



DECORATING TIPS

THE DESSERT TABLE

Decorating Ideas from the 18th Century

The hospitality that is part of Virginia's heritage for centuries had its origins in the beginnings of the colony, when the humblest emigrant shared his table with friends and relatives. By the time the grandees had established their plantation houses and town homes, gatherings together for a festive meal was a daily ritual. In temper with the times, the dessert course especially became the opportunity for a hostess to show off her creativity, taste, and wealth, with a spread of dainties artfully made and artistically composed to fill the dining table at the end of the meal.

Presenting food in an ordered pattern so that it pleased the eye as well as the palate was a testimony to her sophistication and knowledge. Special occasions brought forth tables that glittered with multitiered glass pyramids full of almonds and colorful marzipan, perhaps shaped to honor the occasion. Small glass pails were filled with candied fruit, and other plates held little cakes and edible centerpieces. Colonial hostesses were not likely to center their tables with a huge bouquet of flowers, as we do; instead fresh flowers might be used to grace a plate, or a small vase might be tucked among the platters. Ornamental porcelain also might be placed on the table.

A contemporary party that focused on a variety of small desserts and treats would be a festive occasion for us, too, and our own tables can borrow this idea of the table as a stage set, to be trimmed with details. The first step would be a white linen table cloth. For the 18th-century hostess, placing the plates in a geometric and regular pattern was important. Ceramic figures or tiny bud vases with a posy or two are then set among the plates and worked into the overall design. Undoubtedly there would be candles to bring it all to sparkling life, and we could intersperse several sets of tapers among the desserts. Marzipan, Jordan almonds, and silver dragees are still to be had, and sugar cookies snipped into shapes, crispy gingerbread, petits fours, and candied fruits are easy to make or to buy to fill and assortment of white or crystal platters.

Besides offering a wide variety of desserts, a hostess would make her table pretty by varying the heights of the serving dishes, building pyramids of food to tempt a guest. Collecting graduated sizes of footed cake plates, preferably in similar patterns, will allow you to build a pyramid to reasonable height, with cookies or candies placed on each tier. Or several favorite plates can be pierced, a rod inserted, and joined to make a serving platter that matches your dinner set. Sweets or fruit can even be arranged in a cake or cookie tower. Begin with a simple plate for a base, spiraling the cookies as you place them in layers.

To complete the geometric effect, place each platter in rows that cross in the middle of the table, where a pyramid of glass sparkles with tiny tarts, small cakes, and fruit frosted with egg white and sugar. Put small vases of seasonal blossoms in each corner, and four candlesticks where the lines cross. Small glass dishes placed symmetrically within the quadrants might hold love apples, figs, tangerines, and grapes. Light the candles and invite the guests in to savor the beauty, as well as the flavors, as they pick and choose among all the treats.

Colonial hostesses were often happy to bring a bit of nature indoors by copying flowers and birds in sweetmeats and almond paste, coloring the marzipan, called marchpane in colonial Virginia. One idea for a winter table is to create a “snow branch”: Select a small branch with a pleasing shape, wash it, and allow it to dry thoroughly. Place the white of an egg into a bowl, then brush the branch with the egg white. Roll the branch in crystallized sugar and “plant” it on top of a cake dusted in powdered sugar. Or place an apple in a bowl, anchor the branch to it, then fill the bowl with “snow cream” – heavy cream whipped with no sugar. The “snow”-dusted branch can be decorated with cookies tied on the ends.

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