

Back to the Beach

The trend for this summer's East End events? Lose the over-the-top opulence in favor of casual, comfortable parties

"THERE IS A DEFINITE TREND in the overall look of parties in the Hamptons to look more casual, while blending with the setting in which they take place," says Peter Callahan of Callahan Catering in New York. He and other tastemakers say that after years of getting progressively more hyped and filled with blatant marketing and promotions, this year, East End events will be more comfortable and low-key. In other words: Over-the-top, highly themed Hamptons events are, well, over. Bring back the beach party.

"No one needs to see one more overproduced, urban-inspired event in an environment that is meant to be a retreat from city life," says style expert Thom Filicia, the *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* interior design specialist.

Still, no one expects the hype to leave the Hamptons any time soon. "There are always going to be those over-the-top bashes that take place in giant mansions," says Sue Garvey, director of communications for Piaget North America. But those parties aren't necessarily appropriate for every

audience. "So many of these people would rather be at a party with 50 of their friends in the backyard," she says. "In general there's a trend toward doing smaller, more targeted events."

Piaget has sponsored a benefit for the East Hampton art center *Guild Hall* for the past three years, and last year's event included a raw bar, a lobster bake, burlesque performances, and a lounge decorated in velvet and leopard-print fabrics. But this year Garvey is looking to produce a less glitzy event. "I think we're going to do something a little more low-key," she says, "but high-end."

"It's not less is more, it's simple is more," says Serena Bass, owner of catering and event firm *Serena Bass Inc.* and author of *Serena, Food & Stories*. "We are really getting away from events with themes, like making a house or venue look like Morocco. Because party guests can walk into a



Tastemakers say this year's smartest Hamptons events will focus on making guests comfortable with touches like manicurists and masseuses.

high-concept themed event and not understand how it's supposed to make them feel. Now, in the Hamptons, we are letting the look and feel of the event be informed by the environment—a casual beach party."

With beautiful light, houses, and colors in the Hamptons, planners can let an event's look be an extension of its setting. One example: setting up cabana-style tents where guests can dine while seated casually on pillows in beachy hues, underneath lanterns swaying in the breeze. Or perhaps heading out to firepits filled with driftwood.

The idea is to create an uncontrived look that appears as if friends helped throw it together after a day on the beach. The decor takes its cue from the grounds, garden, or view.

"There is an effort being made by corporations to be more environmentally friendly and P.C.," says Connie Costas, former *Goldman Sachs* planner and founder of corporate event consulting firm *Greenhill Agency*. "The way I see it, the event scene in the Hamptons is an extension of corporate entertaining and benefits in the city hosted by the heavy hitters of Wall Street."

Those heavy hitters are sensitive to the state of the economy and the scandals that have hit corporate execs who have spent a bit too lavishly in the past, and they understand the importance of the bottom line and the danger of appearing overly ostentatious.

Still, Callahan points out that more beachtown-appropriate functions may not actually cost any less—and they certainly won't go on without expensive touches like big-name entertainment. "There could be a massive infrastructure of electrical work underneath the sand," he says. And

money saved on overly themed decor is often used in other areas. "Where you cut costs on decor, you can refocus on food, or materials in the decor, like serving lobster and dressing tables with luxe linen tablecloths," Bass says.

Christopher Robbins of catering firm *Robbins Wolfe Eventeurs* says the food at these events tend to be made up of American fare; 80 percent of his Hampton menus last summer used local, seasonal ingredients.

Callahan prepared a menu inspired by Independence Day picnics for last year's *House & Garden Designer Show House* opening night, with mini-cheeseburgers, French fries, and raspberry vodka popsicles. In addition to simple, American fare, Bass prefers what she calls "recognizable" cuisine, like fried chicken, cornbread, and a simple dessert of chocolate shortcake, mascarpone, and strawberries. As an appetizer, Bass like to serve huge piles of grilled shrimp with different sauces to choose from. "It's an icebreaker to get guests involved—giving them choices gives them something to talk about," Bass says.

Even the staff is dressed down at these events: Bass's servers wear white T-shirts and khakis or even new blue jeans. "Black-tie would look ridiculous," she says.

Alexis Ufland of *Sparty*, who has brought her team of spa specialists to client appreciation days and product launches in the Hamptons, takes it a step further. Not only are her guests dressed in plush robes and slippers, but so is the staff. "Most Hamptons parties take place around a pool or on the beach, but this is sort of fun and different, with everyone in robes," she says. "It allows the host to indulge the guests." Everyone gets poolside manicures and massages, and is generally made to feel as comfortable and pampered as possible—after all, this is still the Hamptons. —Brice Gaillard

