



Host your own dinner party

By Food Editor Regan Maloney

If the thought of hosting a dinner party conjures images of you slaving away in the kitchen and missing out on all the fun while you serve others, think again. The secret to a successful dinner party is to keep it simple, make ahead and add those little touches that look like you've put in a lot of effort when in fact you've had time to get your hair done, relax in a nice hot bath and look like the perfect domestic god/ess when the guests arrive. It also doesn't have to cost an arm and a leg. By buying cheaper cuts and substituting rich fatty ingredients for healthier ones, you can still pack a punch with flavour, provide guests with something they may not have tasted before, and still win brownie points for originality.

Top 5 tips to the perfect dinner party

Making the food look pretty:

Don't spend oodles of time on food presentation at a dinner party. Take a tip from the Italians and serve food in large bowls/dishes in the middle of the table family style. If serving a joint of meat, nominate someone to carve at the table while you bring out the rest of the dishes and you'll have guests drooling before they've even tasted a thing.

Decorating the table: Instead of placing a big vase of flowers in the centre that everyone has to talk over, instead get some small old fashioned milk bottles or even

wooden Tibetan boxes (available from Hunter & Rose, Shoreham) and place in a row interspersed with small tea light holders.

Protect your table: Serving large hot plates of food in the centre of the table means having to have something heat proof for it to sit on. Don't spend a fortune on expensive placemats, instead pop to your local tile shop and invest in some cheap slate tiles to place in the centre – they can also double up as a cheese board at the end of the night, and you can write on the cheese names with some chalk.

Have a welcome drink ready: With a lot of guests all arriving at the same time, instead of

having to deal with individual drinks orders, have a welcome cocktail available for everyone to try. I've recommended a good make-ahead one here that doesn't require fizzy ingredients that run the risk of going flat. By keeping the base non-alcoholic, you can keep the drivers happy and top up with the gin for the non-drivers.

Getting rid of guests at the end of the night: There's nothing worse than coming to the end of a great night and realising that it's gone midnight, you have a pile of washing up and the guests are still tucking in to your finest Brandy with no cab in sight. Set expectations ahead of the evening by providing a time for taxis on

the invite, or if too late, subtly switch off the heating and open a window. They'll soon get a little bit chilly and realise it's time to head home to their cosy beds.

Your dinner party menu

Welcome drink

(make 1 hour ahead of guests arriving)

Elderflower & apple gin punch

Make this an hour before guests arrive and leave in a large jug in the fridge. I'd recommend leaving a bottle of gin to the side so that you can add as much or little as required. Ingredients and instructions provided make one large glass, so simply multiply by the number of glasses/guests you'd like to cater for.



Ingredients:

1 teaspoon brown granulated sugar
30ml elderflower cordial
200ml fresh apple juice
Half a fresh lime – quartered and juiced
6 fresh mint leaves roughly chopped
Handful of crushed ice
1 measure of gin

Instructions:

Place all ingredients (except the ice and gin) in to a jug and stir, cover and leave in the fridge until needed.

Add the crushed ice to a tall glass, pour in the measure of gin (if required) and then top up with the elderflower and apply mix. Serve with a stem of fresh mint.

Pre-dinner nibbles

(Can be made up to a day before)

Olive & lime butter

It's little touches like this that really impress guests and lead them to thinking you've spent hours slaving away. It's very simple to do, and you could even go so far as to make your own butter as a base – by over-

whisking a good quality double cream until it's churned into butter. Serve with some olives and a nice warm crusty ciabatta ahead of the meal.



Ingredients:

7 pitted green olives
Zest and juice of 1 lime
80g salted butter

Instructions:

Chop the butter in to rough pieces and place in to a bowl along with the lime zest and olives. Blitz with a hand blender for a couple of minutes until the olives and lime are completely combined with the butter

Add the lime juice and blitz again until the liquid has been absorbed. Spread in a serving dish, cover with cling film and leave in the fridge until ready.

Starter

(Can be made up to a day before)

Mackerel & horseradish pate

A light and tasty way to start a meal. This can again be made up to a day ahead of your dinner party and refrigerated until needed. Serve with a selection of seeded crackers, crusty bread or toast and accompany with a nice glass of cold white wine.



Ingredients:

Zest & juice of 1 lemon
300g smoked boneless mackerel
1 tablespoon Greek yoghurt
1 tablespoon hot horseradish sauce
Good twist of black pepper
Sprinkle of sweet paprika for serving
Crackers for serving (serves 4)

Instructions:

Remove the skins from the mackerel and discard
Break the fish in to pieces and put in to a bowl

Add in all of the other ingredients and blitz with a hand blender until smooth

Place in individual bowls or ramekins, cover with cling film and leave in the fridge until needed.

Before serving, remove the cling film, dust lightly with paprika and serve with your crackers or toast on the side.

Main

(Prep & leave to cook for up to 3 hours before guests arrive)

Slow cooked pig cheeks with chorizo & peppers

If you're put off by the thought of pig cheeks, then you could substitute for pork shoulder, although the pig cheeks work so well and literally melt in the mouth. They're also a great talking point at the dinner table. It's such a simple dish to prepare, and can be left in the oven to cook without having to do anything else to it until the time comes to serve. This is also a perfect dish to pop in the oven and leave if you want to go for a nice long walk and return



to a delicious smelling house and wholesome dinner.

Ingredients:

2 large onions, thinly sliced
2 large red peppers & 1 large yellow pepper both thinly sliced in to long strips
1 x 50g chorizo sausage roughly diced
1 x 30g tin anchovy fillets in olive oil
12 pig cheeks (3 per person)
2 cloves garlic, crushed
2 tins chopped tomatoes
½ cup full bodied red wine
Ground black pepper to season (serves 4)

Instructions:

Trim the pig cheeks of any sinew or fat.

In a large casserole dish, place a layer of the peppers and onions, then sprinkle over the chorizo sausage, chopped anchovies and garlic.

Lay on top the pig cheeks, then the rest of the onion and peppers and pour over the tomatoes and red wine. Season with pepper and give it all a mix to ensure the ingredients are covered in the juice.

Pop on a lid or tightly cover with foil and place in the oven at 120 degrees for 3 hours.

Remove the cover and return to the oven for a final half an hour before serving.

Transfer to a serving bowl and place in the middle of the table along with your side dishes of potatoes and cabbage with a big ladle to let guests serve themselves *(remember to tell them how many pigs cheeks they can each have!)*.

Main - side dish

(Prep & leave to cook for up to 3 hours before guests arrive)

Red cabbage & apple in cider

Another easy to prep and leave dish that takes as long as the main to cook so that you can sit back and relax with your guests rather than worry about timings.

Ingredients:

500g red cabbage, thinly sliced
2 braeburn apples cored and roughly chopped
2 tablespoons sweet cider
Salt & pepper to taste
(serves 4)

Instructions:

Pre-heat the oven to 120 degrees. Place the chopped cabbage and apple in to a casserole pot dish that has a tightly fitting lid.

Pour over the cider and season, give a good mix, secure the lid and place in the oven for 3 and a half hours stirring once halfway through cooking.

Serve in the centre of the table with a nice big spoon.

Main - side dish

(Pop on to boil 20 mins before serving the main course)

New potatoes in mint & olive oil

Make the most of Jersey new potatoes when they're in season by simply boiling and tossing

them in some herbs and olive oil. I've opted to use mint here so that you can use up what's left from your welcome drink, but you could equally use fresh rosemary or thyme.

Ingredients:

Allow 5 new potatoes per person
Large saucepan of water for boiling
Tablespoon good olive oil
Tablespoon of finely chopped fresh mint
Salt to season

Instructions:

Boil a full kettle of water and pour over the potatoes in a large saucepan with a good twist of salt.

Leave to boil for 15/20 minutes (until a knife or a fork can be easily inserted in to the potatoes). Drain the potatoes, then toss in the olive oil, mint and some salt. Serve in a large bowl in the centre of the table.

Dessert

(Prep ahead, and finish just before serving)

Med inspired Eton mess

A slightly healthier version of a classic with refreshing lemon and fruit flavours. If you have the time to make ahead, then you can even make your own low fat lemon curd. Find the recipe at www.whatiatelastnight.com

**Ingredients:**

200g strawberries quartered
150g blueberries chopped in half
4 x small ready-made meringue nests
2 tablespoons Greek yoghurt
4 tablespoons lemon curd
(serves 4)

Instructions

Clean and chop the fruit ahead of guests arriving then leave in the fridge until ready to serve. Before serving, add the fruit to a large bowl, crumble in the meringue nests and add the

Greek yoghurt. Give a good mix together, take 4 glasses, add a dollop of lemon curd to the base of each glass, then a good spoonful of the mixture, then another dollop of lemon curd and a final spoon of the mix.

Finish with a dollop of lemon curd on top and a half-cut strawberry for presentation.

Serve in the glasses with spoons for guests to enjoy and accompany with a small shot of Limoncello for a special after dinner treat.

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Competition closes 30th June 2013 and the winner will be notified by email. For full terms and conditions please visit www.whatiatelastnight.com/lifemagscompetition

Decorative table items & glassware shown have been supplied by Hunter & Rose Interiors. For some unique and unusual pieces visit The Barn at the Old George Inn, Church Street, Shoreham, Sevenoaks, Kent

