

## The Art of Reception Crashing

My friend C., a fellow journalist, is emphatic about what he considers a true joy of our profession. Is it a prominent byline, an exclusive story, an expose of wrongdoing? Guess again. “What I really like,” he says, “is all the chances you get to eat and drink for free.”

C. is talking about receptions – those mini-parties held in conjunction with an art exhibit, a panel discussion, or virtually any other kind of public venture. It’s safe to say that in New York City, there is a different reception on just about every night of the year. And it’s also true that you don’t have to be (or claim to be) a reporter in order to partake. *Au contraire* – by employing some fairly simple strategies, you too can help yourself to a healthy amount of free eats and liquor, and even discover opportunities for personal and professional networking.

Note the word “free.” I emphasize this because I am not talking about those get-you-coming-and-going affairs where, in addition to the price of entry, one is expected to buy \$3-\$5 tickets for food (i.e., hot dogs) and drink (i.e., beer). This kind of gouging is especially common at political receptions, such as Democratic or G.O.P. “victory parties,” and it’s one more reason to be disillusioned with politics. No, the kind of gatherings you’ll want to frequent fall into many different categories, but they all have one aspect in common: *something about them is free* – admission, food, the bar, any combination of two, or all three.

Receptions in New York can be roughly grouped into three levels, each with its own distinct characteristics. To wit:

### **Low End**

**Examples:** small-gallery exhibit openings; off-off-Off-Broadway productions; poetry, play, or other literary readings

**Food:** crackers (Carr’s and Ritz), cheese (cheddar and Swiss cubes, a small wheel of Brie), fruit (grapes)

**Drink:** jug wine (Gallo or worse)

- To Find:** Check listings in *Times*, *Voice*, *T.O.N.Y.*, *New York*, and your neighborhood weekly.
- Admission:** Exhibits and readings, usually free; productions, usually about \$10-15 (advance reservations may be necessary).
- Comments:** These are good for an occasional nosh-and-slosh, but if you find yourself depending on them for regular nutrition, you've got a problem. Be aware that at some point in the evening, you may be called upon to shore up the ego of the artist/playwright/performers whose work is on display, so come prepared with a line or two of vaguely complimentary b.s. (*see sidebar*).

### Mid-level

- Examples:** Panel discussions/seminars, alumni or professional association gatherings
- Food:** Buffet featuring crudités, cutesy mini-sandwiches on baguettes, humus & babaganoush with pita or French bread, cheese & crackers (see above), occasional hot items (e.g. buffalo wings)
- Drink:** Mainstream domestic and imported beers (don't expect any fruit-flavored or microbrewery products); red & white wine (no more than two varieties of each); Coke/Pepsi/Sprite (regular & diet); Perrier
- To Find:** Ads in special-interest magazines; word of mouth; postings in your office, neighborhood laundromat, the Web; your neighbor's discarded junk mail
- Admission:** Free to members of sponsoring group
- Comments:** For "association" events, that's the rub – it generally helps to have attended the school or be in the profession in question. The next best thing is to be involved with someone who is, or claim as much ("*I was supposed to meet my date here. Can I just stick my head inside for a minute and...*"). As for discussions/seminars, you may have to join the sponsoring organization for an annual fee of \$25-\$45 (not a bad deal – there will be a number of receptions in the course of the year, so you'll earn back your "investment" several times over).

## High End

- Examples:** Awards ceremonies; other “annual events”
- Food:** Same as **B)** plus trays of hors d’oeuvres carried by circulating waiters; mixed nuts at bar; small baked desserts (cookies, brownies)
- Drink:** Same as **B)** plus any traditional mixed drinks (a Kamikaze or Sex on the Beach is probably unavailable)
- To Find:** Same as **B)**, or have a connection, direct or otherwise (say, friend or relative of your ex, providing the breakup was amicable), on the inside
- Admission:** Generally same as **B)**
- Comments:** Be advised that these events are usually “formal.” That means no sneakers, exposed navels, bizarre color combinations, or anything ripped (unless, of course, the event involves some segment of the entertainment industry).

Once inside, there are a few simple rules of behavior to keep in mind for a successful evening:

- 1) *Watch your mouth.* You may have to make conversation at some point; and your reason for showing up – are you there to find career opportunities, meet that Special Someone, or just stuff your face? – will help determine what you say. The occasional vague-but-convincing response (*see sidebar*) can help you avoid serious embarrassment.
- 2) *Be discreet.* Even if you haven’t eaten since that pathetic little croissant you had for breakfast, try not to show it – don’t blitz the waiters, don’t attack the buffet table like the fat relatives at your cousin’s wedding. And while it’s okay to take a few goodies with you for later consumption, be subtle. (Wrapping some hors d’oeuvres in a napkin and slipping it into your purse or gym bag is okay. Stuffing beer cans into your pants is not.)
- 3) *Sign that list.* If you forget everything else I’ve told you, remember this. Getting on an organization’s mailing list is the key to future invites from that group... and others, because they tend to exchange lists (think junk mail).

A final word: if you ever get invited to a really *important* reception (as in, “For only \$1,000, you’ll get the chance to meet Sen. D’Amato *in person*”), be advised that most of what I’ve told you here does not apply. But then, if you were in that league, you wouldn’t be reading this.

-- *Phil Berroll*

**Sidebar:**  
**Block That Gaffe!**

It's not uncommon for novice reception-crashers to feel more than a bit insecure, even paranoid. After all, *you* know you don't really belong; how long will it take for everyone else to find out? Not to worry, however. Depending on the situation, any or all of the epigrams below will discourage prying by your fellow guests, and help you avoid the embarrassing *faux pas*. (They'll also enable you to recognize fellow crashers when *they* use these or similar lines. What you do with that knowledge is entirely up to you.)

*"I'm not comfortable making a judgment. I work in a completely different style."*

*"My wife (husband, boy/girlfriend) couldn't make it. She gave me her invitation."*

*"We have a chapter in San Francisco. Nothing like this, though."*

*"Interesting use of color."*

*"I honestly don't remember. I'm on so many lists, I lose track."*

*"I'm not sure I agree with everything that was said, but there were a lot of interesting points... what do you think?"*

*"I'm with the Passaic County Courier ... that's okay, you wouldn't unless you live in Passaic (laugh)."*

*"(Name) said it was okay. You know – heavyset woman with glasses? Frizzy hair?"*

*"Sorry... my English not so good."*

*Originally written for New York Values magazine.*