

Mash ado about nothing

Preparing for a dinner party used to be fun. I would heave out my largest pan and chop up stuff until I'd filled it with all the necessities for a good old spag bol. If my friends arrived carrying something gooey in a Sara Lee box, I shoved it gratefully onto a plate. Occasionally, I'd come over a bit ambitious and make some chocolate creation which didn't look quite right - but as long as it tasted good, no one cared. It was just something we consumed while we got on with the main point of the evening - having a laugh, getting progressively more drunk and, in my case, performing a moving rendition of 'Dancing Queen'.

But now? Well, now the business of giving dinner parties is so competitive that it can only be a matter of time before it becomes an official Olympic sport. It's true that evenings are just as likely to culminate in extreme drunkenness and a spot of wild boogieing in the living room, but these days, there's the huge, scary hurdle of The Food to negotiate first.

I have one friend who used to be as devoted to spag bol as myself. Recently, though, every time she invites me round, there's an orchid lying on each plate, the starter involves some intricate latticework of sauce around morsels of exotic meat, and the main course is either a finely crafted tower of rare vegetables and herbs, or some dish hailing from a country I dimly think may or may not exist, like Narnia. She says things like: 'This is Rajasthani pheasant and red rice. You eat it with these miniature forks and you should really suck air through your teeth to be authentic. Gambian gravy, anyone?'

Another mate employs the cunning double bluff of pretending she's doling out good, old-fashioned grub. But about two forkfuls into my pile of bangers and mash, she'll casually mention how it's always well worth the trip to the independent butcher in Brighton who does these fabulous specialist sausages - they're venison and wild rosemary, by the way - and don't these organic potatoes flown in from the Channel Islands and mashed with Provençal garlic just taste so much better than Tesco's?

I blame Delia Smith and Jamie Oliver. From the



When it comes to throwing a dinner party, the knives are out, says Sharon Wright. Nowadays, if it's not organic, GM-free and flown in from Zanzibar, it's just not pukka tucker. Photograph Polly Farquharson

minute Delia appeared on every telly and bookshelf, stridently informing us how 'easy' cooking is, people have been bringing on nervous breakdowns by trying to serve up a masterpiece at every meal. Jamie, too, has a lot to answer for, now that even scruffy lads on skateboards throw together things like John Dory with buffalo mozzarella instead of going down the kebab shop like normal boys. Then there are the must-have cookbooks that appear every season, opening up a whole new range of anxieties like - horror of horrors - what if your guests have already tried the recipe you've sweated blood over? 'Recently, I served something from *The River Cafe Cook Book*,' says my friend Patsy. 'As I was dishing up, one of the guests said, "This is very nice, isn't it? We have it a lot." I was mortified. I thought I was serving something special and it turned out they'd rustle it up for a Tuesday teatime.'

And on top of all this, you're expected to look gorgeous. I have several friends who can do the Nigella Lawson thing. You know - up since dawn with the kids but not only have they managed to produce an exquisitely laid table and mouthwatering food (just finishing off on the hob in copper pans), they've also applied fresh lipstick and a flirtly skirt. Me? Well, that's the plan, too. Except when I cook, I like to ease proceedings with a glass of wine - or two. So when my guests arrive, my outfit, demeanour and grub all conspire to create the impression not of a domestic goddess, but more a half-crazed, half-cut Margot from *The Good Life*.

So, what is everyone trying to prove? Doesn't anyone else yearn for the days when 'drizzle' meant a gloomy sort of rain that kept you indoors on Sundays? Or when 'Come over and eat' meant just that, not 'Come over and marvel at my dazzling entertaining skills.'

Consider this: if you had four minutes to live, what dish could you be sure everyone would seize on with relish? I'll tell you. Either a) a bacon buttie, or b) fish and chips, neither of which requires 14 hours in a tagine or tarting up with hothouse flowers and washed-silk place mats. And because they're easy to prepare, you get to spend less time in the kitchen and more time with your friends. As a great woman once said: 'Life's too short to stuff a mushroom.' ■

