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# HOW WE ENTERTAIN IN THE WHITE HOUSE

BY BETTY FORD  
AS TOLD TO TRUDE B. FELDMAN

The First Lady describes her efforts to re-create the warmth of family gatherings at a beach cottage on Lake Michigan in making kings and prime ministers feel at home when they come to dinner at the President's house

"How did you know I can't resist chocolate?" the Chancellor of Austria, Bruno Kreisky, asked after a State Dinner we had given in his honor.

I didn't tell him that one of the advantages of entertaining in the White House is the wonderful help I am lucky enough to have. There are two chefs, a pastry chef, three cooks, six butlers, a marvelous maître d'hôtel—John Ficklin—and the kind of information from the State Department that will tell me everything I should know about the guest of honor, including his favorite dessert.

But even with a large staff and the inherent grandeur of the White House, my first concern is exactly what it was when we entertained over the years in our homes in Grand Rapids or Alexandria, Virginia—to please our guests and make them comfortable. It took some effort to accomplish that even for a small group of friends in our own home. With large numbers of distinguished guests in the rather overwhelming atmosphere of the White House, it takes even more planning to make people feel at ease.

For example, when a woman comes to a White House dinner or dance without an escort, I try to make sure that someone looks after her. And when a man asks me to dance, I subconsciously hope Jerry will ask the man's wife or date to dance, too. I particularly am concerned with shy people.

At a recent dinner for the Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzhak Rabin, everyone joined in when the band played the "Hora," a kind of Israeli community dance. When the music changed, one of our guests asked me to do a fox trot with him. As we danced, I asked where his wife was, and when he pointed her out to me, I winked at one of my aides to alert the President and suggest he ask her to dance with him. Later, when she realized I had put Jerry up to it, she thanked me, and we had a good laugh about the whole thing. It's just one way of putting people at their ease.

To begin with, we try to make our guests feel welcome with a personal greeting and handshake in the receiving line. I want each one to sense—with the handshake itself—how I feel about his accepting our invitation. It's the inflection in your voice that counts. I don't like to give people an automatic greeting or a mechanical smile.

Several days before a State Dinner, I go to the first floor and check with my social staff who have set up a sample table, with the tablecloth, color scheme and floral arrange-

ments planned around the centerpieces. Beforehand we have checked preferences of food and beverages with the State Department or particular embassy to make sure the visitor and his entourage will be happy with our choice.

I have tried to make official dinners less formal. When I was the wife of a congressman and visited the White House, I was struck by the formality and similarity of every State Dinner. I decided to use small round tables, seating ten, rather than a large banquet-style arrangement. We cover the tables with colorful print cloths and try to arrange distinctive centerpieces. Since many of the people at each table are strangers to one another, the centerpieces can help start conversation going.

On St. Patrick's evening, we entertained the Prime Minister of Ireland. Because Mr. Cosgrave is an avid lover of horses, I chose centerpieces depicting the Winner's Circle at the Kentucky Derby. Bronze sculptures of Kentucky Derby winners (borrowed from various museums) were placed on beds of natural bark covered with moss and hedged with flowers. Many of the guests that night have stables of their own, and they particularly seemed to like the bronze on the President's table, sculptured to represent Secretariat crossing the finish line when he won the Kentucky Derby.

For another dinner I chose a colonial American theme. Antique metalware used in American homes during the 18th and early 19th centuries was displayed with fruits, vegetables, breads, nuts and spices. The historic uses of the housewares were linked with the decorations: Pewter wine and ale measures were surrounded by grapes and berries; a copper teapot was trimmed with tea, oranges, cloves and cinnamon sticks; a flat iron was accented by cotton thistles.

I have also tried to make official dinners less formal by cutting down on the amount of food served. On many occasions we have eliminated serving two appetizers. My predecessors often included both soup and fish courses, but I usually omit one or the other. Of course we try to serve the finest food possible, but I select fresh vegetables in season, usually those readily available in abundance, and meats or fowl that are the best buys of the week. Like other wives, I am concerned about rising costs and nutritional values of food.

While a memorable meal is important, perhaps even more crucial to whether or not our guests will have a good time is the after-dinner entertainment and socializing. Here again we let ourselves be guided by the preferences /turn to page 150

## HOW WE ENTERTAIN IN THE WHITE HOUSE

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of our guest of honor. For a State Dinner honoring the President of the Federal Republic of Germany, Walter Scheel, last year, we invited Tennessee Ernie Ford and the Opryland Singers to entertain in the East Room after dinner. President Scheel may be the only chief of state to have made a hit record. In 1973, for charity, he sang an old German folk song, "High Up on the Yellow Wagon." The record sold over 400,000 copies. He hummed the song for reporters after dinner, to the delight of everyone.

**B**ecause I think actor-singer-dancer Ben Vereen is one of the most versatile entertainers on the American scene today, I invited him to perform in honor of the Cosgraves. But even for the White House it wasn't easy to get him. He had an engagement at the Plaza Hotel's Persian Room. He convinced hotel managing director Joseph Mogush to free him so that he could perform on St. Patrick's evening for our predominantly Irish audience.

We invited Metropolitan Opera star Roberta Peters, who was celebrating a milestone in her career—25 years at the Met—to sing for the President of Colombia, Alfonso López Michelsen. Miss Peters was seated at my table during dinner. When I sensed her nervousness before her performance, I tried to put her at ease by talking about something other than the after-dinner program. I knew that she had a teenage son, Paul—the same age as my daughter, Susan. So I began to tell her about Susan's recent prom at the White House and engaged her in conversation about our children. Later I asked the orchestra to play tunes that would be comfortable for her to dance to. To show his appreciation for her magnificent performance, the President danced several times with Roberta.

Her thank-you note was most rewarding. Let me share part of it: "Both you and the President really did your homework. He introduced me beautifully—as if he knew me for years. And you helped me forget the awesome atmosphere of the White House by showing your interest in me—the mother and wife, rather than the artist."

At the end of a dinner the President and I don't hurry upstairs. We make a practice of mixing with the guests, and we try to set the pace by having fun ourselves. Both Jerry and I love to dance, and when we begin, others join us. While at times we are criticized for dancing too much, we feel it's part of our hospitality.

Despite our best preparations, there has been an occasional ticklish moment. For example, one thing we hadn't discovered in advance about President Sadat of Egypt is that he doesn't dance and apparently doesn't approve of dancing. We found that out at our dinner for him when one of our guests, Pearl Bailey, began to coax him to dance. But we didn't think it

was anything to make a fuss about, because he seemed willing enough. He rose, took a few steps and then sat down. Some in Mr. Sadat's entourage thought he had been offended, but there was a beaming expression on his face that told me he was enjoying the experience.

Our first State Dinner at the White House was for King Hussein of Jordan. I had very little time to prepare for that one because Jerry became President only five days before the King was due to arrive. We hadn't even moved into the White House yet. So I depended upon friends to help me and just used my best judgment about planning the evening. Imagine how happy I felt when someone told me the King had been heard to say that it was the most enjoyable party he had ever been to at the White House. During that evening Eric Severeid was coerced into dancing, and as he got up to do the Mexican hat dance he remarked, "I've never seen so much joy in the White House."

**W**hen we have guests informally in the family quarters of the White House, I usually fall back on the way we used to entertain when we lived in Alexandria, when Jerry was a congressman and then Vice-President—buffet style. It's a carry-over from our days in Grand Rapids. Back there, entertaining was on a much smaller scale and was relatively simple. Our space was limited: a living room, dining room, breakfast room, kitchen, two bedrooms and a bath. We lived downstairs in our own duplex, and we rented the upstairs portion. This was home mainly in the summer when Jerry went back to campaign for Congress.

In Grand Rapids I used some antique silver that had belonged to both my mother and Jerry's mother. Mother Ford gave us antique knives with pearl handles and an antique silver coffee urn, which I also used in Alexandria. They came in handy when I served buffet style.

We spent part of our summers at Ottawa Beach in a cottage on Lake Michigan, 45 miles from Grand Rapids. It was jointly owned by the four Ford brothers—Jerry, Tom, Dick and Jim. There we enjoyed parties and picnics on the beach with friends and relatives. At the cottage we served a menu generally consisting of casseroles or potato salad with cooked ham or a leg of lamb or hamburgers. Desserts were ice cream, pies and cakes from the local bakery or fresh blueberries, which were locally grown.

As a congressman's wife in Washington, I continued to entertain diplomats, press and congressional couples in this informal style. My guests seemed to enjoy getting away from the black-tie circuit.

Since we had a small house in Alexandria, I entertained more often during the fall and spring so that I could use the patio and pool area as well as the house. The buffet was set up in the family room with service directly from the kitchen. A typical buffet included

beef tenderloin, a vegetable, a tossed salad and dessert, followed by coffee. I sometimes cut a watermelon in half, scooped it out, then filled each half with fresh blueberries, strawberries and melon chunks. A delicious angel-food cake with a chocolate mousse between the layers is one dessert that could be prepared ahead of time. I often made desserts in advance and kept them in the freezer a day or two before they were to be used.

One day last summer I reverted to this outdoor approach by holding a "brown bag" lunch on the lawn of the White House for members of the Republican Congressional Wives Club. I invited the wives to "brown bag" it in keeping with the President's economy program. The event turned out to be fun for everyone.

The 110 guests sat at picnic tables under a cluster of trees on the South Lawn. The temperature was 93 degrees. Each guest brought her own lunch in a paper bag, and I provided beverages and dessert, served by waiters from a small nearby tent. Beverages included coffee and iced tea with a sprig of mint. For dessert there were cookies and pistachio ice cream with chocolate shavings. The desserts were served from a garden cart, which featured small clay flowerpots with the ice cream into which a plastic straw was embedded. A flower stuck in each straw created the look of blooming plants.

**M**any of the wives brought sandwiches, but I had to be prepared for those who forgot. One was in such a rush that all she had time to put in her bag was two slices of bread, spread with mayonnaise. On the other hand, another guest carried caviar in her brown bag and still another brought an elaborate lunch that included artichokes, complete with dip. Someone asked for lessons on how to cook artichokes properly. Instead, I gave a demonstration on how to eat them.

My own brown bag was filled with roast beef on whole-wheat bread; carrot and celery sticks; potato chips; and assorted fruits in a plastic cup (sliced oranges, grapefruit, cantaloupe and apples).

There was no head table. It was a "sit where you like" arrangement that seemed to please everyone. There were eight at my table. The tables were draped with bandana-pattern sheets, some in red, others in blue. The centerpieces were arrangements of red geraniums, white feverfew and blue bachelor's buttons placed in a brown paper bag tied with red and blue ribbons. Everyone seemed to have a wonderful time.

I really enjoy entertaining. From black tie to brown bag, it seems to me that the principles of American hospitality are always the same: consideration for your guests' tastes and preferences, a little imagination in preparing a congenial setting and—of course, most of all—communicating your genuine warmth and pleasure in being with them. ■