

# 805 LIVING

DECEMBER 2010

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# Winter Wonderland

AN ALL-WHITE DESSERT SPREAD MAKES FOR COOL HOLIDAY ENTERTAINING.

BY LAURA SAMUEL MEYN PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATT WALLA



When it comes to the sweet side of holiday entertaining, Merryl Brown, president of the Montecito-based Merryl

Brown Events ([merrylbrownevents.com](http://merrylbrownevents.com)), has a beautiful idea: an all-white dessert table, which makes for an elegant desserts-only party, or serves as a delicious way to transition a dinner party from savories to sweets. "Dessert tables are always a fun option for dessert, and they get people up and mingling," Brown says. "I like to do them in one color or in a theme. Symmetry and balance are important."

Brown specializes in tasteful and sustainable events, ranging from smaller in-home parties to large weddings to corporate events. She's known for her inspired decor, great food and wine, detail-oriented creative approach, and decidedly green bent. "We always have a team at the back of the house sorting," she says. "We strive to create as little waste as possible while putting on amazing, memorable parties."

While Merryl Brown has done all-pink and all-chocolate dessert tables, an all-white theme is one of her favorites for this time of year. "It is just so lovely for the holidays; I think that it invokes a feeling of a winter wonderland," she says. "People love dessert tables. They are visually exciting, and they allow for a lot of creativity." Her all-white theme makes for a spectacular setting appropriate for any wintertime party—and it produces a particularly dramatic effect because, with white, you can extend the theme beyond the decor to the desserts, too. Here's how she creates a magical spread worthy of the season.

**TO SET THE TABLE**, Brown uses the supply of props that Merryl Brown Events stocks, plus a few favorite local resources. For china, she likes Classic Party Rentals in Santa Barbara ([classicpartyrentals.com](http://classicpartyrentals.com)) and Small Masterpiece in Los Angeles ([smallmasterpiece.com](http://smallmasterpiece.com)); for linens, she loves La Tavola ([latavolalinen.com](http://latavolalinen.com)). With an all-white dessert table, Brown is careful to select linens and serving dishes in a uniformly bright white for the best impact. “I really don’t like different hues when it comes to white,” she says. “When I do tables in other colors, I don’t mind some variation as long as it is in the same color family.”

**FOR THE COOKIES**, Brown draws from a variety of sources, including homemade cookies, purchased varieties from Renaud’s Patisserie & Bistro in Santa Barbara ([renaudsbakery.com](http://renaudsbakery.com)), and gorgeous snowflake cookies (see recipe below) baked by the chefs of Sweet Moon Confections in Santa Barbara. “When you make or order custom cookies, be sure to have a hole made at the top so that you can hang them from branches or from a small tabletop tree,” says Brown. “Hanging the cookies creates verticality so that the tablescape doesn’t look so flat.”

**FOR THE MARSHMALLOW LOLLIPOPS**, Brown purchases regular grocery-store variety marshmallows, white lollipop sticks from Michael’s ([michaels.com](http://michaels.com)), and white sprinkles from Sur La Table ([surlatable.com](http://surlatable.com)). She pierces each marshmallow with a white lollipop stick, paints each marshmallow with water (using a clean paint brush or pastry brush), and rolls each in a dish filled with white sprinkles to coat it on all sides. Brown’s finishing touch: “With a little double-stick tape, adhere a small flag to the top of the lollipop stick,” she says. “Place in even rows on a platter and serve.”

**FOR DIY-CUSTOM CHOCOLATE-BAR WRAPPERS** that make a great addition to a dessert table as well as a delicious take-home favor, you’ll need as many chocolate bars as guests. “I like anything they sell at Chocolate Maya [in Santa Barbara],” says Brown. “Theo Chocolate in Seattle is great.” You’ll also need enough recycled paper to wrap each bar. First, unwrap the outer wrapper of each chocolate bar, leaving the foil on. Cut enough recycled paper to fit around each bar. Cover the bar, leaving the short ends exposed, and seal with double-stick tape. Using a holiday-themed paper punch (such as those made by Martha Stewart, available at [michaels.com](http://michaels.com)), punch out a shape from additional paper and adhere it to the top of the wrapper.

## MERRYL BROWN’S TIPS FOR Holiday Entertaining

1. Be prepared: Think through your party from start to finish and be sure that you have everything that you need. Making a detailed timeline really helps.
2. Use lots of candles. Nothing creates greater ambience than low lighting and lots of candlelight.
3. Use your good china, silver, and crystal. What are you saving it for?
4. Music is important at any event. I love surprising guests with carolers who enter the room halfway through the party, to the delight of everyone present.
5. Wrap small gifts for each guest. My favorite gifts are always edible: fair-trade dark chocolate from Chocolate Maya, local honey, a bundle of freshly baked cookies, or a tin of hot cocoa with a vintage silver spoon.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

**Candy:** Candy Warehouse ([candywarehouse.com](http://candywarehouse.com)), Robitaille’s in Carpinteria ([robitaillescandies.com](http://robitaillescandies.com)), and Oh, Nuts! ([ohnuts.com](http://ohnuts.com))

**Chocolate:** Chocolate Maya in Santa Barbara ([chocolatemaya.com](http://chocolatemaya.com)) and Pierre Lafond in Santa Barbara ([pierrelafond.com](http://pierrelafond.com))

**Container and white branches:** S.R. Hogue & Co. in Santa Barbara ([srhogue.com](http://srhogue.com))

**Paper punches and lollipop sticks:** Michaels in Goleta ([michaels.com](http://michaels.com))

**Recycled paper** (for wrapping chocolate bars): Twisted Limb Paperworks ([twistedlimbpaper.com](http://twistedlimbpaper.com)) ■

### Snowflake Butter Cookies

*The Snowflake Butter Cookies and Royal Icing recipes come from the chefs of Sweet Moon Confections in Santa Barbara; both were adapted for a smaller yield and can easily be doubled for a large party.*

- 1 cup (2 sticks) butter
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 egg
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 3 cups all-purpose flour
- 1½ teaspoons baking powder
- ½ teaspoon salt

Using an electric mixer, cream butter and sugar. Add egg and vanilla. In large bowl, mix flour, baking powder, and salt, then add to butter mixture and mix well. Gather dough and knead for a minute. Divide dough into two pieces. Place one piece between two sheets of parchment paper. Roll it out to the desired thickness (from ⅛- to ¼-inch-thick) and then place the dough and paper on a cookie sheet and refrigerate. Repeat with other piece. Refrigerate dough for at least one hour. (Refrigerating the dough before cutting will help preserve the shape of the cookies after cutting.)

Preheat oven to 350°F. Cut refrigerated dough into desired shapes. Bake on ungreased baking sheet for 10 to 12 minutes or until just beginning to turn brown at the edges.

*Makes about 3 dozen 3-inch cookies.*

### Royal Icing

*Meringue powder is available at specialty foods stores and stores that stock cake supplies, such as Michael’s ([michaels.com](http://michaels.com)).*

- 2 level tablespoons meringue powder
- 3 tablespoons lukewarm water
- 2 cups sifted confectioners’ sugar

Combine all ingredients. Beat 7 to 10 minutes at low-medium speed in a heavy-duty standard mixer (or 10 to 12 minutes if using a handheld mixer). To prevent drying, be sure to cover the bowl with a damp cloth while working with icing. (Store in grease-free airtight container for up to 2 weeks. To reuse, beat the icing to restore original texture. It gets hard when exposed to air.)

The icing will be very stiff after mixing. To thin down the icing to use for outlining cookies, add a couple of drops of water to about ½ cup of icing and stir slowly to incorporate the water. (Stirring quickly will create air pockets in the icing and will cause breakage when outlining.) The right consistency for outlining is achieved when the spatula is lifted from the icing and the peak formed bends slightly.

To thin down icing for filling (or flooding), add a very small amount (½ teaspoon at a time) of water to the icing. Stir slowly until water is incorporated into the icing. To test for consistency, lift the spatula and let the icing drip back into the bowl. Count to 10; if the dripped icing smooths back into the rest of the icing, then the consistency is ready for filling.

