



Come Dine With Me?

This month our Richard recalls the dinner party to end all dinner parties

I WILL TELL YOU IN A MOMENT WHY we now seldom entertain guests for dinner. First you will have to endure a feast of my past.

It was an alternative to inviting my date back to view my etchings. Unable (on £8 a week as a trainee solicitor) to afford trips to a restaurant, I chose to learn to cook, starting with a very handy book called 'cooking in a bedsitter' and graduating to two cookery books by Len Deighton.

In the 1970s, Len Deighton, the thriller and spy writer, produced a pair of Action Cookbooks (which, incidentally, are still available). They were great for people like me because they were prepared in cartoon strips, so that even I could understand what to do. I became a cook of sorts – at least to the extent of preparing food without inducing food poisoning in the guests.

Deighton's dishes were always flamboyant – sometimes literally. They required exotic (to me then) herbs and spices, like paprika, cardamom seeds, turmeric and tarragon. The kitchen in my shared flat always looked like the scene of a major disaster after I had prepared a meal and – once – we nearly had to call out the fire brigade when the crêpes I was flambé-ing set fire to the curtains.

But it worked and as the years went by – even as a care worn solicitor – I would occasionally roll up my sleeves and produce an exotic chicken paprika or coq au vin.

So began the dinner parties – lively evenings where conversation flowed as freely as the wine and we deftly solved (or so we thought) the problems of the world with the brilliance we thought we were demonstrating, as the house filled with smoke and then reeked for days afterwards.

One thing that makes a good dinner party is variety. And that might have been our downfall because we had the dinner party to end all dinner parties. We invited: a pleasant American couple who both worked in the pathology laboratory at a local hospital, a trainee solicitor and his wife and some other people whose names I have now forgotten.

Most of the guests arrived on time but the American couple were nowhere to be seen. The pre-dinner drinks were duly consumed and the guests (still without the Americans) wandered into the dining room where the starters of chicken liver pâté were elegantly laid out.

The trainee solicitor took one look at the pâté and announced that he was a vegetarian and would not touch it. That caused an uneasy moment, followed by a more uneasy feeling of dread: the next course was to be Beef Bourguignon. My then wife hissed at me in the kitchen: 'Why didn't you tell me, you idiot?'

I had no real excuse. I had been vaguely aware that he claimed to be a vegetarian, but he had a lean and hungry look, so I reasoned that he needed some good meat to put some flesh on him. That only got me into deeper water.

A hastily prepared omelette provided a substitute of sorts for Beef Bourguignon, but I remained in the dog house.

As the main course was being dished up, the nice American couple rolled up – and casually announced that they had already eaten.

'Why didn't you tell them they were invited for supper?' this time in a louder hiss (you can see why I have to change wives from time to time). My honest answer was that I thought I had.

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We settled the nice American couple in, gave them small helpings of the main course and offered them large helpings of something alcoholic – which they declined. There was the briefest pause in the conversation while the other guests (who had not declined) gasped that someone should choose to refuse Barr booze.

Slowly the chat started up again, drifting across the Atlantic and to different cults and religions. On cue the vegetarian started to wax lyrical about the way some Americans join strange cults and become obsessed by their fanatical leaders.

Out of the wide choice of extremist cults, he happened to light on one that none of the rest of us had heard of. He then spent several minutes saying how mad, bad and greedy was its leader and how weird were his followers.

You know how silence can sometimes be loud. The nice American couple then went deafeningly silent. They both proclaimed that they belonged to that cult and were very proud of their leader who was undoubtedly the Messiah reincarnated.

Condemning us in general to hell fire and damnation, and the vegetarian couple in particular to rot in hell, they swept out, leaving a slight whiff of brimstone behind them. We never saw or heard of them again.

Not long afterwards they were followed by the vegetarian and his wife who paused only briefly to pick an apple from the tree outside the door and mutter 'at last, something decent to eat' before they too disappeared into the night.

I told you it was the dinner party to end all dinner parties. After that, we started to eat takeaways – on our own.