

# HOUSE RULES

t h e p o d c a s t

## Episode 10: Hosting Part One: The Mood & The Food

I'm Myquillyn Smith and this is House Rules.  
Welcome to Episode 10.

I have lived my entire adult life dreading taking showers. Hear me out—I do in fact take showers. But until I actually set foot in the shower, for some reason, I try to put off all that work. Just thinking about having to get undressed, get in the shower, wash and condition my hair, and shave things makes me tired. And that's just all prelude to the real work. We women don't step out of the shower and towel off, put on a shirt and pants, oh no. We put product in the hair, then blow-dry that hair (but not too much), then more product, all while in a tiny bathroom that is now one thousand degrees. We add more hair product. Next, face stuff. Sunscreen, makeup I'm never quite sure if I'm getting right, and then the fixing of the hair commences. May the odds be ever in your favor. Once I'm committed to the work of taking a shower, I can't negate it by wearing my regular sloppy house clothes. I always feel the need to honor all that trouble by putting on actual people clothes instead of yoga pants. Deciding on the shirt-pants-shoes combination always takes me longer than I'd like to admit.

The one thing that gets me through and motivates me to take that shower, besides the knowledge that I'll be a social outcast if I don't, is that I have never, not once in my life, regretted taking an actual shower.

So why am I sharing my shower issues? I'm glad you asked. Because I experience the exact same feelings when it comes to inviting people over. As the time gets closer to people showing up at my house, I one hundred percent of the time dread that I have to be on. I temporarily hate myself for opening up my big mouth and inviting people to come to my house. Why do I do this to myself? Why can't I just be home alone watching Little House on the Prairie again?

It's because I've experienced the truth of hospitality. I have never, ever regretted inviting anyone over. Once it's done, I have never regretted hosting, it's always been worth the effort. Welcoming people into our home has never been a waste of energy, time, or resources.

Whether you're a reluctant or ambitious host by the end of today's episode you'll be reminded of what truly matters when it comes to hosting one person or one hundred people.

+++

When it comes to hosting, there are really only three things you need to consider, I call them the Hosting Trinity: The Mood, The Food and The People. We're going to cover the mood and food today and next week will be part two where we talk about the people.

Narrowing our focus is important because it's all too easy to feel overwhelmed when we think about hosting. Based on what I saw in all the shelter magazines I loved, I used to think that legit adult hosting always had to involve real dishes, ironed cloth napkins, breakable glassware, homemade everything, a perfectly styled house and table, and impressive outfits for the whole family. The idea of connecting with others in my home was something I was really drawn to, but something I didn't have the energy to put on a great show.

But when I thought about times that I felt most at home at other peoples houses and at their gatherings, I realized they didn't look or feel like the images of legit adult hosting that I had in my head. Instead, they were always casual, simple, and informal. The food was approachable, the setting didn't distract from the conversation, and most important of all, I came away from those gatherings feeling more myself, more known, and more connected to others. And so that became my goal for any kind of gathering we hosted, including those high-profile holidays. That's when hosting shifted from feeling overwhelming to feeling more natural, doable, and enjoyable for me.

Okay, back to the hosting trinity and the mood, the food and the people. To make it easy to remember and implement, we'll focus on the three ways to add mood, three foods and three people to consider for any and every gathering you will ever host for the rest of your life (of course the people part will be in part 2, that will come next time). I promise this method works. I use this whether I'm hosting a thousand people in our barn, thirty people for a graduation party in our back yard, or a few out-of-town friends for dinner in our home.

Okay, let's start with The Mood.

If you listened to Episode 2: How to Decorate for Fall Without the Fuss, (our most popular episode out of 7 so far by the way) then you already know about decorating like a creator instead of a consumer and it works for every single season. If you haven't listened yet, be sure to, because when you get your home ready for each season, whether it's fall, winter, spring or

summer, you're actually working on getting your home ready for everything coming within that season.

I say this every season over and over again, and it's true: when your home is ready for the season, it's automatically ready for the celebrations and holidays within that season. Yep! It's almost like I tricked you! You thought you were just getting your home all pretty and decorated for whatever the season is, right now it's fall. But really, we're getting our home ready and kind of done so that we can use it and invite people over. That's what our homes are really for.

You're welcome.

So, when your home is ready for fall it's automatically more ready for Halloween and Thanksgiving.

When your home is ready for winter it's automatically more ready for Christmas and New Years.

When your home is ready for spring it's automatically more ready for hosting the baby shower, wedding shower, Easter and graduations.

When your home is ready for summer it's automatically more ready for Fourth of July, barbeques, impromptu s'mores nights and birthday parties.

You can insert any season and any celebration and it works.

So if, after listening to Episode 2, you used your 5 senses and worked through what sounds, smells, tastes, feels and looks like the season to you, you now have a home that actually already feels like it will support the season. Right now it's fall, so we're going to focus on that, but I want you to know, this method works for every season.

Since you've already seasonalized your home for fall, it's feeling really cozy and like autumn. For some of us, that's all we need for Thanksgiving decor, if we think about hosting for Thanksgiving. But maybe you want to make your gathering a little more special and decorate your home with some additional Thanksgiving touches. No problem!

There is a difference between seasonalizing your home and decorating for the holidays. Do you hear that? The goal is to seasonalize first, then as each holiday within that season comes, if you feel you need more holiday specific decor – you can do that.

When it comes to decorating for a holiday, after I seasonalize working through the five senses, I start by using the rule of three. Begin by choosing three places to focus your decorating magic for whatever celebration or holiday is coming. It could be your front door, or your mantel, your buffet, or entryway, a windowsill and your dining table, or any other combination that works for you. You don't have to go overboard, just pick three places and that's it. You have other things to focus on besides decorating for the holiday.

Once you choose only up to 3 places to add some festive celebration or holiday specific decor, whether that be Thanksgiving, Christmas, or Labor Day, focus on something large that you can add to each space to pretty it up. It's always better to have one large statement item than lots of tiny little things spread around. One mistake I often see on Pinterest is people focusing way too much attention on lots of small tiny details that just get lost in the room.

Instead of using twelve tiny vases with single stems of flowers, consider a large statement piece, maybe a big basket of mums, a big fall wreath, or an oversized branch with dried leaves tucked into a corner. Focusing all your creative attention into one big, beautiful item makes a bigger impact than gluing one-inch pumpkins onto tiny napkin rings or putting pilgrim stickers on water bottles. Let's commit together to never to apply stickers to water bottles again.

Once you've added your holiday specific decor, it's time to take stock of your utensils. So pay attention to your serviceware, your tableware, all the things that are needed for your celebrations and hosting. Ideally, you want your supplies to work for year-round celebrations. I try to avoid holiday specific plates and glassware and serving pieces. I don't want candles or platters with turkeys, or Christmas trees, bunnies, or shamrocks. I don't want American flags on my serviceware. No, I want stuff that I can use January through December. And I make sure to nod to the season with my seasonalizing, with my decor. You know, with my statement pumpkin or my mums or my greenery, whatever that is. But you're adding that, most likely, at the beginning of the season. See how this is making sense?

### **Next, we're going to move on to the Food.**

Food is the delicious icebreaker of any get together. It's also one of the things we tend to make into a very big deal to the point that it holds us back from inviting people over. Coming up with a menu and then serving it? Going to the grocery store, cooking stuff, making it presentable, and then saving energy to have actual conversations with people? Forget it.

When it comes to the food that you are preparing when you are hosting people in your home, there are some limits that apply to every hosting event be it large or small – all year round.

Limit yourself to two foods maximum to make from scratch, with the rest being store bought or others brought. Did you hear that? Store bought or others brought, and two foods max that you make. If you hate to cook, you are not even required to make two foods from scratch, this rule is for those of us who enjoy cooking, and maybe are ambitious and end up biting off more than we can chew – food pun intended – or maybe somehow we are manipulated into thinking that it's our job to cook everything from scratch and the holidays will be ruined if we don't. So we commit to cooking too much when we host.

This applies even if you are a person who loves to cook – you allow yourself to make only two things. Hosting is about more than just cooking. You need to be in a place where you aren't

preoccupied with stirring, basting, timing, and simmering. Make two delicious things and allow the rest to be easy so you can be present.

If you hate to cook, then don't make anything. You can have great food from the grocery store or a restaurant. And remember, people ask what they can bring because they are, first of all, so happy you are hosting. And they are happy to contribute. Let them bring something and make sure they know it doesn't even have to be homemade. And yes, this applies just as much to Thanksgiving with extended family as it does to Pizza Friday with the neighbors. Never commit to making more than two foods from scratch.

In addition to only making only two homemade foods, one thing I love to do that makes my guests feel special and makes me feel like I put thought into having people over is to serve one special drink.

Your guests cannot possibly remember every detail of their time with you, but they will remember something. When you spend a little more time on one lovely detail, you can boss their memory into choosing to remember how delightful and wonderful that one detail was and how it made them feel loved. So I like to focus on creating one memorable drink – sometimes it's a signature cocktail or just a drink bar. I want something that's delicious, maybe there's an option for alcohol or not alcohol at all, but think about a beverage bar with all sorts of fun embellishments. Because it's a visual delight, as well as a taste delight, there's zero cooking involved, but you still get to enjoy it, and everyone gets to drink it. Plus, when you make a special drink simple, beautiful experience for your guests, no one will remember whether your house needed to be dusted or your tub needed to be scrubbed. I like to rely on this trick for almost every gathering I host, no matter the season.

In the fall, my go-to special drink is often is a stacked hot-cider bar. By "stacked" I mean I stack a bunch of tiny fall edibles on a skewer and use the skewer as a garnish. It's reminiscent of those over-the-top Bloody Marys with the big skewers full of shrimp, peppers, sometimes there's a mini sandwich or a cheeseburger on the skewer. Only this is a hot, family-friendly drink with fall flavor applied. So on the skewer, which is just a kabob stick from the grocery store, there might be an apple or orange slice or if you're super fancy you can cut up candied apple, Walmart has those miniature pecan pies, so a lot of times I will put those on the skewer, you can get tiny donuts or donut holes, sprigs of rosemary, teeny tiny cupcakes and maybe a cranberry at the end to hold everything in place. For this I make sure to serve the cider in a heavy mug so the drink isn't toppled over from the skewer of edible embellishments.

If this sounds fun to you, spend a few minutes researching different fall drinks, or whatever the season is, something that suits the season. And set up a drink bar or station with a tablecloth, maybe some pretty edible embellishments and drinks available to your guests. I do have a pinterest board with drink ideas for every season, we'll link it in the show notes for you so you can get ideas for setting up a drink station or different types of drinks for every season. Some are really elaborate, some are really basic and simple. But I promise, once you start doing this, the payoff is worth so much more than the little bit of effort.

So, pick one special drink, make it your go-to for each season, and stock up on supplies. You can serve it every time you have people over throughout the season. Your guests will feel really special because they get a fun and beautiful drink, and you don't have to worry about all the special details or garnishes for anything else because the drink does all the wow-factor work for you.

This episode is coming out before Thanksgiving so for funs, we're going to apply this rule to the Thanksgiving meal, but if you're listening to this before Christmas, Easter, Fourth of July, or for any big event, this rule applies.

What if you are hosting and somehow now feel you're expected to provide a hot fully cooked delicious turkey, homemade mashed potatoes and gravy, homemade macaroni and cheese, stuffing made from your family's favorite stuffing recipe, cranberry sauce that you canned yourself, green bean casserole, sweet potato casserole, yeast rolls, and homemade pie?

First of all, that is a lot of food. So unless you LOVE and live for doing this and don't have any other job besides cooking food for your family, this is too much work for one person who is also allowed to have a day off and give thanks.

If this is you, I want you to decide which two items you are most excited about cooking, or maybe which to items you're most familiar with, or taste the best or just are the easiest. Say you decide to make the mashed potatoes and mac and cheese from scratch. Great, you also understand the power of a nice drink so you're gonna set up a pretty little drink station with details – or maybe you ask your niece to plan that because she loves stuff like that, that's perfectly fine!

Now for the turkey, you're either going to order one precooked from a local place, maybe you'll ask someone to bring a PRECOOKED turkey – did you know you can buy just a turkey breast and make it ahead if you don't want a big turkey? Also, did you know you're allowed to have other meats on Thanksgiving? Your family gets to create their own tradition. In our house the turkey is 100% Chad's responsibility. I don't think about it. So even though it's homemade in my house, it's not my job and doesn't count as one of my two homemade things. He knows he's not even allowed to use my kitchen refrigerator because of the stuff I'm doing that day. So he always buys the turkey and takes it down to my sister's extra fridge at her house. Over the years it's become a tradition for Chad and our youngest son, Gavin, to mix the brine and presoak, what is the word? They put the turkey in the brine overnight, and then they get up really, really early on Thanksgiving morning and smoke the turkey together. It's a HUGE success, it's really delicious and a bonding time for them. And they bask in the congratulations and compliments of their delicious creation, as they should.

That leaves all the other sides, desserts, and breads when we're going through the Thanksgiving meal. If you have people coming to your home, these are the things that you ask them to bring.

Now, sometimes there are crazy circumstances where everyone is traveling from across the world and staying with you or maybe they are staying someplace where they can't cook. Listen, this is not proof that you should be making more, it's actually the opposite. If you have guests staying with you, that's proof you need to keep the big meal even more simple because you are probably providing other meals along with a place to stay.

You can still request that guests pick up something. You can tell them the store to go to, you can suggest your favorite bakery and have them grab some pies, they can get sides from the deli down the street, ice, paper products if possible, whatever it takes to make this holiday enjoyable for everyone, including you. Your guests want to help and they will be glad you asked. They don't want to see you slaving in the kitchen all day just for them. That's going to make them feel awful.

Now, everytime I talk about this, someone comes up with the unique scenario - what if your guests are all old men who have never stepped foot in the kitchen or people who just moved and their kitchen is being remodeled or your young kids with a new baby and I don't want them to have to cook. I think that's so wonderful of you. But the solution to this wonderful problem is not that you wear yourself out in the kitchen. The solution is that you get help in the form of finding a way to get some premade holiday sides, deserts or mains that you are not responsible for. Weather from a local chef, a favorite restaurant, a neighbor down the street who offers to fry a turkey, or simply changing the menu.

Often the person who has set the bar so high for piles of homemade food from one singular person, is ourselves. And we are the one who must break this vicious cycle so our sons and daughters don't one day believe that the only way to have a meaningful holiday meal is for someone to sacrifice their own holiday in front of the stove. Did you see that episode of The Bear? I believe I've made my point.

If you are a guest this holiday season and you sense that the host is putting it all on themselves to make everything from scratch, ask them how you can help. Suggest adding in some store bought or others brought items to help ease the burden. Convince them they don't have to wear themselves out on your behalf.

As a reminder the Hosting Trinity is about focusing on The Mood, decorating in 3 places only, The Food, making two foods and the rest is store bought others brought, along with an impressive drink station, and The People that we'll get to next week in Part Two: How to Host People Like a Person.

+++

Much of this content can be found in my last book, *Welcome Home: A Cozy Minimalist Guide to Decorating and Hosting All Year Round*. It's a New York Times Bestseller that's helped thousands of seasonal decorators and hostesses like you focus on what really matters. If you want more hosting and seasonal decorating encouragement check out *Welcome Home* from your local library or anywhere books are sold.