

15 Parties in 20 Nights

Our reporter might have been that strange guy—well, that stranger—at your office holiday bash
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I have seen the future of company holiday parties, and its name is the Lucky Zartini.

It is a drink. A festive and powerful drink. Mostly powerful. After a couple of these, shopping for duct tape at Menards would seem festive.

After 2 1/2 weeks of crashing holiday parties in the name of Q, I have determined that the Lucky Zartini represents the pinnacle in holiday celebration, the best new Christmas arrival since Baby Jesus.

But then again, my judgment might have been impaired. We'll get to the Lucky Zartini later. First, some background.

A month ago, Q went fishing for invitations to company holiday parties. The idea was to have a reporter drop in and enjoy the festivities as if he belonged. Sort of a fly-in-a-Christmas-sweater-on-the-wall thing.

I didn't exactly crash the parties and there was no deception involved. I went only where invited, and if someone asked what I did for a living, I was honest: "I'm with the Tribune and I'm doing a story on company parties."

The usual response: "Wow, I want your job."

No, you don't.

During 15 parties in 20 nights, I consumed hundreds of hors d'oeuvres, tasty and otherwise; spent hours in snowy bumper-to-bumper traffic; and ran up a mileage expense report that would have made Lewis and Clark blush. I missed sleep. Christmas cards went out late. Gifts remained unbought, the driveway icy.

If there was one consolation, it was the Lucky Zartini.

It was found at a party thrown by Cary Zartman and Faron Greenfield, who run the Chicago ad agency Z Factory, at their annual bash for clients and friends at Zartman's North Side condo. Each holiday season, they serve a signature drink that is chosen in a competition among their friends earlier in the year.

The 2005 winner—bless you, Michele and Kurt Clauss—was the Lucky Zartini. It features, among other ingredients, white chocolate liqueur and vodka ("lots and lots of vodka") and is garnished with marbits, those marshmallow treats you find in Lucky Charms cereal. And it's served in a cereal bowl.

The drink's a winner on two levels: Not only does it loosen people up, but it also provides a wonderful starting point for conversation ("A couple more of these and I'll be dead").

And for this assignment, I needed help in both areas.

Showing up at parties where I was a total stranger was awkward and uncomfortable. Anything that would break the ice was welcome.

Sometimes all it took was bumping into an interesting person. I learned that at MAB Advertising's holiday party. Luckily, I wound up chatting with Bernard Bahr, whose wife, Mary, is MAB's president. Bernard is a successful painter after having spent decades in the advertising world.

The party was great—a relaxed, civilized gathering in a private room at Cafe Spiaggia. Bernard explained that this was vastly different from the way ad agency parties used to be. He recalled one wing-ding in New York a few years ago that featured a guest leaving via a 12th-story window. Bernard wasn't sure whether it was the fall that killed him or the cars that hit him after he landed.

If talking doesn't work . . .

No such theatrics at MAB's party. Just good atmosphere, food and drink. And Bernard's stories. Every party should have an engaging person like Bernard to keep conversation flowing. We may hire him as the Q section's official raconteur.

I surely could have used him at the Sudler Sotheby's International Realty soiree, a classy black-tie party held at the Pump Room. The place was wall-to-wall well-dressed flesh. I managed to find CEO and President Janice Corley, who had invited me, but because she was trying to ride herd over hundreds of hungry employees, we weren't able to chat. So I stood at the bar and made awkward small talk with a couple of other guests. That went nowhere. I wish I had Bernard's phone number.

Things picked up, on a personal level, when people were asked to take their seats for dinner. I wasn't staying for the meal, so I decided to finish my drink and leave. Roving servers, called upon to deliver dinner, left the trays of hors d'oeuvres on the bar. Perfect. I sidled over to a half-empty tray and began grazing. The night's lesson: Conversation is good, but food is sometimes better.

Food, in fact, turned some good parties into great parties.

Take the L. Wolfe Communications gathering. Lisa Wolfe, president of the PR/ad agency, had it at her home. Nice place, nice guests and great meatballs, one of the culinary highlights of this entire escapade.

More good food? The Midtown Educational Foundation event was catered by Phil Stefani. 'Nuff said. The Westin Michigan Avenue event had roast pig on the menu. The law firm of Gardner Carton & Douglas had grilled rack of veal, andouille sausage, lobster tail Dijon Provencal and baby back ribs. I expected hot dogs and Italian beef at the Vienna Beef celebration, but they rolled out roast turkey breast, prime rib and salmon at their party, held in the Stadium Club at U.S. Cellular Field.

Locations, locations, locations.

Partying at the Cell was cool, but I noticed that the venues don't make much of a difference. The L. Wolfe and Z Factory events were in homes. They were warm and cozy and fun.

Facets Multimedia's bash was held on site, in an upstairs room, while customers shopped below. Gardner Carton & Douglas turned its Wacker Drive offices into a huge party facility, complete with dance floor (that thing may still be going on). And Midtown Educational Foundation had its event at Finkl Steel, where the second floor of a warehouse was transformed into a great party space.

Speaking of venues, a tip o' the elf hat to Rubloff Residential Properties, which rented the Adler Planetarium. And if that weren't enough, the company also brought in people who did caricatures, handwriting analysis, tarot card reading and palmistry. I stopped by artist Bruce Carlevato's table for a caricature, then visited Sylvia Friedman, who analyzes handwriting. Her take on me: efficient, with a sense of order, spiritual, creative, a sense of dignity and woefully out of place in a tux. Well, everything except that last part. And as a bonus, a good part of the Adler was open for inspection. Did you know that Venus is 23,630 miles in circumference at the equator?

Good times, good pyrotechnics.

The Planetarium was a nice touch. Other parties had special twists too. The Westin Michigan Avenue turned its party for 300 employees into Prom Night, with the election of a king and queen. Gardner Carton & Douglas had an Idol Contest for employees; winner Nancy Wilson-Lister should think about giving up her day job. She was great. And Facets' employees had a wine tasting.

In all, I had wonderful times. The embarrassments were few. Oh, there was that incident at the bash thrown by the LaSalle Street law firm of Vedder, Price, Kaufman and Kammholz. I was nicely blending in with the 200 or so partygoers. But then, in the buffet line, I dropped my paper napkin onto a candle as I reached for the salad. Luckily I caught it before the room had to be evacuated. This also was the only place where I feared I'd been scammed. The e-mail invitation had come from a guy named Rocco. At dinner, I dabbed my lips with my singed napkin and asked the woman next to me if she knew Rocco. She didn't. She asked two other women at the table. They looked baffled. After some discussion, one finally said, "Oh, I think he works in the mail room."

Uh-oh, pranked by a kid in the mail room. Actually, it turned out that Rocco is Rocco Lotesto, the night supervisor in the Office Services Department, high enough in the company to legitimately extend an invitation. Also quite the dancer, I might add.

If there was one regret in all this, it's that a scheduling conflict forced me to miss a party thrown by Renee H. Matlock & Associates, a clinic that serves children with communication and learning difficulties. It's actually two parties, one for clients—an elf, Santa, snacks and games for the kids, etc.—and then one for the staff at a Frankfort bistro. According to the invitation, "After dinner, we adjourn to our director's house . . . for fabulous desserts and a raucous (a la the many Cosmos at dinner) grab bag."

The invitation explained that the highlight of the grab bag was taking the gifts that other guests had already chosen.

"The stealing is the fun part. . . . You learn a lot about your co-workers when you get them drunk and steal their Christmas presents."

And really, isn't that what Christmas is all about?

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Party guy highlights all the good stuff

HATS OFF: The best Santa hat we saw was a spiffy affair worn by Ann Bodman at the Vienna Beef party. Very Dr. Seuss.

BEST SNACK: Grab some toothpicks and enjoy the meatballs made by Lisa Wolfe, president of L. Wolfe Communications (recipe on Page 6).

BEST HOLIDAY DRINK: Wash down those meatballs with the Lucky Zartini (recipe on this page).

FAVORITE ENTERTAINMENT (MUSICAL CATEGORY): The Bob Ojeda Quintet at the MAB Advertising party, although the Stitely Orchestra at the Gardner Carton & Douglas party was a close sec-ond. Q should stage a battle of the bands.

FAVORITE ENTERTAINMENT (NON-MUSICAL): The tarot card reader, sketch artists, handwriting analyst and palmist at the Rubloff Residential Properties event.

MOST UNSOCIABLE CO-HOST: Molly, Lisa Wolfe's Maltese. She recognized me as an interloper and circled and barked at me. I should have slipped her a meatball.

DOUBLE DUTY: After leaving the Sudler Sotheby's International Realty black-tie affair at the Pump Room still fully tuxed, I stopped at White Castle No. 35, just to thrill the employees.

A SIGHT TO RELISH: Howard Eirinberg, president and chief operating officer of Vienna Beef, walking around dressed as a giant hot dog.

GREATEST CONVIVIALITY: One table at the O'Malley & Associates party was populated by a group of employees from Sheboygan, Wis. Pound for pound, the most fun-loving bunch I met.

COOLEST PHOTO OP: The Vienna people had the White Sox World Series trophy at their party, and guests were allowed to have their photos taken with it.

BEST CONVERSATION: Listening to members of the modeling staff – fully dressed, of course – from the American Academy of Art talk shop over a long, long lunch.

MMMMM, SHRIMP: The breaded beauties at the Westin Michigan Avenue event made me wish my pockets were lined with plastic.

NICEST SOUVENIR: A pewter ornament given to guests at O'Malley & Associates' blowout.

BEST QUOTE: A guest at one party knew all about Q. "Hey, you're the guy who gave away all that [junk] off your desk, right?"

Right.

– W.H.

THE 2005 LUCKY ZARTINI

1 parts vodka

2 parts Godiva White Chocolate Liqueur

1/2 part Rupleminze

A splash of Frangelico

Marbits*

Mix well, chill, then pour into a small cereal bowl. Sprinkle in a half-dozen marbits.

*Marbits are marshmallow bits from a box of Lucky Charms or other similar cereal.

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