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## Thoughtful guest lists make for gracious dinner parties

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Dinner parties are times when friends and family get together to have fun, meet new people and try the latest recipes. Planning any dinner party involves a number of steps, not the least of which is coming up with the guest list. I have hosted or been the guest at a number dinner parties over the years and have come to realize just how important the guest list is.

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For some occasions, the guest list will be determined by the meal - food is the primary focus of the event, after all. Let's face it, some people just don't like or cannot eat certain foods. If you're having a lobster dinner, for instance, inviting people who have a shellfish allergy or aversion would be senseless - and potentially dangerous. You could, of course, offer a different meal for such a guest if you don't mind preparing a second dish.

One can argue that the pleasure of getting together trumps the meal itself, but there is usually a change in atmosphere if the food cannot be enjoyed by all. I have been to dinners where the hosts have literally spent days cooking a really special meal that revolved around a single key ingredient. These events were gastronomic extravaganzas and great attention was paid to the guest list to be sure everyone would fully enjoy the fruits of their labours. The effort was well worth it.

Then there are those dinner parties where camaraderie is the main focus. In these instances, it is not unusual to have two or three entrées from which to choose.

Planning the invitations for this sort of get-together takes a different thought process: it is essential to include people who are likely to be congenial. This does not mean that the guests need to necessarily be like-minded. Differing viewpoints add to the life of the party. Congenial means being willing and able to listen to what other people have to say without letting egos get in the way.

The larger the party, the greater the diversity of guests the list can accommodate.

One surefire way to create stress at a dinner party is having competing strong personalities seated at the same table. My advice is to avoid this at all costs, unless your goal is to create such drama.

Dinner parties can be social or business events. Sometimes there is an agenda. This can be as simple as making an introduction or as complex as closing an important deal. Either way, arrange the seating so as to facilitate the desired end result.

Multiple tables skillfully seated successfully solves this challenge and can help to orchestrate wonderful conversations and maximize the fun. I enjoy nothing more than bringing together people who have never met one another before. I also think including people from entirely different backgrounds adds an important element of any great party: spontaneity.

Family dinners can be an opportunity for stimulating conversation, as well. I find it helpful to keep it to cheerful, non-controversial subjects. Sharing what you did during the day at work or school, interesting insights and things you are looking forward to are all good topics. Resist speaking about things you dislike or that irritate you, or criticizing your dinner companions. Save these conversations for more appropriate times, away from the table.

Dinner is a major meal - aid digestion by creating a stress-free environment. Pleasant conversations are in order. Tired, cranky people should resist complaining about a miserable day at work, an unappreciative boss or frightful rush-hour traffic. As compassionate as the family may be, it puts a real damper on a relaxing dinner.

Enjoying a thoughtfully prepared meal is one of life's great satisfactions, as well it should be. After all, if you must do something three times a day, you might as well do it right!

Whether you find yourself hosting a dinner party or invited to one, remember that it is not a political arena or forum for advancing personal philosophies. Deferring to other opinions can widen our own perspectives and create a friendly atmosphere where respect for one another is the main course.

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