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Thank you very much

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Staff

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A thoughtful hostess gift says it with panache

By DREW STERWALD PHOTOGRAPHY BY GARTH FRANCIS

When it comes to parties, Dewey Sanders always seems to be planning one or attending one.

If it's not a Junior League function, it's a dinner party with friends, or an Edison Festival of Light gala, or an Oscar-night bash.

"I know a lot of people," the Fort Myers native explains simply.

Whether she's hostess or guest, Sanders grasps the importance of showing appreciation for hospitality.

She keeps a stash of hostess gifts at home for such occasions - a nice candelabra or a good bottle of American cabernet sauvignon in a pretty bag or box.

"You never want to show up empty-handed," she says.

American society seems to have relaxed some of its traditional codes of etiquette over the years - perhaps, gentle reader, to Miss Manners' chagrin.

But many well-mannered guests still make an effort to say thank you with a token gift during or after a social event.

It's not required, but it's a thoughtful gesture, according to manners maven **Suzanne Willis**, who educates local youngsters in etiquette.

"The protocol is to be always thinking of other people - that's the underlying rule of good manners," says **Willis**, who teaches her classes at The Ritz-Carlton in Naples. As with most gifts, it's the thought behind a hostess gift that counts - not the price tag.

THE RULES ARE FEW

"It can be anything from a simple box of chocolates to a plant," **Willis** says. "You don't want to feel like you're upstaging the other dinner guests."

Also, it's inconsiderate to hand the hostess a bouquet of fresh-cut flowers wrapped in plastic, **Willis** says. That forces the host to stop mingling with guests, find a vase and assemble an arrangement on the spot. Orchids, herbs or other potted plants present no such effort.

Other than that, there are few hard-and-fast rules.

"I try not to decorate people's homes," says Louise Senneff, executive director of the Lee County Alliance for the Arts.

Instead she takes along homemade gifts such as bread or herb-infused oils, especially during the holidays. For out-of-town hospitality, she might bring Florida-specific gifts such as Key lime cookies, or post-visit send the hosts a nicely framed

photograph taken during the stay.

Small gift boutiques, antiques shops and home-furnishings stores are rich sources for unique picture frames, candlesticks and other things that can cater to the host's individual interests.

CATER TO TASTES

Find an unusual barbecue sauce for a man who likes grilling, for example, or wine-glass charms for a couple into vino.

Ron Killion, who owns Frog and the Fly in downtown Fort Myers, has one customer who shops for porcelain dogs. She tries to match the canine knickknack to her host's pet.

"If you know what somebody collects, for instance, that always makes a good gift," Killion says.

Hors d'oeuvres trays, barware such as cocktail glasses or shakers and other housewares make lovely little gifts, he says.

Larger stores offer plenty of possibilities, too.

Look for unique bottle stoppers, leaded crystal candy dishes and leather or wooden tea chests at The Bombay Co. in Fort Myers and Naples.

Do your hosts have a taste for adventure? Line a wicker or wire basket with a lovely linen tea towel and fill it with goodies from Blue Pepper Gourmet Foods & Bakery in south Fort Myers, such as wasabi mustard, mango chutney and pickled garlic.

"Whenever I'm in a jam, I go to Pier 1 (Imports) and buy some nice candles or a little platter," Sanders says. "Everyone loves candles."

When she doesn't have time to do the shopping herself, Sanders relies on Creative Baskets in south Fort Myers.

"They have little trinkets, candles, books, pillows - in every type of price range," she says.

WRAP IT UP

Even if you don't drop a lot of cash on the gift itself, you can make it look like a million dollars. The presentation of the present can involve shiny ribbons or unusual containers such as Chinese porcelain.

"There's lots of ways to do creative packaging," Senneff says.

The personal touch, after all, adds value that mere money cannot buy.

DETAILS

TOP ROW, left to right (page 58):

- Clever kitchen towels for the hostess with a retro sense of humor, at Ladybug and Dragonflies, Fort Myers
- Decorative pillows with attitude, at Creative Baskets, Fort Myers
- Treasure chest of imported teas, at The Bombay Co. Metropolitan Museum of Art coasters, at Ladybug and Dragonflies and faux cup of tea that never gets cold, at La Charmante Maison, downtown Fort Myers

MIDDLE ROW, left to right:

- Picture frames from several area shops
- "Parfum pour la Maison," perfume for the home, made in France by L'Occitane
- "Batons D'Encens," incense sticks in cinnamon orange by L'Occitane
- candles in various sizes and scents by Archipelago Botanicals all at Escentials in The Village Shops, Sanibel

· Large plate from the "Tropical Jungle" collection by Siddhia Hutchinson palm tree-etched wine glass, (water goblet also available) small bottle palm plate from the "Jungle Safari" collection by Siddhia Hutchinson and set of six (one shown) porcelaine de Limoges dessert plates all at Ile Crocodile in Palm Ridge Plaza, Sanibel