

THE PARTY'S OVER

The rise and fall of the middle class dinner party mirrors the rise and fall of Thatcherism. Simon Titley argues this is no coincidence

The British middle class dinner party is dying out. And not a moment too soon.

In an opinion poll published this May by YouGov, 27% of Britons said that they avoid giving dinner parties completely because they are too stressful, while a further 38% said they don't host dinner parties very often as they involve too much work, money or time. Only 14% said that they "love hosting dinner parties". The minority that persists with dinner parties is tending to abandon formality in favour of the informal 'kitchen supper'.

Besides having fewer dinner parties, people are also eating out less. A survey published in May 2010 by Mintel found that 53% of Britons are staying in more to save money. Mintel concluded that the recession has accelerated a trend towards 'cocooning'. Rather than host a dinner party or eat out, we prefer to hunker down at home with a bottle of wine and a pizza.

There is one group that has not given up on the dinner party, but it hardly counts as a ringing endorsement. YouGov found that the demographic that remains most keen to host dinner parties is couples with three or more children, but only because it is cheaper for them to entertain at home than hire a babysitter for the night.

LOST ENTHUSIASM

What has gone wrong? Over the past three decades, the dinner party was a regular feature of British middle class social life. When you consider all the cookery programmes on TV and all the cookery books sold (Britain's best-selling author in any genre is Jamie Oliver), not to mention the fortune spent on fitted kitchens and kitchen gadgets, you would have thought that dinner parties are still all the rage. But most people today seem to have lost their enthusiasm and no longer feel any urge to host them.

The history of the dinner party can be traced back to the nineteenth century but the practice was for a long time confined to an affluent minority. Until the 1970s, most British people were working class and would never have dreamt of hosting a dinner party. Instead, they had 'tea'.

As a child in a family on the cusp of the working class and middle class in the 1960s, I well remember the ritual of 'tea'. It was served on a Saturday or Sunday at about 4pm. The guests who came round for tea were usually relatives. Everyone sat at the dining table but it was never a cooked meal. There were sandwiches and cakes, although in the summer the sandwiches might be replaced by a 'salad' (which meant cold meat accompanied by lettuce, tomato, cucumber and a bottle of Heinz salad cream). The drink of choice was a pot of tea, or orange squash for the kids, certainly not wine.

And then the emerging middle classes acquired aspirations. The moment was captured perfectly in

Mike Leigh's 1977 TV play 'Abigail's Party'. It was viewed at the time simply as an uncomfortable comedy of embarrassment, but we can now see that it was also extraordinarily prescient.

The setting is a suburban drinks party rather than a dinner party, but the play nevertheless satirised the vulgar materialism of the new middle class in quite shocking terms, through the medium of the central character Beverly (memorably played by Alison Steadman), a domineering monster in a bright orange cocktail dress, with a penchant for Demis Roussos and kitsch erotic art.

The historian David Kynaston sees this play as a key text. He argues that, in the pre-Thatcher period of the 1970s, "a lot of evidence shows that society was quite ready for Thatcherism when it came along. Whether one thinks it was a good or bad thing, many people already wanted the 'me first, society second' policies that Thatcher promoted."

The dinner party chimed perfectly with this new mood. It caught on in the early Thatcher era, primarily as a means of showing off. Middle class couples would compete to emulate the dishes they had tried on continental holidays or in foreign restaurants, or had seen on TV. If you are not old enough to remember the aspirational culture of the 1980s, don't bother searching in a history book; simply watch some old episodes of the cheesy TV drama series 'Howards' Way'.

By the 1990s, the dinner party was ripe for satire, notably in the TV sitcom 'Keeping Up Appearances', where Hyacinth Bucket's 'candlelight suppers' were dreaded by anyone invited. But such satire was the exception, not the rule. A boom in TV cookery programmes began in the 1980s and hasn't stopped booming since. It began with the didacticism of Delia Smith and evolved via the tomfoolery of Keith Floyd to the pure entertainment these programmes offer today.

But might some of these TV shows be a reason for the dinner party's decline? The BBC's 'Masterchef' ("cooking doesn't get any tougher than this") promotes the mistaken idea that, for any dinner party host, nothing less than Michelin-starred restaurant standards will do. It makes people feel ashamed to offer a homespun casserole, even though that is much more practical for a domestic dinner party than Masterchef's labour-intensive, chefy food. Another disincentive is provided by Channel 4's 'Come Dine With Me', which creates the impression that the average dinner party consists of incompetent cooking shared with a bunch of arseholes.

The only deterrents to hosting a dinner party mentioned in the YouGov poll were time, effort and cost (the same poll found that the average amount people spend on hosting one is £60, too much to bear for many people in a recession). But there are

undoubtedly other reasons.

People are tending to work longer hours, with longer commuting times, and all they want to do when they get home is flop on the sofa. Friends are increasingly scattered geographically, so that their homes

are no longer a convenient meeting point. Also, the dinner party became the territory of the 'smug couple'. It was used by newly-married women as a device to reorient friendships around other couples and freeze out their husbands' single friends. Now that a third of UK households are occupied by one person, the couply scene of the 1980s and 90s has lost its appeal for both sexes.

Then again, the explanation for the death of the dinner party might simply be that they're just awful. Does anyone really enjoy them? What ought to be a relaxing evening with friends usually turns into an anxiety fest, which no-one looks forward to and leaves everyone feeling worn out afterwards.

A dinner party demands all of its participants to behave artificially, so that when their natural selves slip out (as they tend to when drink is taken – *in vino veritas*), any unfortunate personal traits are amplified. So it is not just the social pressure that causes stress but also the bad behaviour of others.

This was confirmed in a survey of dinner party behaviour commissioned by the insurance company Sheilas' Wheels and published this June. 28% of guests regularly turn up without a gift, 19% get out their mobile phones to make a call or text while in their host's company, 17% swear in front of their hosts, 13% light cigarettes despite not smoking in their own home, 9% admit to snooping around their host's home without permission, and 6% cause over £100 of damage a year through breaks and spills.

This poll only scratches the surface. There are many more examples of inconsiderate behaviour that can ruin an evening.

One thing that has turned hosting a dinner party into a nightmare is women's dietary fads. Most British women seem to be following some sort of quack diet and they often make unreasonable dietary demands of their hosts. And you can bet that your guests' respective fads will be incompatible, forcing you to prepare at least two different dishes for each course. It doesn't stop there; faddist guests often see nothing wrong with marching into the kitchen, inspecting the food, pointing to a vital ingredient and uttering one of the most depressing phrases in the English language: "Don't put any of that in mine."

There's worse. A fixture of any dinner party is the Interfering Woman. As soon as she arrives, she heads straight for the kitchen and tries to take over, even though she has no idea what the host is trying to cook. Some are assertive bullies who put on a pinny and push the host aside, while meeker examples shadow the host around the kitchen, intermittently meddling. Of course, they don't see this behaviour as interference but insist they are 'helping'. (There is a male equivalent: Barbecue Man. He appears only in the summer but has a similar determination to take over

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despite not knowing what he is doing).

Then as you make your way to the table and hope to continue an interesting conversation with someone, you are invariably frustrated by the Bossy Hostess who bellows, "You can't sit there! It's got to be boy,

girl, boy, girl, boy, girl..."

Once everyone is settled, you are invariably subjected to a predictable and dreary conversation about house prices or finding school places. Still, it could be worse. You could be forced to endure The Most Boring Thing In The World – women's small talk. Words cannot do full justice to the excruciating tedium of having to listen to an interminable stream of mundane details of other people lives. "You remember Mavis who used to live next to the post office? Well her cousin's daughter in Canada has just had her third. Mind you, she had a funny turn last week and had to get some new tablets. Yes, I got this blouse in the sale at Matalan, it was only £7.99. While we were there, Brenda found some curtains for her spare room..." (Already, half of you are in agony, screaming "Please make it stop!", while the other half want to know more about Brenda's curtains).

But you know who the worst type of guest is? Me. Like most Liberator readers, I am perfectly accustomed to rambunctious political argument and easily forget how threatening this is to normal people. I therefore unilaterally sweep aside the dinner party convention of banal conversation and proceed to take apart the cosy assumptions of the other guests. And that's before I've finished my first bottle. Later in the evening, I descend into lavatorial humour before being sick in the back garden.

Perhaps the middle class dinner party should be turned into a sitcom called 'Guests Behaving Badly'. And this deteriorating behaviour is a clue to the real reason for the death of the dinner party: we've given up trying.

The dinner party was a Thatcherite game in which we competed to impress each other. But by now, we all know what an olive looks like, and there's no kitchen gadget you have that everyone else hasn't. So the dinner party has lost its point.

And there's one more clue why the effort is no longer rewarding: the YouGov poll that began this article was commissioned by a manufacturer of convenience cooking ingredients. The company's name? 'Very Lazy'.

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