

Throwing dinner at the party

Tossing spaghetti against the wall with your guests is a great way to have a party, says Julie Ritter.



evening when there were six of us throwing spaghetti against a wall to check if it was cooked.

As for formal dinner parties, I either cook everything in advance in order to avoid any untimely disasters, or cheat and call in the caterers, adding the odd home-made dish of my own.

Cooking aside there are a few tips that I have picked up over the years

which help to avoid the dinner party becoming decidedly dull. The most important ingredient of any successful dinner party is undoubtedly the people you invite. It is a mistake to invite guests just because you owe them a meal and you should always include a few new faces, especially if you're inviting a group of old friends, whose company is as familiar as your slippers.

Getting together with the same old gang may ensure a cosy relaxed evening but you stand a good chance of talking about the same old things and sounding much like a record stuck in a dull groove.

Forget about the correct ratio of men to women and just invite the people you really want. I usually end up with more women than men which avoids the conversation resting on the dollar rate, football and cars.

I can't stand people who try and wrack their brains to find an eligible man for their single female friend. Not only is it embarrassing for both parties concerned, as it's pretty obvious why they've been invited, but who cares who's married anyway.

You may find that you are constantly being invited by the same people because they find you witty or unusual and you'll be produced on a pedestal as the prize exhibit, which can be frustrating and may cause resentment amongst the other guests.

Thomas Carlyle once said: "If Jesus Christ were to come today, people would not even crucify him. They would ask him to dinner, and hear what he had to say and make fun of it." Take heed and avoid this type of invitation.

Buffet suppers, in some ways, are the saving of the dull, formal dinner party, and I notice they are becoming more and more popular. All you have to do is invite the guests, supply food, drink and music and let them get on with it. It's best to try not to worry about who didn't get on with who, who said only one word all evening, or even worse, who fell asleep. Just remember, if you have duties as a host, they also have duties as a guest.

There will undoubtedly be times when you feel like quoting Horace: "You've had enough fun, eaten and drunk enough, time you were off".

Dinner parties are like a game, you win some you lose some. They require a certain amount of planning and a degree of luck. And remember, if you are ever invited chez moi, don't forget your apron. ●

The dinner party is to the Gulf what bullfighting is to Spain: all that preparation and anticipation for a swift execution. An enormous amount of home entertaining by way of formal dinner parties takes place for both business and pleasure. As a result there is a brigade of tremendously talented, super efficient women out there who somehow have the knack of putting it all together without a hitch.

But what about the rest of us? When it comes to giving dinner parties, I, for one, am all fingers and oven gloves.

Cooking for me is something to be enjoyed and should be fun. I'm of the Galloping Gourmet's school of thought — a swig of this, a gulp of that. But when I've got six arriving for dinner at eight I'm so paranoid I can't even swallow. This state of paranoia is largely due to a record of culinary disasters overshadowing my past. I remember I once ambitiously attempted venison, but somehow I didn't allow enough cooking time and ravenous guests were eagerly waiting. So I hurriedly dished it all up only to find that, when cut into, it was red raw and dripping with blood. Horror stricken I could only suggest that they ate the vegetables washed down with lots and lots of wine.

Then there was the time I spent hours creating an exquisite sauce for a special dish made of meat juices and cream only to watch it slide down the drain as the man of the house did a spot of washing up to help out!

However, it will never happen again, thank goodness, as I've devised an ingenious plan. I invite everyone around to help out in the kitchen beforehand. Invariably friends bring ready prepared dishes or even suggest cooking themselves. I have one friend who admitted he knew his way around my kitchen better than his own. I was delighted. My ideal dinner parties involve lots of people gathering in the kitchen, working together while the conversation flows as fast as the wine.

I have fond memories of an