



## On Being a Good Guest

By: Alexandra McKay, Morven Park Events Coordinator

As I write this, I am staring out of my office window on an overcast and unseasonably chilly day and cannot reconcile the weather outside with the batch of positively warm and sunny invitations I've received this month. Ready or not, we've entered the season of baby showers, art openings, garden parties, and other lovely outdoor (as long as it doesn't rain) events.

I love planning events almost as much as I love going to them (far less work), and I can confidently tell you that everyone needs an occasional reminder of what it means to be a good guest. Few people seem to care or realize that being a good guest is as much an art form as being a good host or hostess.

### Read Your Invitation

If your host and/or hostess have taken the time to send physical invitations instead of an email or a Facebook invite, please take the time to read your invitation, which includes the envelope. A few weeks ago, I witnessed a big hullabaloo because someone brought their children to a wedding that did not allow children, and the bride asked them to leave. This entire scene could have been avoided if the parents in question had read the envelope. The only people who are invited to an event are the people whose names are listed on the envelope. This saves your hostess from telling you, "No, your boyfriend cannot come to the girls-only baby shower," or "No, due to space constraints, you cannot bring your six house guests." For example, if you were invited to a bridal shower at Morven Park's Coach House and your host's headcount was at 115 prior to receiving your RSVP for 10 guests (instead of the one person on the envelope), there's going to be a very awkward conversation because the Coach House only holds 120 people.

RSVP stands for "Répondez s'il vous plaît" and means "Please respond." We have gotten so lax about responding to invitations that the French have become even more direct in the last few decades with the phrase "Réponse attendue avant le [date]," meaning "[Your] response is expected before [date]." You should not only respond to your host regarding your attendance, but you should do so in the manner requested. If the host provided an email address for replies, then please don't reply by calling, mentioning it in passing, or sending an Instagram message. Your host is trying to stay organized and your on-the-fly response, or complete lack of a response, is not helping.



Lastly, hang on to your paper invitation so you don't have to call your host the day of the event to get the address or time or to confirm that you have the right day. Refrigerator magnets are made for this purpose (and you can find some nice ones in the Davis Mansion gift shop).

### What to Wear

Figuring out modern dress codes can be a more perilous journey than the one Odysseus undertook to get back to Ithaca. I was always told, "Be overdressed, Darling, but never out-dress your hostess." In this day and age, being overdressed can mean putting on a sundress instead of shorts, and out-dressing your hostess can be done far too easily (trust me).

When deciding what to wear, start with the aforementioned invitation. In some cases, the kindest of hostesses will have noted what to wear in the bottom right corner. The most common categories are

White Tie, Black Tie, Black Tie Optional, Semi-formal/Cocktail, Business Formal, Business Casual, and Casual.

Other options may include “Festive” or perhaps a theme such as “Roaring 20s attire.” In this case, to be polite, you should follow this edict from your hostess to the best of your ability. For example, Morven Park’s members-only Garden Party invitation says, “Garden Party attire requested; Hats encouraged.” Our guests get into the spirit of the event with summer sundresses and derby hats.

If you are unsure what a dress code implies (e.g., “Boho Chic” or “Nautical Flair”), Google it or ask your host when you RSVP (not the day before the event).

If your invitation does not include a dress code, you can make an educated guess based on the type of event and the start time. Societal rules dictate that the later in the evening an event occurs, the more formal the dress code, unless it is attached to another event. For example, if you are invited to a friend’s house for champagne, cake, and strawberries to celebrate Teddy’s 30<sup>th</sup> birthday party after an evening of *[Polo in the Park](#)*, no one is expecting you to go home and put on a cocktail dress.

### **Please Don’t be Late, Be Thoughtful, and Leave!**

I was told a story (which I have always been too lazy to Google) that Elizabeth Taylor was so notoriously late for everything that she wrote in her will that she was to be 15 minutes late for her own funeral. As a reminder, you are not Elizabeth Taylor. Being a few minutes late is forgivable (especially with Northern Virginia traffic) but missing cocktail hour at a dinner party is not. With the invention of cell phones, you have no reason not to send a quick message if you are running behind schedule. This can be sent by any medium (well, maybe not carrier pigeon) and should include an estimated arrival time. If you don’t, your hostess is left wondering if she needs to stretch the cocktail hour by a mere 15 minutes to await your arrival, or if she should remove your place setting from the table so as to not make it obvious you are a no-show.



Photo credit: Bow Tie Photography

If you are going to bring a hostess gift, be thoughtful about it. Don’t bring wine to a hostess who is allergic. If you are going to bring flowers, bring them in a vase so no one has to dig around to find one and take the time to cut all the stems to fit. When asked, I’ve always recommended providing something the hosts can eat in the morning, when they are exhausted from the night before. You can also match the theme of the night, such as bringing Lillet, an aperitif used in Vesper Martinis (the martinis James Bond makes up in the *Casino Royale* book), to a game night event.

Lastly, know when to leave. Your hosts have most likely had a long day and cannot go to bed until you leave. If you are sitting on the sofa and are the only one there; if all the dishes are clean and they are straightening the room; or if they have offered to call for an Uber even though you are sober, then you have missed all their subtle hints and it is time to go home. Thank them again and go home.

Remember, being a thoughtful and graceful guest is the best way to get an invitation to the next “must attend” soirée.