

**I have a recurring nightmare. I'm dressed like Cinderella and cleaning my kitchen, which looks as if a pot of couscous exploded in it. As I reach over to pick a chicken wing off the front of the refrigerator, the door bell rings. I open it and find thirty of my friends standing there with party invitations that I don't remember sending. When my friends see my unkempt appearance, and glimpse the farina-like crust sliding down the walls, they recoil in horror. At this point I usually wake up, my heart racing.**

Like many seemingly normal people, I suffer from a Fear of Entertaining. I can, when forced to the wall, throw a party or make dinner for my friends, but I am apt to do so feeling the kind of terror usually associated with jumping out of airplanes. Given the choice between throwing a party or having several teeth extracted, I'll opt for the surgical route every time.

We vinophobics (from the Latin *vino*, literally, a fear of serving white wine with meatloaf) would very much *like* to entertain our friends. However, we're afraid that opening our homes to others would be like opening Pandora's box.

**WHAT WE FEAR:** Fear of Entertaining can usually be broken down into specific areas of alarm. Foremost among them is the fear of exposing our homes to the prying eyes of others. We vinophobics see our homes not as comfortable, familiar spaces, but as testaments to our every imperfection. Our very walls will tell what we don't want told: that we are not as sophisticated as we let on (witness the rubber duck in the bathtub); or as well organized (witness closets that look as if they're perpetually confused with hampers); or as unerringly tasteful (witness the satin pillow with the words "Welcome to Hawaii" spelled out in glitter).

My friend Bob's fears run along these lines. Most of Bob's friends haven't come any closer

to his home than they have to Ronald Reagan's, and for good reason. Although Bob is perfectly happy living in an apartment furnished only with (1) a king-size bed and (2) the most elaborate audio equipment ever found outside of a recording studio, he is concerned that his friends might think him odd if they saw that, after seven years, he hasn't even bought a sofa.

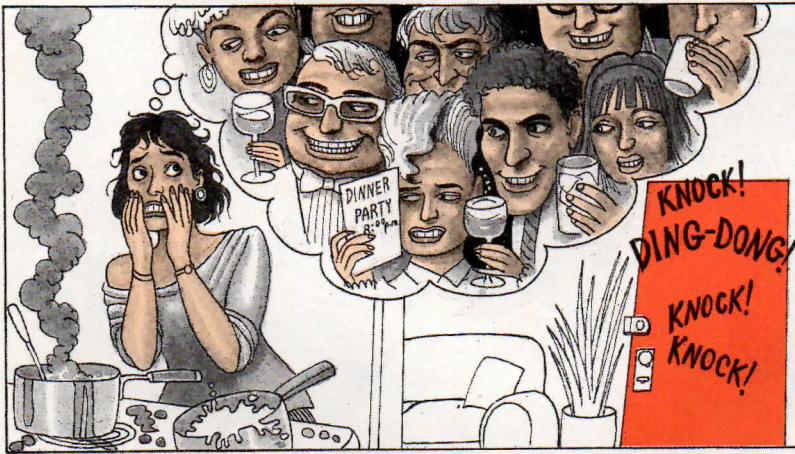
Even if our friends can swallow their criticism of our homes, we still worry whether they'll be able to swallow our food. I know only one person who's confident she can make good food at her parties, and that's the person who caters *my* parties. For the rest of us, the prospect of turning out an elegant meal for six, or even an inelegant meal for a horde, can seem awesome. What if we serve a dinner that leaves the guests feeling contemptuous, or hungry, or sick? What if, in years to come, they remember our party as the one where everybody went home with trichinosis?

Even if nobody gets sick, what if nobody has a good time? *Going* to such a party is bad enough. *Giving* one is unthinkable. It's this prospect that haunts my cousin Sandy, whose home I've been to only once, to use the bathroom. ("When it comes to entertaining," she says, "that's as far as I go.") In particular, Sandy remembers attending one gathering so deadly that an outsider

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by Bette-Jane Raphael

# FEAR OF ENTERTAINING



would have assumed the guests had taken a vow of silence. "All except for the hostess," Sandy recalls, "who, in a desperate attempt to get the conversation going, chattered hard enough to unhinge her jaw." Since that soirée, Sandy has been tormented by the thought of being at such a party in her own home *and not being able to leave*.

**What if my best friend broke up with her lover as a result of his meeting someone else at my party?**

I, too, have been tortured by these thoughts. What if the only interaction between guests at my party were the blows two of them exchanged during a disagreement? What if my best friend broke up with her lover as a result of his meeting someone else at my party? To forestall such disasters, I often end up deciding not to entertain my friends with anything other than funny stories about all the things that have gone wrong at other people's parties.

Theoretically, these fears should subside once you hook up with a partner. After all, when you host a party together, the two of you share the responsibility *and the blame*. But in reality, giving a party as a couple only complicates matters. Instead of worrying that one friend won't like another as much as you do, you worry that your friends won't like his friends any *better* than you do. Instead of worrying about whether the dish you want to serve (Julia Child's Boeuf à la Catalane) will turn out right, you worry about whether the dish he wants to serve (Capt'n Ed's Hawaiian Chili) will be considered edible by any guests besides his bowling buddies. Instead of worrying that your friends will question your taste in furniture, you worry that they'll question your taste in men.

**WHY WE'RE AFRAID**

The roots of vinophobia can be traced back to our early years. A dud birthday celebration or a pajama party gone awry can traumatize a budding hostess for life. One friend recalls that at her sixth birthday party, somebody accidentally brushed against her cake, so that instead of reading "Happy Birthday Marjery," it looked more like "Happy Birthday Marjerk." This so mortified her that she vowed never to have another party. Or another birthday.

Even watching somebody else's grief can leave its mark. My friend Emily remembers seeing the tears in the eyes of her eight-year-old best friend when she realized that all of the boys in their second-grade class were boycotting her Valentine's Day party because she had let it be known there would be kissing games. To this day Emily has trouble inviting anyone to her neighborhood, let alone her home.

My own fear of entertaining began in my mother's kitchen. From this room would emanate feasts to feed the platoon-size congregations of friends and relatives that regularly gathered in our living room. I am certain that watching my mother marching to and from

the dining room with an endless supply of food-laden platters made me fainthearted about my own abilities, which were at that time limited to making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

**LICKING OUR FEARS**

You can't hide from your social obligations forever. One day, your friends are likely to compare notes and realize that while you've been to their homes for dinner thirty-seven times collectively, none of them has had so much as a bread stick at your house. They may wind up speculating that you are (a) an ingrate (b) a freeloader or (c) homeless. So, it's imperative you overcome your fears.

In trying to overcome any phobia, it's important to take only one step at a time. For example, agoraphobics—people who haven't left their bedrooms for fourteen years—are at first encouraged to go only as far as their dining rooms. So take a small step first. Invite into your home your most trusted friend. Offer that person a refreshment you know you serve well, a glass of ice water, perhaps, or a perfectly timed three-minute egg. Once you've taken the plunge, realize you can then begin to branch out: Invite *several* people over for ice water; try *scrambling* an egg.

Reinforce your efforts by reminding yourself how many prominent people have survived embarrassing social situations. Nancy Reagan fell off the dais at one of her recent gatherings, and yet people are still clamoring for an invitation to the White House. Thank your lucky stars that the networks will not be televising *your* social gaffes.

If you still feel shaky, shore up your self-esteem by thinking of all your past achievements. Can serving dinner to six friends really be too hard for a woman who read *I'll Take Manhattan* in only three days?

Remember, when it comes to being a hostess, you probably have assets as well as liabilities. I know a woman who actually made a list of both, writing down her weaknesses in one column and her attributes in another. While she found that she didn't

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have a china closet the size of Bloomingdale's, she *did* have a lot of interesting friends. While she'd never made any dish more complicated than fruit cup, she *did* have a butcher who sold delicious barbecued chickens. After adding things up, she saw that the pros outweighed the cons and finally decided to give a party.

Remember, too, that this isn't the Middle Ages. You don't have to dip your own candles in order to make light for your guests, or melt down animal fat to provide them with soap. A lot of people, such as the above-mentioned butcher, are dying to help you give a successful party. There are people who actually *like* to cook, and who cater parties for a living, or make elegant take-out

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food. You can also rely on manufacturers of paper products. I use paper plates and napkins exclusively when I entertain. I'd use paper food if they made it.

**COPING WITH DISASTERS**

Of course, nobody can guarantee that you won't have any disasters. It isn't whether you have one that classifies you as a dismal hostess, it's whether you rise to the occasion. I once planned a buffet that included a gelatin and fruit mold for dessert. I must have left out some vital ingredient, however, because when I went to get it from the refrigerator, I saw that it had less in common with gelatin than it did with Kool Aid. Luckily, my friend Amy, an experienced hostess, was the first person to arrive that evening. After I explained my predicament, she simply dumped some rum in the bowl of fruit-filled red liquid and passed it off on my unsuspecting guests as punch.

Even worse disasters don't necessarily ruin an evening. I had a terrific time at a party my friend Linda gave the night of an electrical blackout. The lights, the stove, and the refrigerator all went out at exactly 8:12 P.M., minutes after ten of her friends had arrived for dinner. Luckily, it was to have been a candlelight dinner of poached salmon. It turned out to be a candlelight dinner of salmon *sushi*, where we all took turns speculating on how badly we'd have behaved if we'd been stuck in the elevator.

Encountering a disaster or two can even turn out to be a blessing in disguise. A writer I know fell off a bicycle and broke her arm the day before she was to have thirty friends in to celebrate finishing her book. Instead of canceling the event, she simply changed the menu: from homemade veal meringo and asparagus soufflé to take-out Chinese. "I couldn't open a can," she recalls, "but I could still write a check." She says it was actually a gratifying social experience, because everyone made a fuss over her. Not only that, she got to tell the story of her accident thirty times.

If you ever start to lose your newfound confidence as a hostess, remind yourself that most of these guests are your friends, not a panel of judges for the Party Olympics. They're not going to ostracize you because your turkey tastes as if it had been freeze-dried instead of roasted, or because your choice of hors d'oeuvres (a dip made from sour cream and onion soup mix) is *passé* enough to inspire nostalgia. Moreover, your guests *want* to have a good time. That is, after all, why people go to parties. If you stop confusing a party with a college entrance exam, you know you're on the road to recovery from vinophobia.

After that, who knows? You may never be the most sought-after hostess in your social set, but at least you will no longer have to tell your friends you can't entertain because your home is not yet equipped with window guards. And as your skill and assurance as a hostess grow, a miracle could happen. You might find yourself not only *giving* a party, but enjoying it. ■

*Bette-Jane Raphael's last party started at 8:00 P.M. The last guest left at 8:24.*