

CAN THIS BE LOVE?

DINNER-PARTY FIGHTS

How to keep the mayhem minimal

My partner believes that when you invite people over for dinner, you are obligated to serve them a meal that rivals those served in the finest, most intriguing new restaurants. I, on the other hand, believe that when you invite people over for dinner, you are obligated to feed them, period. That is why, at our house, entertaining is anything but.

It starts with his question: "What do you want to make for dinner?" My invariable answer, "Something simple," is muffled by the sound of turning pages, as my partner starts hunting through cookbooks in search of a recipe that takes no less than three days to complete and requires several hundred dollars' worth of new kitchen equipment and ingredients found only in certain marshes in France. By the time he has finished reading it to me, it is nearly noon and I've decided to cancel the dinner and am seriously considering canceling our relationship.

This difference in our approaches to entertaining is repeated with variations in the homes of our friends. I know one couple, for instance, whose approaches are so irreconcilable that none of their friends has seen the inside of their home since 1979. The woman in this partnership thinks the perfect party is one where three or four couples sit around a dinner table, eat good food, and talk about a variety of timely subjects. Her partner subscribes to the more the merrier school, where the ideal party has everyone you've met in your entire life in attendance, food that comes in cellophane bags, and talk that can be heard above cannon fire. Her attempts at elegance have gone conspicuously unrewarded, as when, at their last (very last) dinner party, she brought out the Charlotte aux Poires for dessert, and her partner's only comment was "Pears!"

When couples entertain there is also the problem of who works harder. At my friend Sue's house, for example, her husband Gil piously insists that *he* should enjoy their parties just as much as their guests do. When Sue exhorts him to exert himself on behalf of the event, to join her, perhaps, in pinching together the one hundred little raviolis she is painstakingly making from scratch, he demurs and says, "Giving a party is supposed to be *fun*, Sue. That's why they *call* it entertaining." His patronizing tone is why they end up with only ninety-nine raviolis for dinner and one on his forehead.

My friend Marcia tells me that every time

she and Stan give a dinner party, she is forced to point out to him that answering the door does not constitute his full responsibility as a host. She thinks he ought to acknowledge the fact that you can't put away used plates and silverware without washing them first, and finally told him that if he wanted to have friends over for dinner again, he'd either have to help clean up, hire a catering service or buy her a uniform.

Which brings us to money, another cause of entertaining problems between partners, who often disagree on how much should be spent on a party. Stan, for example, complains that Marcia spends too much, speculating that their last dinner party cost about the same amount per person as his sister's wedding reception, a remark that Marcia somehow mistook for a proposal. Gil, too, believes that parties do not have to cost as much as Sue spends on them, a belief that he manifests the day after they entertain by announcing that dinner that night will consist of leftovers: six deviled eggs, half a container of guacamole, and a pint of eggnog. Sue insists that she does not overspend, and that if she spent what Gil wanted her to, the only way they could entertain their

friends would be by taking them out to dinner at a soup kitchen.

If you and your partner have problems like these, it doesn't mean you have to give up entertaining. A better choice is to attempt to minimize the problems. You might, for instance, try alternating the types of parties you give, one time having the kind of civilized evening you like, and the next time turning your home into the "animal house" your partner seems to prefer. Or you could cut down on the number of times you entertain and fulfill your social obligations by increasing the number of people at each occasion. Instead of squabbling every time you give a small monthly dinner party, you could give one gigantic gala a year, have a tremendous fight over it, and relax for the following twelve months. Perhaps if you do that, then the next time you hear somebody singing "The Party's Over," it won't sound quite so much like a metaphor for your relationship. (Next month: How does he stack up as a guest?)

by Bette-Jane Raphael



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