). My guests nursed coolly on the Angles' chawan mushi eggs and tuna tartare — obedient lotus-eaters.

Then the Scotch-a-Roos arrived.

They are the goo, if not water, of life: peanut butter on the bottom and melted chocolate on the top. The middle is Rice Krispies bound with Karo syrup. The Scotch-a-Roos showed up in a Pyrex baking dish covered with aluminum foil, on the arm of Rick Fox, a late-appearing guest.

They caused a stampede in the room, then a steeplechase, as the subtly fed chased them through the party. The Asian Rim hors d'oeuvres didn't stand a chance.

That's when Missy Elliot's "Under Construction" hit my CD changer, while I wasn't looking. And that's when people started hugging the kitchen counter like it was a casino table, empty glasses in hand, watching me high-roll the drinks.

"Wow, I've never had this particular problem," Ms. Angle said later that week, from Los Angeles, referring to the Scotch-a-Roos. "I don't know how you balance that in. Serve them with Scotch?"

Mr. Angle, conferenced on the call, said, "You just roll with it. Or you leave and go to another party."

My advice: serve Scotch-a-Roos.

As Missy Elliot suggests on her CD, in "Funky Fresh Dressed," if you're having difficulty with your message, "Turn the volume up." She and Mr. Fox should write a book on entertaining.

We at my party never looked back.

# Banana Republicans And Their Cocktails



Erica McConnell, from "Cocktail Parties With a Twist," Stewart, Tabori & Chang

**THE FANTASY** Guests from the *Impossibly Small Apartment* chapter in "Cocktail Parties With a Twist."