



DEBRETT'S



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FOREWORD

There are many ways in which you can entertain at home – from formal dinners to drinks parties, informal and improvised lunches and al fresco suppers. All these events will inevitably be enhanced by impeccable hospitality. As a host you must be perceptive, organised and meticulous. But you should also be relaxed, flexible and confident enough to improvise when the need arises.

Above all, you must be generous: the simplest dish will be immeasurably improved if it is plentiful, delicious and served with liberal amounts of wine. Good conversation and entertaining company will be much more memorable to your guests than rarefied cuisine, served with a dose of cook's anxiety. Good etiquette is not about outmoded manners and codes of conduct, it is all about being observant, being aware of other people's comfort, and doing your utmost to ensure that everyone is having a wonderful time.

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"A guest never forgets the host who has treated him kindly"
HOMER



"The art of being a good guest is to know when to leave"
PRINCE PHILIP

HOSTING IS BOTH A PLEASURE AND A RESPONSIBILITY. THE BEST HOSTS ARE ADEPT at concealing all the effort and planning that has gone into their event; they make it look easy. But all hosting, from informal lunches to formal dinners, requires forethought, organisation and hard work. Start by visualising the upcoming event and then make the nature of that event clear to your guests. Being a good host means being super-aware of all your guests' needs, so always check allergies and intolerances before you start planning an event and do your best to accommodate them.

Never fall into the trap of being over-ambitious: a multi-course meal of dishes you have never attempted to cook before is a recipe for disaster. Realistically appraise your culinary skills, assess the numbers and, if in doubt, simplify.

Once the event is underway, you may be enjoying yourself hugely but remember that you will need to be on the alert throughout. Keep an eye on your guests and be especially vigilant about empty glasses or signs of boredom such as fidgeting and yawning. Above all, remember that you are bringing people together, so do your best to introduce people, steer conversations and socially engineer your gathering to ensure that everyone enjoys each other's company.

THE MAIN JOB OF A GOOD GUEST IS TO BE FLEXIBLE, POSITIVE AND APPRECIATIVE. You will be aware that your host has gone to a great deal of trouble, and you must do your utmost to ensure that it was all worthwhile.

RSVP as soon as possible and do not change your mind about attending an event because something better has come up. Only cancel for a very good reason. Make sure that you turn up punctually for the event (aim to be no more than 15 minutes later than the stated time for sit-down meals).

Within reason, try not to be too demanding about allergies and food intolerances and do your best to eat what is put in front of you, or at least forego it with good grace. Adopt a positive, friendly demeanour and be as communicative as possible; withdrawing into your shell may alarm your host. Contribute to the conversation, but do not dominate. Be as complimentary as possible towards the food, wine, table decorations and so on. The host will be seeking endorsement and reassurance and it is your job to give it. Be alert to signs that the host, or the party in general, is flagging, and leave promptly. Always thank the host profusely and follow up with a thank-you letter, email or text.



"I drink to make other people more interesting"
ERNEST HEMINGWAY

DRINKS PARTIES OR COCKTAIL PARTIES ARE TRADITIONALLY HELD BEFORE DINNER, often from 6.30–8.30pm. Increasingly, drinks parties last for a whole evening from 7pm until around 9–10pm. If you're holding a large, formal party you should send a printed invitation several weeks before the event and specify a dress code. A text or telephone call asking friends to come round for a drink would imply that you are organising a very casual get-together.

Drinks parties are where waiting staff, or at least help of some sort, is most worthwhile. At a club or venue, you can use their own, or the caterer's staff; at home, if professionals are not wanted, then the host's (or their friends') teenage children, plus a friend or two, may be a good option. If there is no help, a host needs to be very organised, with drinks set out ready poured and a few friends enlisted to circulate with refills.

Pay careful attention to the ambience of the room. Flowers or seasonal decorations will create a celebratory atmosphere; lighting should be low and subtle. Music is not essential and should be kept low – the din of conversation can soon reach deafening pitch in a crowded room.

PARTY DRINKS

Drinks can range from champagne or sparkling wine to cocktails.

Always serve a good selection of soft drinks and perhaps a non-alcoholic cocktail.

Get too much of everything, including extra glasses. It's always best to over-cater.

PARTY FOOD

Canapés are customary and may be provided by a caterer, shop-bought or homemade.

Canapés should be easy to eat in one bite, without cutlery. Avoid any canapé that is overloaded or liable to fall apart.

Serve canapés in stages, introducing new kinds progressively throughout the evening. As a general guide, allow six different canapés per head, three hot and three cold.

If food is served on sticks or skewers, then receptacles for used sticks should be provided on the canapé tray or be offered separately.

HOSTING THE PARTY

Hosts must be ready to greet their guests on arrival and make sure they have drinks. Ideally, someone else should open the door and take coats.

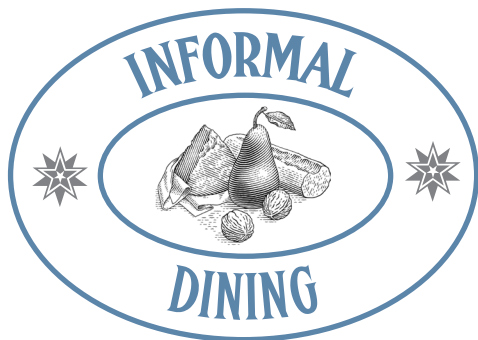
Guests should be introduced as much as possible, especially in the early stages of the party. Ensure that everyone is circulating and conversing and to check that there are no lonely wallflowers.

A good host will keep on the move, exchanging friendly greetings, chatting briefly and moving on. If you feel you're getting too drawn into a conversation, just say: "I'm so sorry, I need to catch up with old friends, so I'm going to circulate..."

ETIQUETTE TIPS

If there is no help, it is sensible for the host to take a bottle with them as they circulate. This will keep glasses topped up and signal to guests that the host cannot linger for a long chat.

It is perfectly in order to stop serving drinks to signal the end of a party.



"If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold,
it would be a merrier world."

J.R.R. TOLKIEN

IN AN INCREASINGLY LESS FORMAL SOCIETY, FOR MOST OF US HOSTING IS ESSENTIALLY CASUAL. We invite friends or family round for Sunday lunch, supper, or dinner, but the emphasis is on a relaxed approach to the event, a rejection of tradition and convention and a willingness to be much more improvisational and spontaneous. By its very nature, most informal dining is signalled by casual invitations – phone calls, texts, emails. When guests arrive, they may find themselves ushered into the kitchen or enlisted as helpers. Table settings are informal – there will not be a daunting array of specialist glasses, cutlery and starched white napkins.

A host of an informal event is much less likely to embark on an ambitious procession of courses, focusing instead on the main course and possibly pudding, and providing savoury nibbles beforehand and a selection of cheese and fruit afterwards. The understanding is that these events are flexible: extra guests can usually be accommodated without much fuss, and seasoned hosts will be able to make food stretch by resorting to store cupboard staples – chunks of Parmigiano Reggiano, olives, sun dried tomatoes and artichoke hearts will make your *hors d'oeuvres* go a lot further. Guests at informal events may find that they play a greater role in proceedings, assisting with serving and clearing away if required. They should still ensure that they thank the host afterwards for their hospitality.

NARROW ESCAPES

If your food is over-seasoned, try using water to dilute soup or stew. Alternatively add more vegetables, grains or noodles to soak up the salt.

Use the potato trick: chunks of raw potato in stews or soups will act as a sponge, absorbing excess salt.

If you've been heavy-handed with the spices, add some sugar or honey. Dairy products will offset the painful effects of over-spiced food, so always have yoghurt to hand.

If you've overdone the sugar and honey, offset the sweetness with citrus juice, wine or vinegar.

Don't spend the entire evening apologising abjectly for food disasters. Do your best to remedy any problems and brazen it out.

If your guest spills red wine on your white carpet or breaks a glass, it's your job to remain calm and serene and reassure the abject culprit. There are few stains that can't be removed.

AVOID PITFALLS

Ask guests beforehand to let you know what they really can't eat (whether for cultural reasons or because of allergies or intolerances).

Scrutinise ingredients before serving guests with allergies: peanuts, for example, can lurk in unexpected places.

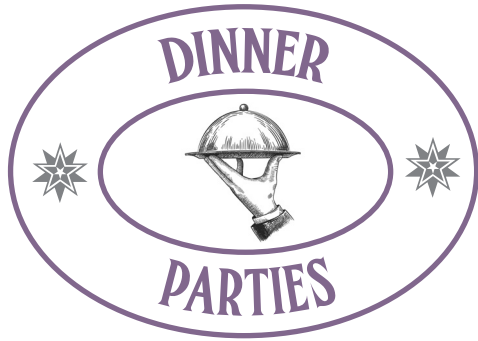
Poisoning your guests is an embarrassing *faux pas*; play safe, steer clear of shellfish and molluscs.

Always over-cater; nipping down to the corner shop for extra supplies looks disorganised.

Don't be tempted to swig the cooking wine or drink heavily during the meal. If you lose the plot your guess will start to feel anxious.

ETIQUETTE TIPS

You should never cajole or pressurise your guests. Whether you're teasing them about a 'supposed' food intolerance, pressing second helpings on them that they do not want, or encouraging them to drink wine when they're on the wagon, you'll make them feel uncomfortable and trapped.



"That which chiefly causes the failure of a dinner-party, is the running short – not of meat, nor yet of drink, but of conversation."

LEWIS CARROLL

A MORE FORMAL DINNER PARTY CAN BE A DAUNTING PROSPECT, so it is imperative to plan carefully and not to be over-ambitious. Think carefully about numbers and capacity and choose compatible guests. If you're opting for a very formal affair, printed invitations will alert your guests to the nature of the event. If you resort to more casual methods, such as text or email, you will need to give them some hints, perhaps by referring to the dress code.

Guests should RSVP promptly and should alert you to any special dietary requirements at this point (not on the night itself). Once you have a confirmed guest list, make a table plan. You can either add little handwritten cards to the table, or usher your guests to their places. These days, seating plans are more likely to be based around compatibility and conviviality than formal conventions, but traditionally the host and hostess sit at opposite ends of the table, couples are split and genders are alternated.

Hosts should do as much preparation as possible beforehand: laying the table; sorting out any decorations or flower arrangements; sprucing up the house and removing clutter. They should also plan the menu carefully, ensuring that it is well balanced; for example, a heavy main course requires a lighter pudding.

Now is not the time to experiment. Go for tried and tested recipes and remember that sometimes the simplest dish, well-executed, is the biggest crowd-pleaser. Set off your meal with the best bread available, and delicious home-made sauces and dressings.

When the guests arrive, keep an eye on the clock. Don't let pre-dinner drinks drag on for more than an hour to an hour and a half. The food should be ready when everyone is called to the table, with starters already plated up. Give people plenty of time to linger over the food and rest between courses. The dinner should follow a calm and leisurely pace.

Offering cheese and port is the signal that the meal is at an end. Invite people to leave the table for coffee and liqueurs before they depart.



TABLE MANNERS TOP TIPS

- Put your napkin on your lap, don't tuck it in your shirt.
- Help other diners to food before serving yourself.
- Wait until everyone has been served before starting, unless your host asks you to start.
- Eat at a relaxed pace and try and match fellow diners.
- Always compliment the cook.

ETIQUETTE TIPS

- Take your guests' coats and seat them before offering them drinks.*
- Don't leave guests on their own for long periods while you're fiddling in the kitchen. If you're entertaining as a couple, use teamwork to ensure one of the hosts is always present.*
- Don't completely clear the table while the guests are sitting there; just remove the dirty plates.*
- If it's all going on too long, deploy subtle hints – cups of coffee, offers of taxi numbers or spare beds.*



“There are few things so pleasant as a picnic eaten in perfect comfort.”
W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM

AL FRESCO ENTERTAINING CAN BE ONE OF THE HIGHLIGHTS OF THE SPRING AND summer months, but the weather is unpredictable so you will need to be prepared for all contingencies. If you’re entertaining at lunchtime, remember that your guests may not want to bake in full sun. Locate your table in dappled shade under a tree, or make sure you have parasols, spare sun hats and plentiful supplies of sun cream. If it’s evening or the weather is cool, have cosy rugs, woollen wraps and spare jumpers at the ready in case guests become chilly, and have a contingency plan to move indoors if it starts to rain.

Prioritise your guests’ comfort: it’s rude to persevere with al fresco plans if the weather isn’t co-operating and guests are forced to huddle up to keep warm. Eating outside doesn’t have to mean being uncomfortable. If garden chairs and tables are rickety or unsightly, bring some of your indoor furniture outside instead. Lay the table with proper glassware, crockery and cutlery and use a tablecloth and cushions to create a festive air.

If you’ve got a spare table, set it up outside – it will be useful for serving dishes, wine, and jugs of water, minimising the number of laborious journeys you must make back and forth to the kitchen.

If you’re entertaining at night, think carefully about lighting. Fairy lights or solar lights will look attractive strung up in trees or on fences, while tea lights in lanterns, or solar table

lanterns, will ensure adequate lighting at the table. Make sure that the path back to the house is well illuminated, so that guests do not come to grief if they’re making their way to the bathroom.

Be very aware of your neighbours and warn them if you’re hosting a dinner that is carrying on into the evening. Keep the noise down after 11pm and be aware that voices and music carry further on still nights.

AL FRESCO MENUS

Make use of fresh, summery, seasonal food such as salmon, sea bass, bream, crab, prawns, lamb, salad, new potatoes, strawberries, cherries and raspberries.

Create a menu that can be prepared in advance and give guests your full attention.

Use strong marinades and sauces with meat or fish – when you’re outside you crave more pungent flavours.

Ensure you have plentiful supplies of water and soft drinks: sun and alcohol do not mix and it’s important to keep your guests hydrated.

Encourage guests to eat as soon as they’re served – food cools down quickly outdoors.

HOSTING PICNICS

Choose a location where there is sun and dappled shade and bring sun cream and spare hats.

Bring picnic blankets that can be placed on the ground and cushions and folding chairs if possible.

Invest in inexpensive, reusable bamboo plates, cups and cutlery and sturdy stainless-steel beakers, which can be used for hot and cold drinks

Choose finger food: sandwiches, sausage rolls, Scotch eggs and pork pies. Or cut up batons of celery, carrot and cucumber and serve them with dips.

Leave no trace. Come well-supplied with bin bags and ensure that everything is packed away, placed in rubbish bins or taken home for disposal.



"If antiquity be the only test of nobility, then cheese is a very noble thing...
The lineage of cheese is demonstrably beyond all record."

HILAIRE BELLOC

CHEESE IS AN INVALUABLE CONTRIBUTION TO HOME ENTERTAINING, AN EXCELLENT standby when you need to boost or enhance starters or *hors d'oeuvres*, and a robust contribution to a simple cheese, bread and salad lunch. The cheeseboard also takes pride of place at the end of the formal dinner when – complemented by savoury crackers, home-made chutneys, and fruit – it makes a perfect accompaniment to red wine or port, signalling the end of the meal (or, if you prefer, you can follow the French tradition and serve it after the main course and before the pudding).

Parmigiano Reggiano has been made for eight centuries under extremely strict standards, using the milk of cows that are kept under an equally well-supervised regime. It is aged longer than other cheeses, which gives it a granular, nutty texture and a strong and savoury flavour. It must be aged for a minimum of 12 months and three age designations that are ideal to serve on a cheese platter are : 18, 22 and 30 months. Beyond this, you can find 40 month aged Parmigiano Reggiano in good cheesemongers, if you want to include something a bit different with complex flavours. This deliciously diverse cheese has different flavour profiles as it ages, making it an excellent choice for many home entertaining scenarios.

WHEN SHOULD PARMIGIANO REGGIANO BE SERVED?

Salty and milky, chunks of mild, 12-month aged Parmigiano Reggiano are an excellent accompaniment to a sparkling wine aperitif, offsetting the light bubbly with strong savoury flavour.

Parmigiano Reggiano can be grated, placed on a baking sheet and roasted in an oven to form a delicious Parmesan crisp. Cut into bite-sized chunks, it will prove enduringly popular.

For an al fresco lunch, why not shave Parmigiano Reggiano and use it as a topping for a range of summer salads? Its strong saltiness will cut through the milder taste of the salad vegetables, complemented by a balsamic vinegar and olive oil salad dressing.

Parmigiano Reggiano should have its place on every cheese board – mature 24- and 36-month-old cheese can be eaten on its own and is offset by a drizzle of aged balsamic vinegar and fruit such as figs and grapes. Its strong umami characteristics provide a perfect contrast to more unctuous, creamy cheeses and is delicious with both dessert wines and port.

STORAGE

Parmigiano Reggiano should always be served at room temperature, so take it out of the fridge well before serving.

Parmigiano Reggiano can be stored in glass or plastic containers in the fridge or wrapped in plastic film. Vacuum-packed Parmigiano Reggiano can be stored for several months. Once it is opened, mature cheese aged 24 months or more can be stored for about a month; cheese with a maturation of 12-18 months can be stored for about 15 days.

CHEESE ETIQUETTE

Aged Parmigiano Reggiano is crumbly and will not be cut into smooth, symmetrical slices. Instead, use a cheese knife with a sharp blade to chisel the cheese off at the tip of the cheese wedge, it will crumble into rustic-looking hunks of cheese.

It is fine to use fingers to eat hard, non-messy cheese: cut it into small pieces before picking it up.

Grated Parmigiano Reggiano is delicious with pasta dishes but not usually served with fish or seafood.



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