



HOSTING IN-HOME TASTING EVENTS

HOLIDAY HAPPY HOUR AT HOME

by *Elisa Jordan*

THERE IS A NATURAL SOCIAL ELEMENT when it comes to sampling fine spirits and cigars. Specialty retailers and clubs have been organizing tasting events for decades, but in recent years many aficionados have decided to bring the experience to their friends by hosting events at home. Whether you are gathering friends and family for a party and would like to add a new twist on a holiday party, at-home tastings with friends make an excellent reason to celebrate other while enjoying the hobby.

“WHAT APPEALED to me was having a great social time while tasting various whiskeys and trying other people’s favorites,” says Dominic Parisi, who has hosted a couple of parties at his home in California. “We try different whiskeys on each event. Trying to broaden the experience with brands you wouldn’t usually buy.”

Creating an atmosphere where people can experience new flavors is key. Better to have fewer parties with quality tasting opportunities than just having folks over as much as possible, says Richard O’Malley, a professional event planner in New Jersey.

“Tastings should be about excitement, not scheduling,” he says. “Make sure you have things worth tasting. An event just to have an event will make people less inclined to participate next time.”

Parisi, who is partial to whiskey, makes his events interactive by having guests rate drinks. At a recent party, he set up two tables with each table rating six brands. Guests noted general and distinct observations on each beverage. “It’s amazing how different the ranges are from likes to dislikes on each whiskey,” he says. “The strength of the whiskey to taste varies greatly with each person. Some may think a whiskey is very strong versus not so much.”

People stationed at each table decided on their favorite, then swapped with the other table to decide a grand winner for the evening. (This year’s winner was Lazy River.) The goal, Parisi says, is to broaden everyone’s knowledge and to experience brands that they may not normally taste.

If an at-home tasting event is also tied into a holiday party, guests can bring beverages or cigars instead of a traditional gift exchange. This expands the tasting possibilities and helps eliminate trying to figure out what to get everyone as a present.

Jeff Quint of Cedar Ridge Distillery in Iowa, recommends pacing the evening. With scotch, for example, “you tend to drink a lighter Scotch earlier in the day and gravitate to the more heavily peated scotch over the course of the evening,” he says. “I recommend the same with cigars.”

Pairing the right alcohol with the right cigars only further opens up opportunities to experience quality goods.

“Pairing cigars with wine and spirits is amazing,” Quint says. “For wine, the fuller the body of the wine, the fuller the cigar can be. By the end of the evening, with the fuller cigars, I would gravitate to Port or, better yet, Madeira. For spirits, what I mentioned about Scotch holds true. The peat level can tie nicely to the strength of the cigar. For other whiskeys, brandies, and rum, I’d be inclined to look at both proof and body. A lighter bodied spirit—lighter colored, thinner on the palate—and a low-proof spirit (80 proof, maybe even with a dash of water added) will pair nicely with mild cigars.



same with our drink. Either run the proof up a bit, by getting into the 90-100 proof stuff, or run the body up a bit, which might mean going to an XO brandy or a very long-aged whiskey or rum. The spiciness in Rye Whiskey works well on the fuller smokes as well, but go with higher proof and longer barrel aging.”

Because experiencing new flavors is a focal point, guests can bring their own cigars to share or the host can supply them. In addition to variety, taking the guests into consideration is also a factor.

“If you are also supplying the cigars, you probably want a nice variety with some mild cigars—with a nice light Connecticut Shade wrapper—for the less experienced cigar smokers, as well as some medium - and some full-bodied cigars for the cigar lovers. When I host I offer smaller cigars, say 4-4.5 inches, with about a 50-ring gauge, so guests can enjoy a couple choices over the course of the event. If you supply Churchills, they may only get through one. I would add a coffee-infused choice now that the coffee-infused cigars have really entered the mainstream.”

Quint also recommends keeping handy a quality cigar cutter, a torch lighter (he prefers one or two flames) and heavy ashtrays with a couple of inches along the sides so the cigars to sit.

Because it’s a party, having some food options available adds to the atmosphere. What to offer will likely depend on who is coming, which cigars and spirits are on the menu and if there is a special occasion, such as the holiday season or a birthday. It will be a little different for each event.

Quint, for instance, prefers not to combine cigars with food. He tends to offer light snacks or salads, with chocolate for dessert. Parisi serves comfort food beforehand, such as beef dip and macaroni salad. “Nothing greasy,” he says.

Parisi also uses food to help cleanse palates between tasting each item. He had cut orange slices prepared, as well as dark chocolate cubes for the task. “We also had a small straw and a room temperature bottle of water at each seat. You can add a small drop of water into the glass to cut the strength if needed,



but you still taste the flavors of the whiskey. Most liked this for the higher proof brands.”

O’Malley likes bold flavors that can stand up to the cigars and spirits. “It needn’t be fancy,” he says. “Chili is a great tasting item. It’s easily served and maintained.” Generally speaking, he says, foods at these events can be as simple or as complex as you wish. He does, however, recommend quality. “If you start with quality items to sample, just make sure you build with quality items,” he says. Also, gourmet coffees are a fine addition. Just make sure to always take into account that particular tasting because no two are alike.

Like Parisi, O’Malley likes the idea of broadening what everyone is familiar with. “Always change it up,” he says. “Tastings, whether they are about cigars, bourbon, scotch or wedding cakes are about the new experience that you want to try again and tell your friends about.”

To perpetuate broadening horizons, the host can send home gifts and holiday “stocking stuffers” for guests. Or the guests can have a non-traditional gift exchange in which they trade spirits and cigars. Reporting their findings and opinions back to each other can serve as the kickoff for another upcoming gathering. Hosts can trade off or the events can even be held seasonally and themed appropriately to the time of year.

Because he is an event planner, O’Malley invites vendors to his tastings. It’s a good way to include a higher level of expertise into the fold and elevate the experience. “They know their product and can come up with unique uses and pairings since they really understand their goods. As knowledgeable as you may be, you may not even know what you don’t know!”

These same principles can also apply to home parties. If friends are more knowledgeable in certain areas, invite them to participate and bring what they think others will enjoy or think is different or new.



People have become more sophisticated in their tastes and their palates are ever evolving. “Networks like the Cooking Channel and Food Network have taught people how to be discerning,” O’Malley says. “Websites like Yelp and Google have taught them how to review items and share publicly. People are no longer shy about their opinions.”

And people are at the heart of these tastings. Sharing favorite flavors and finding new ones with like-minded friends creates an enjoyable evening. Parisi says simply, “I wanted to get family and friends together who share the same liking.”

Elisa Jordan is a freelance writer living in Southern California and writes for a variety of media outlets. She specializes in cultural history, architecture and pets.