

“The definitive guide to having friends for dinner”

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“It seems that we’ve arrived early,” said the chubby man to his wife, while adjusting his thick glasses.

“Yeah, Steve, I know. I’m beginning to think that this is a mistake. It’s the first time since Liz was born that we leave her alone for so many hours.”

“Come on, Maggie, she’s not alone... Your sister’s looking after her. Besides, she’s a baby, she won’t notice our absence. Why don’t we take this as a date and as an opportunity to finally become sociable again? We’re not even thirty and the pandemic and the distancing and the protocols have made us neglect all our friends. Let’s have fun from now on. What about it?” asked Steve encouragingly as another couple approached the steps of the brownstone.

“...evening” shyly mumbled the newly arrived man. He was in his forties. Nervously fidgeting with his coat’s zipper. His female companion barely seemed more collected. However, her anxiety seeped in and attempted to ring the bell without even saying hello.

“Terry...”, the man muttered under his breath, as his hand intercepted hers in mid-air and prevented her finger from pressing the doorbell – they still had some minutes to wait.

“Jeff, honey! What’s wrong? I don’t want to be late; I want to make the most of this workshop. I need to impress everyone we know! *We* need to,” she giggled, “that’s why you’re here with me.”

Maggie elbowed Steve and said half-heartedly, “We’re attending the workshop together, as well then. Pleased to meet you both, we’re Maggie and Steve,” and an awkward four-way handshake took place. Before the second couple could properly introduce themselves, the door opened revealing a stout, grinning man, flanked by his wife.

“Good evening! I see you’re ready to start! Come on in,” he warmly ushered them in. They stepped into a well-kept downtown house, modern and comfortable at the same time. The three couples stood in a circle, and the lesson began. “Welcome to our home. We’re glad to have you. We know how, after such a long quarantine, people have forgotten how to wine and dine socially. And this is why you’re here, I believe... We’ll have time to talk later on. So, first, let’s introduce ourselves. My name is Richard Kramer, and this is my beautiful wife, Marie.” She smiled honestly, in a warm way that made everyone feel at ease. She had a soothing voice when she said she was glad to have them in their home.

“Hello, everyone. I’m Terry and this is my husband, Jeff. We found the ad by chance, really. We saw it on our country club noticeboard, and we decided to give it a go, especially because the only contact detail was your telephone number... not even the address....” She paused only to breathe and take a look at the rest of the

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guests, and then continued, “You’re lucky I remembered to get some cash before coming! I’m just so used to credit cards that I don’t have notes in my wallet anymore... And since you said we had to pay in cash, well, you get my point, don’t you?...” She trailed off when Jeff nudged her.

“I’m deeply sorry to have caused any troubles,” Richard said solemnly, “but I thought it would be inconsiderate not to let you know in advance that we only take in cash. Since we’re talking about money,” he smiled, “I think it’s an appropriate time to seal the deal and get it over with, don’t you agree, gentlemen?”

Both couples proceeded to hand him the notes, which Richard didn’t bother to count, putting the money in his breast pocket, nonchalantly. Before he could button his jacket again, Marie was already guiding the two women to the coatroom where they could leave their thick layers behind. In a low, secretive voice, she told them that it was important to leave the men alone for a few minutes upon their arrival, and to show the guests the way to the powder room and to let them know of the availability of extra toiletries if they happened to require them. Maggie chuckled at the thought of offering her future guests some of her baby’s talcum powder. Terry made a mental note to remember to buy fancy supplies next time she went to the supermarket.

Meanwhile, in the living room, Richard told his male guests that Marie’s snatching of their wives had not been casual, but a strategic ploy to bond and break the ice. Once the three women returned, everyone felt more relaxed. Mr. Kramer was mixing the drinks. The hostess briefly explained in a calm voice that the seating arrangement of the living room needn’t be fancy but comfortable and cosy instead, and gracefully gestured the couples to sit on the plush sofas strewn around. The guests have to feel at home, especially when the initial conversation takes place. Jeff and Steve nodded in agreement; Terry and Maggie seemed lost in thought, already planning their next dinner night taking into account the experts’ advice.

“It’s at this stage that your friends will be glad to hear that you’re planning to serve the starter course.” Richard was saying when Marie came in from the kitchen carrying a tray. She lowered it allowing their guests to observe its contents. They were served different variations of the Italian bruschetta. Some topped with the traditional garlic rub, tomatoes and basil; light green mashed avocados; ham and cheese; egg and bacon; and mushrooms with grated bechamel sauce. The dishes were colourful and rich in textures. The combination of flavours was simply sublime. Expecting the main course and not wanting to feel full already, Maggie and Terry were nibbling at their food, but Steve and Jeff had already gobbled down theirs.

Marie felt glad they had taken the chance to come. Richard continued: “The starter has to be elaborate but fresh. It can be exotic, too, but most importantly, it mustn’t contain fish or shellfish, for you are certainly not wishing for a memorable night to end up as a bad memory if the ingredients have not been properly received...”

Steve snorted, “I know what you mean, I’ve been there before. But, to be honest, I don’t know whether it was the oysters or the beer what made me feel dizzy as soon as I got home that night...” Maggie stomped on her man’s foot and stopped him right in his tracks.

There was a brief pause while Mr. and Mrs. Kramer collected the starter dishes and began to lay down the new, bigger ones intended for the following course. The guests were invited to sit down at the table.

Richard was the first to speak again, “True friends must be taken good care of. That’s why you have to listen to me very carefully now. The main dish has to be perfect. The man must make the roast and carve it at the table for everyone to see. It will be the lady’s role to prepare the side dishes. Chef’s secret... If the overall plate is dull, bring in some flavour with tasty sauces.”

Marie added, “And remember to include fresh vegetables in the menu to balance the meal! You never know who might be taking extra care of their figure.”

“The choice of the meat must be excellent,” Richard resumed. “Choose meat with marbled fine fat. Even though Michelin Star awarded restaurants take for granted that meat has to be undercooked in order to be tasty, do not make your guests uncomfortable by forcing them to eat meat, too raw for their liking. If you enjoy your meat rare, be mindful of others and cook a separate piece for yourself.” At this point, the guests were amazed at how Solomonic the meat doneness issue could be effortlessly resolved.

“A nice seasoning makes all the difference. It’s a crucial part of cooking meat. Salt and pepper will be your allies. And then, a perfect roast starts with searing the meat on a skillet with butter and fresh herbs. It’s absolutely worth it, can’t you tell?” he examined his guests to see their reactions. They were all with their mouths full, and their eyes expressed the gratitude Mr. and Mrs. Kramer were looking for. It was Jeff who hurried to swallow and speak before taking another bite, “This, Mr. Kramer, is the best meat I’ve ever had. It tastes so good, its flavour is so...” he rolled his eyes before finishing his phrase, “so rich, so succulent. How do you achieve such a luscious result? Terry! We’ve got to cook this for our friends!”

“I’m pleased, Jeff. Thank you for the compliment. You may all call me Rich if you like, let’s leave the formalities aside. You see, having friends for dinner is something to be proud of. As I told you, the meat is the best part, the most remarkable moment of the night, this is why its cooking needs to be mastered. Right, Marie?”

“Sure, darling. After the searing is done, place the meat in the oven at high temperature for at least half an hour, and then lower it to medium temperature to get it crispy outside and tender inside. Once it’s done, don’t forget to let it rest for, at least, twenty minutes before carving it, or the moisture will just leak out.” She caught his eye and made an almost imperceptible signal for him to go on.

“What you’re eating now, my dear guests, is the perfect example of an all-natural grass-fed specimen. Enjoy the meal, have fun, learn how to have friends for dinner. This is the purpose of this workshop.”

The conversation that followed revolved around the topics to bring up while dining – sports, children, food, trips – and also about what to avoid saying, what to mention, how to overcome awkward silences, how to agree and disagree, how to include every guest in the talk.

Not a single bit of meat or vegetables was left on their plates. Richard was in charge of bringing the next course of the meal into the conversation. “For dessert, nothing fancy is expected. Our busy lives force us to cheat a little,” he looked at Marie in the eye with a confident smile.

She nodded and then added, “Let’s be honest, we’re grown-ups and we know that wine and ice-cream pair idyllically on a hot breezy summer night. They are the best ending for a perfect night, *la crème de la crème*... Such a dessert is even better than sex!” she winked.

The female guests and Jeff giggled, but Steve burst out laughing. He was amused by the all the advice. “All these secrets are killing me! I wish I had met you guys before!”

Marie was elated at Steve’s choice of words. “Keep on listening, Steve, because it’s not over. If ice-cream is your chosen dessert, don’t forget to pick a sweet white wine, like a Moscato, or anything that is not too dry. Feel free to experiment with different wines and dessert options after you try mine, of course.”

Immediately after the final lesson, all the wine glasses were full of the sweet, tangy liquid they had been talking about. Mr. Kramer pretended to seize the opportunity to propose a toast. He raised his glass, cleared his throat and said, “Cheers to such wonderful company this evening. It’s always a warm surprise to find genuine friends – if I may call you this way from now on. Marie and I would be glad to have you for dinner as an example for the next workshop.”

The clinking of glasses lasted for some seconds. Everyone drank and kept smiling, but the eyes of the guests slowly wandered off...

A few minutes went by, and now the drunk chatter was replaced by the solitary and intense chinking of Mr. and Mrs. Kramer’s cutlery. Their open-mouthed chewing revealed that they were exclusively munching the roast that still remained on the table. Marie, now with a dirty and greasy face from gnawing at the meat, contorted her facial muscles into an unnaturally childish grin and exclaimed, “Honey! I think the chubby one will taste even better than the hippie vegans we had for dinner last time...”