

*White Sauce, Cognac and Other  
Diplomatic Disasters:*

# HOW TO PLAN FLAWLESS OFFICIAL FUNCTIONS



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**COULD SERVING WHITE SAUCE leave you red in the face?**

In her autobiography, *A Lady, First*, famed social secretary Letitia Baldrige describes the disastrous first official dinner party she planned for Henry R. Luce and his wife, Clare Boothe Luce, the first American woman ambassador to a major foreign country:

“The menu was ... accidentally all white. Not a speck of color. White asparagus, creamed soup, white fish, veal in a cream sauce, endive salad, and a frothy white blancmange pudding. HRL asked if I was color blind. ... I leaped to correct this situation: the next dinners were so colorful, every item on the menu looked like a tutti-frutti nightmare.”

Color was only the first hurdle. The next major official dinner featured a luscious white wine sauce, red wine accompanying the meat entrée and cognac in the crème brûlée. Unfortunately, the guests of honor — then-Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson and his wife — were Mormons and did not touch alcohol. Thus, they ate nothing during the entire evening. Furious, Henry Luce pulled Baldrige aside and said that if she'd spent years trying to come up with the most inappropriate menu possible, she couldn't have done better than this.

Of course the Luces forgave Baldrige, and she stayed on with them for years, piloting successful diplomatic functions for them at the American embassies in Rome and Paris. She went on to become the first female executive for Tiffany & Co., White House social secretary to First Lady Jackie Kennedy, CEO of her own company, and an internationally recognized authority on etiquette, protocol and entertaining. But while success is wonderful, it's even more wonderful to achieve it with as few embarrassing moments as possible. And that's why Helga's Caterers offers this quick guide to planning diplomatic dinners, receptions and parties.



Claire Boothe Luce  
and Henry R. Luce



# CULTURE, CUISINE, CONSIDERATION:

*3 keys to success with official and informal diplomatic functions*

**1. CULTURE.** In planning your function, think carefully about your guests and identify any cultural differences that should be taken into account in choosing menus and entertainment. As in the Letitia Baldrige example above, remember that people of many religions don't consume alcohol. Your guests' personal, national, or religious culture may dictate that certain kinds of food (like meat) not be consumed. Certain types of entertainment may be inappropriate — while other types of entertainment may offer great opportunities for cultivating relationships. In addition to thinking about your guests' culture, think about your own. What traditions, seasonal celebrations, national character, or other aspects of your culture do you want to highlight? For example, if "hospitality" is something for which your culture is known, plan your function to incorporate hospitality into everything from how guests are greeted to the selection and bounty of beverages and foods.

**2. CUISINE.** Once you've used "culture" to help define the diplomatic function, consider what types of food to serve. Again, your guests' tastes and preferences — and yours — should be taking into consideration.

Remember that classics are classics for a reason: Chateaubriand or flambéed Bananas Foster continue to be mouthwatering choices. America's regional cuisine can be very interesting to foreign dignitaries; consider a Texas steak dinner, New England Lobster Bake or a Southern Creole dinner. An eclectic menu can offer interesting variety — and it can be the ideal solution for a very diversified guest list. On the subject of variety, don't always go with the obvious. A German menu, for example, needn't always include "brats."

Wine pairings are very trendy right now, where the menu emphasizes the wines as much the foods they complement. Finally, your menu should be appropriate for the constraints of your setting. For example, if there's not enough space to provide seating for all, consider an "All Passed ... All Butlered" menu.



**3. CONSIDERATION.** This means thinking carefully about the purpose of your event and the personal comfort of your guests. For example, parties should of course include music, but your choice of music — and its volume — should be appropriate to the purpose of the evening. For example, if you want to encourage serious discussion over dinner, you don't want your guests to have to struggle to be heard over intrusive music. Also, show consideration for your guests' personal preferences and any special needs. This might include anything from arranging transportation to and from the event to featuring the guest of honor's favorite flowers in the floral arrangements. These personal attentions are greatly appreciated and set the stage for a pleasant and well-received function.



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Remember, when entertaining in diplomatic circles, disasters happen when you don't do your homework. Take the time to learn all you can about your guests and the purpose of the evening, and take care to engage experienced, full-service party planners and catering firms who share your same attention to detail — and desire for perfection.

*If you have questions about protocol, etiquette or entertaining, please contact Michael Evans at [mevans@HelgasCatering.com](mailto:mevans@HelgasCatering.com). To explore Helga's Caterers menus, prices and party planning services, please visit [www.HelgasCatering.com](http://www.HelgasCatering.com).*



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