Top tips for party prep

Holidays, graduations or barbecues — no matter what the occasion, the gathering place at any home party is the kitchen. It's where we cook, where guests congregate, and often where refreshments are served.

Because of this, the kitchen also is a likely place for clutter, spills and the general chaos that results from party food preparation.

Home entertaining expert Jeanne Benedict offers tips for preparing your kitchen for a celebration, including beautifying what she calls the centerpiece of the kitchen — your countertop.

According to Benedict, the kitchen is the room that will make the first — and most lasting — impression on guests. Keeping surfaces glistening is the easiest thing a host can do to make an immediate difference in its look and feel.

"When properly cleaned and protected, there is nothing that surrounds a room in luxury and stands the test of time like natural stone," says Benedict, host of DIY Network's "Weekend Entertaining" and author of four books including "The Sophisticated Cookie" and "Celebrations."

"And, just like leather and wood in your home, specialty products should be used to care for natural stone. You want products that are designed to protect and enhance your granite, marble and slate surfaces by protecting them and keeping them clean and pristine."

Jeanne's tip

To keep natural stone countertops looking new over time, use a protective sealer such as DuPont Granite and Marble Countertop Sealer.

For everyday cleaning, avoid the use of all-purpose cleaners that can degrade the sealer and dull the surface. A better choice would be DuPont Granite and Marble Countertop Cleaner + Protector, because it cleans and reinforces stone's protective seal as you use it.

Check out these and other products designed to clean, protect and enhance natural stone at www.dupont.com/jb/tips (available at Lowe's).

Benedict's next prep step is to de-clutter. Because kitchen counters and tables are magnets for stray take-out menus, phone books, crayons and gadgets, she recommends finding them a permanent home when possible — or at least a temporary spot in a toy chest, a home office, the junk drawer or even the recycling bin.

Once the clutter is clear, it's time to get your room ready to rock.

Jeanne's tip

Decorative container options are easy to find — from stylish boxes to desktop organizers. In a pinch, she suggests storing items such as keys or cell phones in an empty cookie jar and slipping papers into cookbooks that may be displayed on the counter.

Finish off the natural look of stone with fresh flowers or a plant to add some life to the atmosphere.

"Flowers simply make people smile, which is exactly the mood you want for a party," says Benedict.

Jeanne's tip

Because you'll be busy making party preparations, call your local florist and have them deliver an arrangement based on the theme of your party. You can cross that chore off your list.

Once the kitchen is tidy and looking terrific, hosts can focus on decorating the rest of the house — from the table to the front door.

"Let your creativity and countertop shine through, and you'll have the most fun of all," says Benedict.

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