

The extravagant dinner parties of the desert

Elaborate themes and costumes were common

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Stepping out in a couture gown after a perfect evening of cocktails at your own fabulous home might seem impossible in a literal desert, but it is amazing how well it was done here back in the day. In fact, Elsa Maxwell, maven and undisputed expert on how to entertain, would have been proud of Palm Springs and the Coachella Valley.

The most renowned hostess of the 1920s through the 1940s, Maxwell was consulted by all in the highest social circles regardless of where they lived in the U.S. or Europe. Those aspiring to give a properly unforgettable party never failed to read her books or emulate her style. Maxwell maxims to be followed slavishly included: Make your guests feel at ease, choose just the right theme and appoint your table with beautiful china, gorgeous crystal and fine linens.

While people back when cared about entertaining rather than today's "partying," they were no less intoxicated or daring at their gatherings. Even so, from the photos they actually seemed to have enjoyed more real fun, perhaps a recompense for being less jaded.

Actually keeping your guests engaged takes some thought and planning. Maxwell, for example, was famously credited with inventing the scavenger hunt as a party game (when was the last time you attended a party that featured any game that wasn't on TV?).

Elaborate parties were the rule between the wars and the themes and games ran the gamut. Costume parties were a desert favorite as well as a Maxwell signature. For one thing, a costume is certainly a conversation starter. The ubiquitous theme hereabouts was "Cowboys and Indians" but Western was by no means the only one. There



Executive Chef Werner Futterer stands behind the El Mirador Hotel's opulent display for a Sunday buffet. PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Bob and Billie Dove Kenaston party Polynesian style with Trudy and Paul Reynolds in the early 1960s. Elaborate themed parties were common.

was exotic Arabia thanks to the local date industry, replete with elephants and harem girls. An irresistible perennial was hobo and tramp costumes, which today are relegated to Halloween as they are easy for any mom to pull together from mixed and unmatched bits — the more disparate the better (but perhaps



Sandy and John Payne pose with Hildy Crawford, all dressed up at Phil Regan's party. Costume parties were a desert favorite, as well.

now too politically incorrect).

There were all sorts of costume themes tried in the desert: those that encouraged guests to don Bavarian lederhosen for Oktoberfest, nineteenth-century burlesque showgirl garb, Polynesian sarongs or space-age mylar. There were Hawaiian dress up parties,

sports themes, bossa nova dance parties, and Harvest Moon celebrations to add splash to the ubiquitous cocktail party.

And that didn't count the extensive efforts that went into the holiday celebrations, with Easter being the most grandiose as the weather was perfect in the spring allowing for over-the-top decorations.

Elaborate entertaining was de rigueur and elements of fantasy were encouraged if not required. Those indulging this impulse would float a sailboat in the pool as for George Roberson's birthday party at the Desert Inn, or hold Elizabethan court as Lily Pons once deigned to be Queen, or stage an homespun safari like Ray Ryan wanted to do on multiple occasions.

Simply having a chef create an outrageous evening gown and tuxedo to a Western bar called by the appropriate sobriquet of the "Mink and Manure Club" could be regarded as pedestrian in the day. In order to really get noticed, a hostess had to be mighty creative.

There was always the conundrum of sit-down versus buffet dinner to work out. Buffets frequently prevailed for offering opportunities for informal mixing while providing a lavish display of lobster, oysters, Wellingtons and fine pastries (somehow the waistlines didn't reflect the same indulgence they seem to now). The offerings were abundant, certainly unlikely, and even embarrassingly decadent for a supposed little resort town on the desert.

But the signature aspect of early desert entertaining was the diversity of the guest list. Palm Springs Mayor Frank Bogert famously said that, from early on, celebrities and captains of industry mixed with the locals and even included the cowboys, because there weren't enough people in town to have a really good party unless everybody was invited.

There's a good tip for fresh entertaining that could have been minted today!