

SOCIAL GRACES

GUEST RELATIONS



"Winston, if I were your wife, I'd put poison in your tea!"

"Nancy, if you were my wife, I'd drink it!"

"Have you come far?"

"Mr. Joyce, how does it feel to be a great genius, sir?"

"Sarah, do you mind if I smoke?"

"The men that is now is only all palaver."

"Oscar, I don't care if you burn."

TABLE TALK
Revelers don't always play nice. From left: Oscar Wilde, Lady Nancy Astor, Winston Churchill, James Joyce, Queen Elizabeth II, Sarah Bernhardt, F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Mix and Serve

Even the best dinner parties can contain potentially explosive elements. What happens when it all blows up?

BY DAISY PRINCE

ONE OF MY EARLIEST CHILDHOOD MEMORIES is of hiding under the dining room table during my parents' dinner parties in Chicago. I sat completely still, entranced by conversations I didn't understand, the rich smell of Merit cigarettes, and the translucent sheen of the ladies' L'eggs panty hose. I could hear my mother presiding with the precision of a classical conductor, constantly ensuring that everyone was involved in the discussion, taking care that the Macallan never ran out, and serving such delicious chicken vol-au-vents that every woman called her the next day begging for the recipe. There were whiskey-fueled debates, and no one said no to another coveted Cuban cigar. But when one of the guests accidentally kicked me in the ribs, I squealed. As I was marched up to bed I vowed that I would one day have the same effortlessly sophisticated dinner parties as my mother.

It didn't quite turn out that way. When my husband and I were first married, we threw a dinner party in London. It was an unqualified disaster. We'd hired a Cordon Bleu trainee and ended up with rubber chicken, overcooked vegetables, and some weird coconut version of tiramisu. We'd also made the mistake of inviting only six guests (a number that tends to settle into one conversation instead of two or three smaller ones), who made stiff and dull small talk until my husband's oldest friend tucked into the shiraz and started droning on about the evils of the euro. It turns out that orchestrating the effortless dinner party, like most things that look effortless, is incredibly hard work.

And it's getting harder. Twenty-first-century dinner party etiquette is more amorphous than ever. Gone are the days when you arrived at someone's house not knowing who you might meet,

flirted outrageously with your dinner partner, and ate whatever was put in front of you with aplomb. Now most people are given the guest list in advance and practically require menu approval before deciding whether or not to attend. Then they text or e-mail throughout the meal. The lines of politeness have definitely blurred.

One hotly debated topic is whether or not to tell your guests whom else you are expecting. Old-school protocol dictates that you shouldn't, but what if you've invited a controversial or famous guest? "You don't need to tell people you have a celebrity coming—if they can act like a grown-up," says Amanda Foreman, author of *A World on Fire* and *Georgiana: Duchess of Devonshire*. "I had a dinner for Salman Rushdie, and one of the guests was so excited to meet him in the flesh that she screamed—embarrassingly, like a groupie."

However, if you've been invited and one of the guests is such a big star that it will throw the rest of dinner out of balance, then it's up to the hostess to let the group know beforehand. One eligible Manhattanite accepted an invitation to what he thought was going to be a low-key evening with friends, only to find Madonna sitting in the living room. He felt completely blindsided and remained virtually speechless throughout the meal (which was easy to do, apparently, as Madonna talked the whole time—quasi-informed opinions expressed with absolutely no sense of humor at all).

Another scenario in which it might be better to give a little warning involves controversial guests. Society event planner Bronson Van Wyck, who worked in the State Department's protocol office under Pamela Harriman, says that he would alert guests as to who else was coming only if he anticipated a problem. "If there was a potentially uncomfortable situation—adultery, a lawsuit—then I might give the guest in question a heads-up, and allow that party to discreetly withdraw. Use common sense."

Once you're there, you might easily be faced with another challenge: trying to suss out who your potentially fabulous dinner partners are, without annoying them by asking directly. Try Foreman's technique and find out the names of as many people as you can during the cocktail hour, then dash to the ladies room to look everyone up on Google. "Then I know what I'm dealing with," Foreman says. "If their egos are big enough that they might be offended if I don't know who they are, then they're probably the sort that will be easy to Google."

You might also try plugging your dinner partner into Facebook to see if you have any overlapping friends; just be careful to mask how you discovered the connection. (Finally: a way in which handheld devices are useful, rather than irritating, at dinner.) If a quick Google or Facebook search isn't practical, you've got to rely on interesting conversational openers to get the ball rolling. There's the queen of England's classic line: "Have you come far?"; the flirtier "So, how have you been keeping yourself out of trouble?"; the heartwarming "So, how did you two meet?" Foreman is a fan of "What's been the best thing about your day?" Anything is better than the lumbering "What do you do?"

Then there is the minefield of what to serve in today's ovo-lacto-locavore craziness. If you're concerned about your weight, please skip lunch instead of your hostess's main course. The one exception is for genuine food allergies—in which case you really should let your hostess know in advance. *Twilight* actress Ashley Greene says, "I nearly killed a friend of mine a couple of years ago by serving him a dish with peanuts in it."

And just when you think your dinner couldn't have been any more disastrous, it can still turn out that the guests had a whale of a time. Liv Ullmann recalls a time when Woody Allen asked if he could meet her ex, Ingmar Bergman. Ullmann set up a dinner at which neither of the men talked. They literally didn't say a word to each other throughout the entire meal. But afterward Bergman and Allen each called Ullmann to say how incredible he thought the other had been.

Even if you've done all your homework, disasters do occur.

But one time-honored remedy remains: Top up everyone's glass and hope for the best.

It saved the first dinner party that philanthropist Ashley McDermott and her husband Jeff gave in L.A. "We'd only been married for about 15 minutes when we had a bunch of friends over from the art, entertainment, and business worlds," Ashley says. "They all started to fight about politics and relationships, with half being Republican bankers and the other Democratic Hollywood. It really fell apart when the young, newly married twentysomethings talked in idealistic terms about monogamy and marriage, and the jaded older producers who were on their third wives belittled them. At one point I just hid in the kitchen with my husband. It turned out okay. We just kept pouring wine until everyone got very drunk." •

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JUST ADD WATER

Formal wear doesn't necessarily mean that everyone will maintain an air of formality.

