



CHUCK PEA

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The dinner party. It's an art and one that I've been toiling away at for the past decade.

I'm a child of two serial, dedicated hosts. Looking back, it seems as if I grew up in one gigantic backyard BBQ. The Beechey-Grover residence was one festive house. Naturally, a party isn't a party without food and as soon as the date was set my mom would get to work on perennial favorites like Seven Layer Dip, Sweet Marie Bars, Sour Cream Coffee Cake, and Dad's "Famous Ribs." The potluck buffet table was bountiful and picked at until the early hours of the morning. My parents sure knew how to throw one hell of a party. At age ten, I loved nothing more than to graze the dessert table and observe the adult bacchanal that I found myself in the middle of. As an adult I now crave a little more civilization and fanfare in my dining experiences...and a proper chair.

Coming of age in a party shaped me, but it wasn't until a move to Copenhagen that I fell in love with the dinner party. Growing up, seated dinners with table settings and candlesticks were reserved for Christmas, not your run of the mill Friday night. In Denmark, I quickly learned that the Danes ate at home and most understood the basic principles of cooking. Dining out, in 2008, was thought to be a luxury. Restaurant culture was geared to tourists and the city was hardly the dining Mecca it is now. It was pre-Noma boom and the rise of New Nordic cuisine.

The first weekend in my new city was welcomed by a dinner invitation. I accepted and was handed a

handwritten note with a mysterious location. Upon arrival I was led to a secret basement cave and to a candlelit table set for twenty. It was unlike any party I'd ever been to, more inline with Hogwarts than my Vancouver basement apartment. This would be the first of many of these elaborate dinners.

Gathering over a meal was something the Danes took seriously. My roommates and I would have dinner Wednesday nights and would rotate the duty of chef. Veganism was a foreign concept in the Denmark of a decade ago. When it was my turn to cook I would highlight that a vegan diet doesn't have to be one of deprivation, it should be one exploration, experimentation, reinterpretation. I can't say I converted Dirk, Rasmus or Rune, my three Danish roommates/"brothers" to plant-based diet, but they never left the table hungry. They were always intrigued as to how food could taste this good without meat or cheese.

My time in Scandinavia was formative, filled with bouts of exhilaration, loneliness and personal growth. The level of grandeur surrounding those weekly dinners was an cultural aspect that I transported home and have carried with me since. I've hosted dinners in six countries and in spaces as diverse as sparsely furnished studios, casitas, cabins and campgrounds. This summer marked my first Italian soirée. My partner and I rented a guest house in Puglia and hosted friends to a local feast of tarali, orchiette and fava bean purée. Wherever there is a table large enough to sit six, I'm brainstorming how and when I can host there.

As someone who recognizes that good food is far from the only aspect of a successful dinner, here are a few suggestions for throwing the most consummate affair and creating an inclusive environment for everyone. Vegans, omnivores, gluten abstainers, allergy fighters and anybody else.

ASK AROUND Ask “Are you free Friday night?” And quickly follow with, “Any dietary restrictions?” It’s easy to feel as if you’re burdening a host with an allergy, but there is nothing worse than a guest showing up and not being able to eat. No need to say, “It’s fine, I’ll just eat the dishes without soy in them.” With the multitude of recipes available by a quick internet search, it’s easier than ever to accommodate a variety of diets. I’ve hosted people with allergies that range from sesame to avocados, to nuts, all elements I often incorporate in my cooking. With a little advanced warning, the almond milk in dessert can easily be substituted for coconut or rice and sesame seeds that garnish the salad can be replaced by a toasted sunflower seed or some coconut flake.

COMFORT This is more a part 2 to the above...after a guest has conveyed the restriction, don’t broadcast it. I try and make the whole dinner allergy friendly and I’ll just causally mention it to them when they arrive. That way it doesn’t become a topic of conversation or reason for someone else to avoid.

TAG TEAM If you feel comfortable serving non-vegan dishes, but don’t feel comfortable preparing them, ask someone to help. A guest could bring a dish to contribute to the table or you could “hire” your best friend as sous-chef. Far from a requirement, but I know my father, the biggest skeptic, will be much more inclined to eat vegan dishes if there is a traditional protein involved.

GAUGE YOUR DINER How new is the concept to them? When I was in LA, where veganism is mainstream, it requires no explanation, but in other communities that isn’t the case. Does this need to be a soft intro to plant-based dining or can it be hard? Is it the time for a classic *Veganomicon* Caesar Salad or can it include a raw date sweetened cheesecake for dessert? You don’t want to alienate anyone.

DON’T ADVERTISE I never explicitly say anything is “vegan.” Certain people have had the label tainted by some dry tempeh from a decade ago and they carry that with them. That becomes their marker of “vegan food.” The average diner will never know that sautéed your green beans in olive oil, used almond parm in the gratin or that your ganache was made with coconut milk. If they do find out that it Caesar was all vegetables, they are often pleasantly surprised and leave feeling a little lighter and more virtuous.

LEAD W/ FOOD The joys of a dinner party are often bringing disparate groups together. As a rule, nothing conversationally is off of my table. I love a little banter or a disagreement in the name of progress. As for judging other’s lifestyles, that’s not something that I condone. For me, dinner isn’t the time to get out the pamphlet and soapbox to preach the benefits of meat-free life. My philosophy is to make food that tastes delicious and is as satisfying as its non-vegan counterparts. Changing people’s attitude’s through their stomach can be the most effective method. Who can say no to unctuous chocolate layer cake?

VARIETY I’ve always been one to favor many smaller dishes, instead of one large one. It is more time consuming, but when hosting I don’t mind the extra effort. Instead of making a curry, pizza or pasta, I tend to make a salad, grain and two to three vegetables. There will always be some legumes, nut and seeds throughout for crunch and satisfaction. A higher protein grain, like buckwheat, wild rice or teff can do double duty. I encourage creativity and experimentation.

A traditional meal is typically constructed around protein, starch and plant. I adopt and adapt this to vegetables. I’ll use an assortment — one that tends to be meatier, higher umami, like a mushroom or eggplant, a starchier one, a squash, carrot, parsnip, sweet potato, a leafy or green one and a cruciferous one. I craft a balanced vegetable meal. I’ll also prepare them in a variety of ways, roast, grill, steam, sauté, blanch, etc. The versatility in vegetables is so often overlooked.

HOSTING HELP

- ☞ Might be obvious, but have something for people to graze on when they arrive. It can be as simple as olives, toasted nuts, farmer’s market vegetables and a nut cheese.
- ☞ No one should ever be wanting for a beverage. Have a variety of alcoholic and non-alcoholic on hand. I tend to start with an aperitif or sparkling wine, but I will always have kombucha, flavored sparkling water or a shrub if someone wants a soft option.
- ☞ Start before the day-of to prevent getting overwhelmed. If you’re having a dinner on Saturday, grocery shop on Thursday, prep condiments, sauces and dessert on Friday, leaving Saturday to focus on cooking, plating and entertaining.
- ☞ Know your time management skills and weak points. My knife skills aren’t nearly as good as my partner’s so I’ll either allow for extra time or have him help out in that department.
- ☞ To be able to visit with guests instead of being trapped in the kitchen, I avoid any 15 minute cooking. I serve dishes that don’t lose anything when eaten at room temperature.
- ☞ Cut corners that can be cut — appetizers are mine. I generally splurge on fancy store-bought snacks as opposed to adding another to-do of making tartines, or dips/spreads. Some people favor buying dessert from a bakery, batch making cocktails or doing a potluck. Know your limitations.

My parents love of entertaining and Danish hospitality have been indelible to me. My mom and dad now entertain far less than they used to and I haven’t been to a dinner in Copenhagen in a long, long time. I will always carry those experiences with me. They have informed how I put my table together and create one where everyone, no matter what they eat, is more than welcome to join. △

