

Story: Tanja Kern

THE THING ABOUT OWNING a mid-century modern home is that once the repairs and decor are up to snuff, you can't help but share it. Hosting friends and family is what these houses were built to do, so what better way to usher in the summer than by throwing a house party?

The suburban California lifestyle of the 1950s and '60s was an ideal that many families wanted for themselves. It was all about creating a comfortable life for the family and keeping an immaculate home.

Median family incomes doubled in the 1950s, allowing many families to spend money on their dream homes and leisure activities. One of the most common ways then for breadwinners to spend their hard-earned salaries was to kick back and relax at home.

Entertaining let men showcase how well they provided for their families, while housewives showed off their domestic skills, whipping up multi-course meals and decadent desserts—all while keeping a pristine appearance in classic up-style hairdos, pearls, and heels.

"We didn't have much money, and television was a very new thing, so we made our own entertainment as sophisticated as we could," says Catherine Munson, who has owned and lived in Eichler homes in San Rafael for more than 50 years.

Going out to dinner was expensive back then, so most couples socialized by getting together for dinner parties, games, and conversation. After dinner, many passed the time by playing bridge, poker, and charades. Summertime lured families outdoors and to the barbecue.

"Sometimes it would be hosted by one family, sometimes on hot days people would spontaneously congregate at someone's house," Munson recalls.

Conversation was a simple way to pass the time, too. "One of the most sophisticated parties we had were discussion groups, and it was quite an honor to be invited," says Munson. "We had either 12 people, which would be six couples; or eight people, four couples. We would start after dinner.

"We had pre-assigned subjects, and we would try to read up on that subject for the next meeting. It was a very serious affair. Since most of us were in our 20s or early 30s, we matured with a more serious interest in the political

LET'S HAVE A PARTY!

Your **modern home** may be the perfect setting to **entertain**—but do you have the **nitty-gritty ingredients** to turn a so-so social into a **swinging soiree**?



situation, whether it was local, national, or international. We made some very great and lasting friendships."

Early in the '50s, decor for parties was relatively simple. "We didn't make elaborate table settings, just fresh flowers out of the garden, like geraniums," Munson pointed out.

That changed after Munson saw an Eichler showcase house in 1960 in which each room of the house—even the four bedrooms—was decorated for a party. "They were so clever—things we had never seen before," says Munson, who worked in sales for Eichler Homes for more than a decade beginning in 1958. "They used paper decorations for the tables, for kids and adult parties, and decorated elaborate cakes. They opened our eyes to being unique and original, using colors and being creative. We saw things in a whole different light."



YESTERDAY'S HOUSE PARTY. In their publicity photos, such as the two above, Eichler Homes played up the potential for successful entertaining in their homes. That's party girl Catherine Munson in the blue dress (top).



and night sky are all yours to dine, drink, and laugh under.

Sliding-glass doors to the backyard and atrium and the open single-story floor plan encouraged families to move between spaces and congregate together in the main rooms. Although many of us think today's outdoor rooms are a newfangled idea, in reality the modern homes of the '50s already had outdoor rooms on backyard patios that became the place to entertain. People paid attention to outdoor furnishings, splashed

cake or share some fondue.

Today, with the hustle and bustle of active, non-stop lifestyles, it's no wonder that many homeowners are dreaming of yesteryear, of a time and a place where family and friends take a front seat to work stress, and home-cooked roasts and fresh pies displace takeout Chinese. In the '90s, Martha Stewart took it upon herself to resurrect home-based entertaining, and although her ideal might be too far-reaching for most, there's comfort

long before your family and friends walk through the front door makes them feel appreciated and loved. It's not about impressing the pants off of them; rather, it's about making them feel utterly at home.

"There's one word for a good hostess, and that's 'thoughtful,'" Cherry says. "I have seen parties suffer because the host or hostess threw the parties for their friends to impress them. That's where people go wrong."

The most important element to any



MOOD AND THEME. Above: At this recent black-and-white Eichler event, a Dean Martin imitator crooned smoothly and played his role to the hilt, fake cigarette and all. Top right: Gathering around a piano, the old-fashioned sing-a-long keeps the party juices flowing. Right: Hostess Cherry Capri and a Sinatra look-a-like.

Classic mid-century modern homes support an informal indoor-outdoor lifestyle that continues to be perfect for entertaining today. "I throw a ton of parties," says Loni Nagwani, an Eichler owner and realtor in San Jose. "Eichlers are great for outdoor parties and dinner parties. It's a modular space, so you can reconfigure the house very quickly to open it up and accommodate more people. And there's so much glass."

If you're lucky enough to have one of the distinctive room-sized atriums that were original to many Eichlers, you can entertain inside or out in a flash. The open space allows homeowners to relax in an outdoor environment with the privacy of indoors. The sunshine

in backyard pools, and purchased portable barbecues to grill all-American hamburgers and juicy T-bones.

Homeowners today have expanded on that idea by building expansive outdoor kitchens, complete with a cook top, barbecue, pizza oven, and a refrigerator. Set up a hammock, and there's no real hurry to get back inside.

The interiors were a whole other landscape for entertaining. The open living rooms and broad fireplaces made cozy spots to share a snifter of brandy late at night. The original kitchens were the heart of the home, much as they are today. The Eichlers' pullout tables rolled out and expanded to accommodate larger crowds. What an ideal place to cut a



good retro party is the right beverages. "You can't miss with a good cocktail," Cherry says. "There are two ways to go about a cocktail party. If you have the money, go for a full bar and have everything there: lemon slices, lime slices, Maraschino cherries. If you can't afford that option, then be selective about drinks. Give one or two choices, like a Tangerini, so people don't have to think too much. And definitely don't run out!"

Good-quality martinis bring back the flavor of the '50s and '60s, and mixed drinks, such as champagne cocktails, cosmopolitans, and punches, also add an element of festivity. Have options, like beer, wine, or non-alcoholic beverages, to accommodate different preferences.

Keeping a well-stocked bar can make party planning easy. Have an ample number of bottles of alcohol and mixers and plenty of ice on hand. For a three-hour cocktail party,



plan three to four cocktails per person, and more if your friends are real party animals. "It's always better to have extra for your next party rather than asking guests to go to the store to pick up something," Cherry adds.

With all those drinks, keep food simple so that you're not stuck in the kitchen. Historically, good hosts and hostesses have their menus planned and buffet tables set far in advance. "I'm a big fan of planning," Cherry says. "I have been known to set the table two days in advance of the party." Search through book, thrift, and antique stores to find party-planning books that can help jumpstart ideas for table setting and retro-themed recipes.

"I'm a big fan of casual—not a big

and those from N to Z bring a sweet dish. This allows for plenty of choices and a good balance of tastes.

If you're bringing together diverse groups of friends, it might help to play a few games as icebreakers. "Parlor games, before there was any kind of media, was the main form of entertainment," Cherry points out. "Interactive games are a wonderful way to get complete strangers to meet each other." These games needn't be of the gloomy variety found at bridal showers or networking events. They can be as over-the-top or thoughtful as your event merits.

In the '50s, couples planned scavenger hunts for parties and adult birthdays. People would spend a great deal of time creating clues and placing them in remote



WHAT'S YOUR FLAVOR? "I'm a big fan of casual," says hostess Cherry Capri. Top: Canapés, dips, and snacks are easy to serve and can simply be set out on a buffet table. Above: Cheese fondues, with plenty of vegetables and bread for dipping, make great retro snacks. Left: For drinks, martinis bring back the flavor of the '50s and '60s.

locations. "It was a very high-brow sort of thing to do," Catherine Munson recalls. These games are still great crowd-pleasers today, especially if you can relate it to your guests' hobbies or local community.

Cherry says some of her friends prefer silly fun. "At one friend's party," she says, "he loved to have guests hang a rope around their waist and try to swing a ball into a hoop. I will never forget it. It was so off-the-cuff and silly, and we all ended up making fools of ourselves."

If silliness makes you cringe, then consider an interactive experience like sharing their intentions for the year or their best travel moments. Themed costume parties can be great icebreakers. "I see that as playful activity," Cherry says. "People have an

opportunity to talk about their costumes and laugh about it. You make memories that way."

Loni Nagwani has hosted successful theme parties for clients and friends for which her guests show up dressed as members of the Rat Pack, and Cherry has held events with a black-and-white or 'groovy '60s' theme.

Like good food and drink, music is an absolute essential. Cherry Capri recommends planning the music ahead of time. Have a multi-compact disc player ready with a stack of CDs or build a party music library in your iTunes. Today's home sound systems can turn any room into a dance floor.

"I do moods in my music to help control the situation to a degree,"

Cherry says. "My music is a little slower as guests arrive, and a half an hour or so into it we only have up-tempo songs. As the night winds down, we have some chill-out songs so that some of the slow-goers get the hint."

If you're outside, set up a few tiki torches for some beach-kitsch. A fire pit in the backyard will become a quick point for conversation if you set out a station for S'mores: marshmallows, chocolate, graham crackers, and roasting spears. Mmmm.

If you're new to throwing parties, invite two friends over and have a nice evening of cocktails and conversation. Once you're comfortable with that, up the ante by inviting eight to ten people. "Take baby steps," Cherry says. "I don't recommend people jumping into the deep end." And by all means, relax and have fun.

Photography: Ernie Braun; and courtesy C. Capri, MoMA Design Store, Sur La Table, Carmen Nicholls

RESOURCES

Fine reading on the fine art of entertaining:

- *Pad Parties: The Guide to Ultra-Entertaining* (Chronicle Books) by Matt Maranian, Robert Field, and Jack Gould
- *Occasions* (Simon & Schuster) by Kate Spade
- *In Style Parties* (InStyle) by editors of *In Style* magazine
- Want help planning your next party? Check in with Cherry Capri at cherrycapri.com

Fresh Party Essentials

NEED SOME SMART, new ideas to help pull together the ultimate summer soiree? *CA Modern* has found some cool products and accessories that are sure to tie it all together.

1 Mighty Weber Become an iron chef with the Weber Genesis S-320 gas grill. Features three stainless steel burners, 42,000 BTU-per-hour output, side burner, stainless steel cooking grates, and stainless steel exterior. \$749. weber.com/bbq



2 BBQ-tottin' tools Lock and load your barbecue tools with the Grillslinger Barbecue Tool Kit. Buckled belt has three washable inserts that hold the grill knife, tongs, and spatula. Comes with recipes and a mesh carry bag. \$99.95. surlatable.com



3 Neat teak seats These contemporary teak furnishings by Maku, based in Carlsbad, California, are manufactured using sustainable plantation wood, and a percentage of sales go toward helping the environment. Dining chair: \$579. makufurniture.com

4 Snazzy glassware The distinctive patterns on these glasses from the Museum of Modern Art in New York help your guests remember which glass is theirs. Set of six: \$98. momastore.org



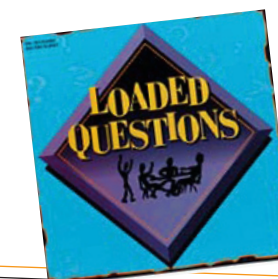
5 All-in-one utensil Don't rely on flimsy plastic knives to cut your barbecued meats. The Knork is a fork, knife, and conversation starter all in one! It's like a traditional fork, but has beveled, rounded edges that work as a knife by using a rocking motion. Set of four: \$2. knork.net

6 Multi-hued bowls These colorful lacquered bowls are handmade from eco-friendly bamboo. Works for hot and cold foods. Set of four: \$55. momastore.org

7 Blue eyes croonin' Together, the albums *Classic Sinatra* and *Sinatra Reprise* offer 40 of Frank Sinatra's timeless tunes that span the popular singer's career, including 'I Get a Kick out of You,' 'Witchcraft,' 'That's Life,' and 'Summer Wind.' \$9.99. amazon.com



8 Game of queries Loosen up with a little self-disclosure. The 'Loaded Questions' game tests how well you know your friends by asking random questions, such as: "If you were invisible, where would you go?" and "If you could be a member of any TV-sitcom family, which one would you choose?" \$22.49. amazon.com



Retro Cocktail Party CHECKLIST

Here are the ingredients you'll need to host an unforgettable retro-styled party in your modern home:

Drink Guests love to unwind with a luscious cocktail, and martinis are a classic choice. Not everyone will choose to imbibe, however, so be a thoughtful host and offer a selection of non-alcoholic drinks, such as mineral water, soda, and punches, for those who choose not to drink. Estimate about one cocktail per hour per guest. (For some choice cocktail concoctions from modern-living hostess Cherry Capri herself, see page 33.)



Eats Go easy on yourself and prepare whatever appetizers you can a day early. Purchase veggie and cheese trays at your local supermarket to save time. Cheese fondues, with plenty of vegetables and bread for dipping, make great retro snacks. Dips and pates served with crackers are a breeze to set up. For a modern-day barbecue, do some quick grilling with pre-marinated shrimp kebabs, corn on the cob, or barbecue chicken.



Put some thought into food presentation. Drape a brightly colored tablecloth on the buffet table. Place appetizers and snacks on decorative trays and plates and in colorful bowls. Flowers are always a nice touch.

Music Set the mood with good music. Cool Jazz, bossa nova, lounge music, and crooners like Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, and Michael Bubl  are nice choices for retro theme parties, but you may also want to program your CD player or iPod for a variety and mixture of themes, artists, and tempos. Keep it fun.

Chatter Organize 'zones' for conversation by placing groups of chairs and small tables around different parts of your backyard. Things will get shifted as guests begin to mingle, but it's important for people to have a place to set down drinks and plates while they chat.

