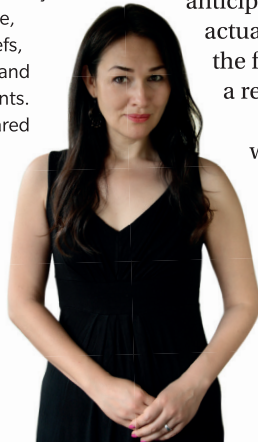




# How To Host An Alfresco Dinner Party

*Our food  
columnist Paola  
Westbeek says  
to ignore rules  
and rigidity  
when hosting*

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**F**OR SOME of us, the words “dinner party” are inherently jovial, bringing to mind convivial images of friends and family gathered around a table teeming with culinary bounty and the sounds of animated conversation, laughter and glasses festively clinking long after the meal has ended. Personally, I see it as a wonderful opportunity to share my love for food with those I hold dear. Unlike going out to a restaurant—which I enjoy, but can feel rather impersonal—I take great pleasure in inviting people to dine with me at home. Everything, from the menu planning and delicious anticipation as the event draws near, to the actual cooking and sitting down to savour the fruits of my labour with loved ones, is a reason for gratitude.

There are others, however, for whom the connotation is anything but pleasant. The thought of taking on the role of host(ess) can be enough to frazzle their nerves with feelings of inadequacy, no matter how great their culinary prowess may

be. While being a good cook does not necessarily translate to having a knack for effortless entertaining, hosting a dinner party with flair and poise requires a little planning and, above all, the realisation that the food is but a small part of what will make an evening truly memorable.

I only learned that years ago at an alfresco dinner in the French village of Duras, where we used to

crockery—made me feel at ease. And yes, there was food aplenty: six courses that included a terrine with sweet cornichons and onion confit; a silky courgette soup garnished with bright orange nasturtiums (she told us how to purse our lips around the tip of the funnel-shaped blossoms to draw out their syrupy nectar); pasta and bean salads; and ripe, honeyed melon for dessert. That unforgettable

## THE TRUE ARTISTRY OF ENTERTAINING IS TO ACTUALLY WANT TO DO IT ALL OVER AGAIN

spend our summer holidays. Just as the scorching August heat had made way for a welcome evening breeze, we joined our hosts, Tessa and Jean-Claude, in their garden for pre-dinner drinks, or an apéritif, as they would say in France. While mingling and sipping my Lillet, I couldn't help but notice the nakedness of the table. There were no elaborate settings with artfully folded napkins and polished silver. In fact, save for a bowl of mixed nuts, there was no sign of food, not even its tempting aromas. Had it been me, I know I would've fretted about trivial things, like whether the colour of the flowers perfectly matched the linens or if the wine was chilled to just the right temperature.

Tessa's laid-back hospitality—she didn't hesitate to ask us to slice bread, uncork bottles or help set the table with her beautiful vintage

evening in the French countryside proved to be a revelation for the obsessive hostess I used to be.

In his influential culinary masterpiece *Physiologie du goût* (1825), beautifully translated into English by MFK Fisher in 1949 as *The Physiology of Taste*, the French gastronome, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, wrote that “to receive guests is to take responsibility for their happiness the entire time they are under your roof.” I concur, but reading the “conditions” necessary for the perfect dinner party was slightly unnerving. One should pay heed to the ambience in the dining room (from the lighting to the temperature), the dishes should be “of exquisite quality” and wines “of the first rank”.

Even today, there is no shortage of well-meant yet intimidating advice. How much pleasure can one derive

when faced with rules and rigidity? In reality, our prime concern should be relishing each other's company.

While I can't deny that I am also about to chime in with my own words of wisdom, the following suggestions for hosting a stress-free alfresco dinner party have nothing to do with proper etiquette or what wine to pair with each carefully orchestrated course. There is no need to worry about elaborate menus, for the true artistry of entertaining is to actually want to do it all over again.

1. Plan a menu with easy, seasonal dishes that can be prepared well in advance. The last thing you want is to have to constantly head into the kitchen to toil over a hot stove.

2. Make a shopping list for any ingredients needed and decide what can be purchased in advance. Bread and herbs should be fresh if possible.

3. Pre-dinner nibbles should merely tease the taste buds. A bowl of marinated olives or grissini (crisp breadsticks) with tapenade will suffice. Artichokes, either steamed and served with lemon mayonnaise or baked with a stuffing of garlicky herbed breadcrumbs and lemon zest, make a chic starter. Follow with spaghetti al pomodoro crudo (a classic Italian pasta dish of raw,

chopped tomatoes seasoned with basil, garlic and olive oil) as a main. The longer the tomatoes sit, the better the flavours, meaning you'll only have to leave the table to boil the pasta. Excellent dessert choices would be grilled peaches with vanilla ice-cream or strawberries marinated in red wine and thick balsamic vinegar. You can add a cheese course before dessert, but stick to three choices and serve them on a rustic wooden board with crackers and quartered figs drizzled with honey.

4. When it comes to drinks, sparkling wine is always a winning tippie to welcome your guests with, especially if you add a frozen raspberry or two to the glass. Zesty white sauvignon blancs go well with most light summer starters, and in the case of the menu suggested, their lively acidity will pair perfectly with both the artichokes and the tomatoes. If offering a digestif such as a brandy, calvados or grand marnier, make sure you have enough ice.

5. Mix and match your crockery, place cutlery in eye-catching vintage food tins and opt for bowls of citrus fruit and/or water glasses with fresh herbs instead of flowers and distracting centerpieces. The decor should mirror the elegant simplicity of the food and the ease with which it is served. ■

