

Can I be the **hostess** with the **mostess**?



What is most testing about a dinner party – unfamiliar guests or an unfamiliar recipe? Helen Lederer weighs up the odds

What possessed me to ask six people who I don't know very well, or each other for that matter, to come round for a dinner party? I'm talking about a proper dinner party with three courses, red and white wine and absolutely no ketchup in sight. I didn't even have matching tumblers, serviette rings or Smythson name plates so I must have felt very bold indeed when I did the availability checks on the phone. All my guests appeared to be booked up for weeks in advance, which only underlined how much catching up I had to do in this canvas of "networking" with home-made grub. But I figured if it's good enough for Madonna to meet her future husband at Sting's dinner party, then it's good enough for me.

I planned to make a Cambodian sauce dish for an exotic starter but panic set in by page two when I realised that I hadn't got any white radishes or papaya and would anyone notice if I used a mango which was slightly off? I suddenly lost the will to take the watercress out from its highly oxygenated salad bag and decided instead to fashion some "mushrooms on toast". It was a pity the recipe hadn't explained more fully what a "coconut block" actually was, because mine was behaving like clay and frankly I didn't have time for surprises.

The self-doubt had now affected my motor co-ordinated skills. The act of lighting a scented candle while de-skinning an

orange and keeping any usable fruit as well as answering the phone without greasing it up with extra virgin – was all too much.

But I've only got myself to blame. Nostalgic (and erroneous) fantasies of happy guests all seated around my table, bathed in candlelight and grunting, "Mmm, stunning gravy Helen" – had spurred me on in this latest stab at social home dining.

My idea was to invite "work people" to segue convivially into talking shop within an atmosphere of friendship in the context of delightful home-made cuisine. I figured that if my Cambodian starter (OK, mushroom toasties) were exotic enough, my guests might see another, more accomplished, side of a confident personality as revealed in their own home and be influenced to sign me up on the spot. Or at least get myself invited back to theirs.

Great concept. Pity about the execution. My six-man dinner was to be peopled by two singles – who, I discovered, had met once before on a job where one of whom had a fling with a colleague and one of whom had been sacked by that colleague – if you follow. Then there was a high-up female journalist with a spouse who did something with patios (either sitting on them or selling, I forget) who



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seemed to follow me about a lot. Lastly, I'd invited two loud people who lived up the road and who fed the cat in emergencies, so needed thanking. I also figured their loudness would be useful in the event of other guests being shy or scared.

Did I say shy or scared? The two singles established that in spite of their polarised opinions, they'd both been shafted by the same colleague and therefore bonded closely in a plot to expose him. The high-up journalist seemed to be networking with my partner and the two "lounds" decided to take the law into their own hands and cook the food themselves. They could see I was in trouble as I seemed to be guarding the food in a scared and frozen sort of way without actually cooking it. This might have been because I'd been caught out timing-wise, and was still wearing my apron, reading glasses and hairband.

By the end of the night, the singles had exchanged e-mails, the high-up journalist suggested a job to my partner and I think I'd been felt up by the patio man.

In fact, I'm thinking of getting the "lounds" to cater for the next one. I'd love to answer the accusation, "Gosh, you shouldn't have gone to so much trouble" with a, "I didn't – I used caterers!" Must check if they know where to get white radishes though. Could make or break a social opportunity. **w&h**

Three ways to take the pressure off

w&h Food Editor Jane Curran gives these tips:

- Make a simple salad, such as buffalo mozzarella with tomatoes, basil and olive oil to start.
- Cook some sort of casserole for the main

course which you can prepare the day before.

- A big bowl of buttery mash is a great accompaniment with some cabbage or green beans on the side.
- Don't prepare masses of

vegetables – two properly cooked and served hot are preferable!

- Buy a delicious lemon or chocolate tart from a good patisserie or M&S, then dust it with icing sugar before serving.