

How many guests?

The number of guests at dinner should not be less than the number of the Graces nor exceed that of the Muses, i.e., it should begin with three and stop at nine.

Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 BC), Roman scholar

Thirteen used to be thought of as such an unlucky number at the dinner table. It is often suggested that this stems from Judas being the thirteenth person to sit down at the Last Supper, but this seems unlikely. The Bible tells us many things but overlooks the seating plan for that evening. Whatever its origins, *triskaid-ekaphobia* (fear of the number thirteen) was so common in nineteenth-century Paris that there were men called *quatorzième* which means ‘fourteenth’. They would dress for dinner and then wait at home until they were sent for to make up the numbers at a dinner party where someone had dropped out and there was a danger of thirteen people sitting down at the table. Today you can find the superstition catered for at the Savoy Hotel in London where a metre-high sculpture of a black cat called Kaspar is available to make up the numbers at any table seating thirteen.

The number to invite today is shockingly simple – it depends how much room you have at your table. If you are of a mathematical bent then ideally you want to allow about half a metre for each guest’s place setting. If you have a small table and want everyone to sit down then you need to invite fewer guests. Easy, isn’t it? Eating a meal in cramped conditions is not fun.

Now, who to invite?

Geltungsbedürfnis

This wonderful German word translates as ‘craving for recognition.’ Some people have dinner parties as a sort of ego trip. They invite not their friends but a mix of people who they feel will show them in a good light. This is not always a success. Think about the mix of people and how they will get on rather than how they will reflect on your own status. I once attended a dinner which included the pop singer Geri Halliwell and the former White House intern,

Monica Lewinsky. I had a very engaging chat with Monica but she knew no one and spent the evening looking rather at sea. (Many people seemed anxious in her company. I don't know what they were worrying about – suddenly mentioning dry-cleaning or cigars, perhaps.) It's also worth bearing in mind that not everyone has the same ideas about who might impress. I failed to cover myself with glory when I spent forty-five minutes chatting to Ms Halliwell and then asked her what she did for a living.

(Side note – the German language is full of wonderful words. I don't think *Weltschmerz*: 'world-pain' or world-weariness can be improved in another language. My father told me that an early German word for tank was *Schutzengrabenvernichtungspanzerkraftwagen*. Roughly translated I think it means trench-crossing vehicle used for destruction. Papa said they lost the First World War because it took so long to tell the tanks to move.)

Do invite

Your friends, of course, but also some people you don't know well but would like to. You never know, but you may not yet have met all the fabulous folk there are to encounter.

Don't invite

- People who will only talk shop.
- Other guests' exes.

Invitations

The way in which you invite people indicates how much you care about whether they come. It also says something about the importance of the event. Most weddings, for example, are not an impulse occasion so taking the time to write by hand shows the significance of both the occasion and that the presence of the guest matters to you. Email is fine for a more impromptu or informal event such as dinner with friends. Text is all right for your nearest and dearest but in general don't invite via a phone call as it makes it very difficult for people to refuse.

Make it easy for someone not to come. You don't want anyone there who wishes they weren't. Don't send invitations too early so that people can't get out of it and don't make them so open-ended that people feel trapped. My least favourite invitations to attend an event say something like 'Please come and speak on any day at all in the next five years'. This leaves you with no other option except to say, rather rudely, that you don't want to.

Make sure everyone knows they are invited for dinner and not just drinks. How hideous to shop and cook for someone who has already eaten.

Give people a chance to declare their dietary peculiarities. No tofu addict wants to attend a hog roast.

Be ready when the guests arrive

(It all seems so obvious when you write it down, doesn't it?) The reason you are having a dinner party is not just to have dinner. You may want to impress someone, develop a friendship or thank someone for a kindness. No one wants to be invited and find their host is in a panic so give yourself plenty of time to get all your preparation done. Making lists of everything you have to do beforehand is a good way to make sure you don't overlook something.

- Tidy up. No one wants to see your dirty clothes or your taste in niche interest magazines.
- Make sure the loo is clean and that there is soap and a fresh towel.
- Make sure there is loo paper.
- Don't have music so loud no one can speak. Remember that the older generation may not have such brilliant hearing but still want to be included. Hard as it is to believe, you will be old yourself one day.
- Turn the TV off. I didn't really have to put that, did I?

The food

If you are not confident about cooking and chatting at the same

time serve something that can be pre-prepared and put in the oven. The guests have come to be with you, not sit by themselves in another room while you fret over the food.

If the meal goes wrong and is inedible – laugh and have a takeaway. These are your friends. If they are not your friends their reaction will help you decide if they might become friends. Whatever you do, try to make sure there is enough for everyone. There is another story about the director Alfred Hitchcock whose very profile showed a man keen on his food. One day he went to dinner at someone's house where he felt not enough food had been served. At the end of the evening, the host very politely said to the great man 'I do hope you will dine with us again soon.' 'By all means,' he replied. 'Let's start now.'

Make an effort

In the *Domus Aurea*, also known as the Golden House, according to the Roman historian, Suetonius (c. AD 69–122)

All the dining rooms had ceilings of fretted ivory, the panels of which could slide back and let a rain of flowers, or of perfume from hidden sprinklers, fall on his guests.

This is beyond most people but it is perfectly possible to set a nice table. In medieval times this was hard work. No one had a full-time dining table. If people wanted to eat, boards had to be laid across trestles – literally 'laying the table'. I remember a wonderful meal in the studio of the Danish sculptor and painter, Robert Jacobsen, when I was a child. The entire touring company of the Royal Copenhagen Theatre had turned up unexpectedly, so great vats of spaghetti were laid out on an impromptu table made out of beer crates and old doors. I imagine students do something rather similar all the time.

'Setting the table'

Nowadays the basics are very straightforward:

- The fork goes on the left. It has four letters just like 'left'.
- The knife goes on the right. It has five letters just like ...

anyway, make sure the sharp edge of the knife lies to the left, facing the plate. That way when someone picks it up they are less likely to cut themselves accidentally.

- The dessert spoon is placed above the dinner plate with handle pointing to the right. (If there is a dessert fork as well the handle of that points to the left.)
- A soup spoon has a wider bowl. It is placed on the extreme right of the plate.
- A silver spoon is usually found in a rich person's mouth.
- The English lay spoon bowls and fork tines facing up, while the French put them face down. North American owners of very old silver may use the French manner to show off the monograms on the backs of the cutlery.
- Be certain that everything is clean. Rubbing an old bit of dried egg off a plate before being served never helps heighten the enjoyment.
- If you have a centrepiece don't make it such a vast statement of artistic expression that your guests can't see each other.

The rest

It doesn't matter whether you have lots of nice matching china. I go to a wonderful restaurant in Canterbury that uses a hotch-potch of old china from charity shops and it looks great. This isn't about being rich, it's about making an effort.

The rule for candles is simple – use them when it's dark. Everyone looks better by candlelight but it mustn't be so dark that people start stabbing each other instead of the main course. Think about the lighting where you are serving the food. You need a glow not gloom. Candles are worth the effort. They suggest luxury as they are generally unnecessary.

Napkins are essential and a tablecloth is a nice touch. If you can't afford napkins even some nicely folded kitchen paper is better than nothing.