



A Time for Friends

The modern version of the classic supper club hasn't lost any of the elegance of its golden era, but today, it is as much about forging deeper connections between friends as it is about the food.

By Lisa Antonelli Bacon

Once upon a time (when our grandparents were young and foolish), supper clubs were destinations—nightclubs, really—for people who wanted to dress up, relax, enjoy an elegant meal (often in a setting where they could order bathtub gin) and spend time with friends. Long, sexy cigarette holders, black tie, and draping pearls were all mainstays of a glamorous night out where people sipped martinis and listened to live orchestra or club music. (Desi Arnaz and Frank Sinatra come to mind.) As dressed up and interesting as the people were, the menus were not. The fare was straightforward: Surf and Turf, mashed potatoes. . . nothing complicated or French.

Today, supper clubs are a different affair altogether. They aren't just a setting; they are an entity. The guests, not the venue, are the club. But the purpose is the same: to spend time with friends over food and drink. The modern supper club is held in a home for a limited group, which is the most exclusive aspect of today's supper clubs, and the same people show up every time. Best of all for guests, the host and hostess of the month usually spend days hunting down exotic ingredients and preparing dishes that are as intriguing as they are complex.

But it's about more than food. "We're trying to

recapture an era when people made time for each other," says Debi Shawcross, author of *Friends at the Table, the Ultimate Supper Club Cookbook* and the authoritative word on how to do it right and best. Also a teaching-chef, Shawcross knows how to pull off the perfect dinner party that is the template for entertaining in the new millennium. Her goal is to make every event *ne plus ultra*. "I think of it as a splurge for my friends," she says. One of the benefits of the modern supper club is reciprocity. "They do the same for me."

In *Friends at the Table*, Shawcross cherry-picks the elements of the vintage supper club and transforms them into home entertaining. There is music (via iPod), cocktails (served by the host or hostess, *not* by a waitress in a provocative get-up) and fine dining (prepared meticulously, not *en masse*, in a home kitchen). The best deviation from the original? There is no tab at the end of the night.

According to Shawcross, when forming a supper club, you first must figure out what you want to accomplish. Do you want to cultivate friends with children the same ages as yours? Are you trying to network for professional reasons? Are you looking for other couples to share your enthusiasm for



Previous page: Artichokes and fresh herbs enliven the table setting. Above: Debi Shawcross hosts her supper club for a holiday feast.

gastronomy? Maybe you're new to the neighborhood and seeking *entrer*. "To get the most out of the supper club experience, you need a common goal," says Shawcross. In her case, she simply wanted to have time committed to spending with close friends. "We're going into our fourth year," says Susan Moss, one of Shawcross' clubbers, adding that children at home were the primary commonality. The group decided to include one non-member "mystery couple" at their events; I was the crasher at their holiday supper club. "Usually, I try someone I don't know real well," says Moss, "someone I think would be an interesting conversationalist, but who blends in."

TFor most of us, when fate intervenes (or the babysitter cancels), good friends forgive someone who opts out of a get-together at the last moment. But with supper club, there are no excuses short of death or an extreme act of nature. "For a supper club to work, you need to commit to a schedule, whether it's monthly, bi-monthly or quarterly, and stick to it," Shawcross firmly states. Adds Moss, "It forces us to get together and make it happen." The benefit? "A supper club is designed to build relationships on a deep, ongoing level," says Shawcross in her book. Indeed, for some of us, nothing says "friend" better than one who devours your flat soufflé and pretends to enjoy it. While no one had to choke down a flopped dish at this party, it was clear the group appreciates time with each other as much as they appreciate exceptional food.

But what of the old rules for entertaining, I ask Shawcross. Aren't they more relaxed than in the days of starched linens and shrimp forks? (Yes.) Can I email invitations? (Yes.) Do I have to invite my best friend? (No.) Can I mix friends with colleagues? (Carefully. You don't want your best friend to resurrect the story of when you left your kid in the supermarket.) Can I pass off Trader Joe's Two Buck Chuck for good wine? (Don't even.) Just because your club mates are close buddies doesn't mean you can slack. In fact, the quintessential supper club experience demands perfection. And why not? To Shawcross' thinking, if your best pals don't deserve your best effort, then who does?

Guidelines for supper club aren't that different than those for the elegant dinner party that you make yourself give once

a year. In addition to the right mix of people, ambient lighting and a smooth segue from cocktails to table without announcing "Chow Time" are important. And there are some new issues that Desi and Lucy never foresaw: How do you accommodate vegans? Shawcross says go the distance, even if it means making a whole separate meal, which she did for one of her guests at this gathering. And, even though your guests can be as close as family, graciously signaling a close to the evening's festivities always requires a delicate touch. "I usually ask what people are doing the next day," says Shawcross.

Although in Shawcross' club, each host couple is responsible for an entire evening, some clubs divvy the courses among members for each event. "In other words," she says, "job-share to create the ultimate dinner party." Another suggestion is for the men to handle the cooking and cleanup. At the Moss home, Susan engages her husband as *sous chef*. "Charlie will do everything, from chopping to grilling to serving food to doing dishes at the end," she says.

Whatever the arrangement, be prepared to go above and beyond what you normally do for a dinner party. When preparing for this holiday supper club, Shawcross spent hours in grocery stores. Rarely does she find everything she needs in one spot—blood orange juice for the cocktails was the elusive item this time. While some of us might fudge with a substitute like *crème de cassis*, Shawcross goes strictly by the book. For her professional standards, it's all in the ingredients, and sometimes there is just no substitute; certainly not for the beef tenderloin, prosciutto and rosemary, or cremini mushrooms, all of which were part of Shawcross' holiday supper menu.

Remember, above all, it's about spending time with friends. Shawcross' holiday supper club was time well spent; the food, a superb backdrop. But don't relax. In a supper club, there is always the unstated expectation that you will extend the same amount of effort as other members. Whether it's on time spent ferreting out unusual ingredients or meticulously peeling fruits and vegetables, supper club should have the sense of a major production, no matter how effortless these hostesses seem to make it. After all, without a little showbiz excitement, it just isn't supper club.

So, what are you doing tomorrow? ●



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- 1. Blood orange champagne cocktails.
 - 2. Chef and author, Debi Shawcross.
 - 3. Roasted beef tenderloin with caramelized onion sauce.
 - 4. Prosciutto-wrapped shrimp with orange and rosemary.
 - 5. A sprig of thyme finishes off a place setting.
 - 6. Charlie Moss, Shawcross and Chiwon Hahn.
 - 7. Brandied wild mushroom pâté.
 - 8. Jeff Shawcross.
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1. Chiwon Hahn, Susan and Charlie Moss.

2. Lobster salad.

3. Shawcross and Nancy Hahn.

4. Wasabi scalloped potatoes.

5. Beef tenderloin and wasabi scalloped potatoes.

6. Nancy Hahn.

7. Chocolate lava cake.

8. Shawcross preparing cocktails.



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All recipes from *Friends at the Table, the Ultimate Supper Club Cookbook* by Debi Shawcross.

BRANDIED WILD MUSHROOM PÂTÉ

- 1/2 ounce dried blend shiitake/porcini mushrooms
- 1 cup hot water
- 1 stick unsalted butter
- 1/2 cup finely chopped sweet onion such as Vidalia
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 6 ounces cremini (baby bella) mushrooms, sliced
- 1/2 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves
- 1/2 teaspoon dried sage leaves
- 1 teaspoon chopped fresh rosemary
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- freshly ground pepper to taste
- 1/2 cup dry white wine
- 1/4 cup brandy
- 1/3 cup freshly-snipped chives for garnish

For the pâté:
Soak the dried mushrooms in hot water for 10 minutes, until very tender. Drain well. In a large, heavy skillet melt butter over medium heat. Add the onions and garlic and cook until they begin to soften, about 3 minutes. Add the mushrooms, herbs, salt and pepper, and sauté until very tender. When the liquid begins to evaporate, add the wine and brandy. Reduce until most of the liquid is gone. Cool, taste, and adjust seasonings; then add to a food processor and process until very smooth. Pour into a small bowl or crock and chill until set. Remove from the refrigerator an hour before serving to soften a bit.

- Rye Toast:*
1 package dark cocktail rye bread
4 tablespoons butter, melted

Heat the oven to 350 degrees. Place bread squares on a large baking sheet. Bake until lightly toasted on each side. Brush one side with melted butter, return to oven, and bake an additional 3 minutes. Remove from oven and cool.

To serve: Spread pate on toasted rye bread and sprinkle with chives.

PROSCIUTTO-WRAPPED SHRIMP WITH ORANGE AND ROSEMARY

- 24 large shrimp, peeled and deveined with tails intact
- 1/2 cup Sambuca liqueur
- 1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon orange zest, plus more for garnish
- 3 tablespoons fresh rosemary, leaves and soft tips only, plus more for garnish
- kosher salt and fresh ground black pepper, to taste
- 8 slices prosciutto (about 4 ounces)

Place the shrimp in a single layer into a shallow sided baking pan. In a small bowl whisk together the Sambuca, olive oil, 1 teaspoon orange zest, 2 tablespoons rosemary, salt and pepper. Pour the mixture over the shrimp; tossing to coat thoroughly. Let marinate 10 minutes and then turn them over to marinate 10 more minutes.

Carefully cut the prosciutto slices into thirds lengthwise. Wrap a strip of prosciutto around the center of each shrimp, tucking a rosemary leaf or two between the shrimp and prosciutto.

Heat a grill pan or outdoor grill to medium-high heat. Cook the shrimp, turning once until cooked through, about 2 minutes per side. Transfer to a serving plate and garnish with a bit more rosemary and some orange zest.

LOBSTER SALAD WITH ROASTED PEPPERS, MISO DRESSING AND GOAT CHEESE

- Salad:*
6 cups mixed field greens
meat from 2 steamed lobsters (1 1/2 pound each), cut into 1-inch pieces
2 red peppers, roasted, peeled and cut into 1/2-inch strips
5 ounces goat cheese, crumbled

Place the greens, lobster and peppers in a salad bowl and add enough dressing to coat. Toss well. Top with sprinkles of goat cheese

- Dressing:*
4 tablespoons miso paste
1/2 cup rice wine vinegar
2 tablespoons ginger
2 teaspoons minced garlic
1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper
juice from 2 oranges
1 teaspoon tahini

Whisk together the miso paste, vinegar, ginger, garlic, pepper, orange juice and tahini in a small bowl. Set aside.

ROASTED BEEF TENDERLOIN WITH CARAMELIZED ONION SAUCE

- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, divided
- 16 cups thinly sliced sweet onions such as Vidalia (about 4 pounds)
- 2 tablespoons firmly packed brown sugar
- 6 ounces dark beer
- 2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- 2 cups beef stock
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh rosemary
- salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
- 1 (2-pound) beef tenderloin
- 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil

For the sauce:
In a large saucepan, melt 2 tablespoons of the butter over medium-high heat. Add the onions and cook, stirring frequently until onions begin to turn a deep golden brown, about 30 minutes. Add the brown sugar, mix well, and cook 3 minutes. Add the beer and vinegar to the pan, scraping the bottom to loosen browned bits. Cook, stirring occasionally, until mixture is reduced by half. Add the beef stock, mix well, and continue cooking until the sauce is reduced by half. Stir in the rosemary and whisk in the remaining butter. Season with salt and freshly ground pepper.

For the beef tenderloin:
Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Sprinkle the beef generously with salt and freshly ground pepper. In a heavy, large skillet, heat oil over high heat. Add the beef to the skillet and cook until brown on all sides, about 5 minutes. Transfer the beef to a roasting pan. Roast in oven until a thermometer inserted into center of the beef registers 120 degrees for medium rare, about 35 minutes. Transfer the beef to a cutting board and let rest 10 minutes.

To serve, cut the beef tenderloin crosswise into 1/2-inch thick slices. Spoon sauce over the slices.

INDIVIDUAL CHOCOLATE LAVA CAKES

- Center:*
3 ounces Ghirardelli 60 percent Cacao bittersweet chocolate
1/3 cup heavy whipping cream

- Cake:*
Nonstick cooking spray
6 ounces Ghirardelli 60 percent Cacao bittersweet chocolate
12 tablespoons unsalted butter
3 eggs plus 3 egg yolks
1/2 cup sugar
3/4 teaspoon vanilla
1/3 cup cake flour
1 tablespoon raspberry flavored liqueur

- Garnish:*
1 cup heavy whipping cream
3 tablespoons powdered sugar
8 raspberries

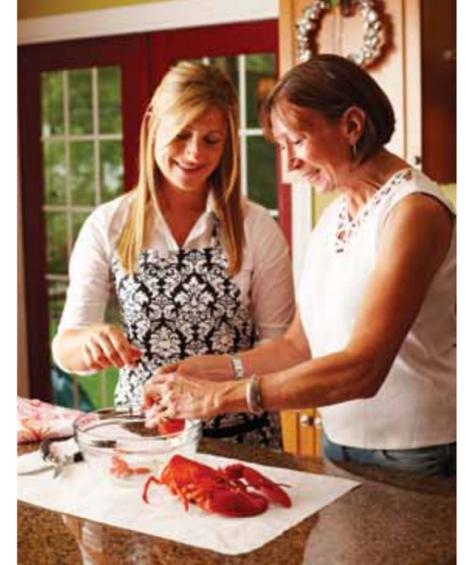
For the centers:
Melt chocolate and cream in a double boiler. Whisk gently to blend. Refrigerate about 2 hours or until firm. Form into 6 balls. Refrigerate until needed.

For the cakes:
Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Spray eight 4-ounce ramekins with cooking spray. Melt the chocolate and butter in a double boiler and whisk gently to blend. In a medium bowl, whisk the eggs, yolks, sugar and vanilla with an electric mixer on high speed about 5 minutes or until thick and light. Fold the melted chocolate mixture and flour into the egg mixture just until combined. Mix in the liqueur. Spoon cake batter into the ramekins. Place a chocolate ball in the middle of each ramekin. Bake about 15 minutes. Run a small, sharp knife around the inside of each ramekin, place a plate on top, invert and remove ramekin.

To serve:
Mix the cream and powdered sugar together in an electric mixer until stiff peaks form. Garnish cakes with raspberries and a dollop of whipped cream.

All recipes serve 8 to 10.

Debi Shawcross and Lisa Bacon prepare lobster for salad.



POMEGRANATE DISHTOWEL, ASTORIA CANDLESTICK HOLDERS, CHILEWICH® DAHLIA CUT-VINYL PLACEMATS IN GUNMETAL, LUSTRE SILVER NAPKINS AND HYACINTH METALLIC RUNNER FROM CRATE & BARREL, RICHMOND. ECO-FRIENDLY, LOCALLY GROWN GARLAND BY THE GREEN FLAMINGO, RICHMOND. BLACK BAMBOO CHAIRS FROM PARTY PERFECT, RICHMOND.