

Ever wondered how some people sail through hosting a dinner party while the very idea of organising one yourself brings you out in a cold sweat? How do they manage to coordinate everything so that every dish is perfectly presented bang on time *and* manage to spend time with guests instead of in the kitchen?



Running a successful dinner party is easier than you might think. The trick is not to be over-ambitious (with the menu if you're not used to hosting dinner parties and to plan carefully and do as much preparation ahead of the dinner party day (avoid the mistakes of so many of TV's *Come Dine with Me* hosts!).

Here are my golden rules - I hope these help you run a stress-free party. Let me know about your experiences by emailing me at enquiries@amiragecuisine.co.uk.

GUESTS



Think carefully about the guests - you should be confident that the guests will 'gel' without you having to be the glue for every conversation. Think about whether your guests have met before and how they got along - you want a lively group, but not fireworks, so avoid people who clash. It's wiser to invite people who don't get along brilliantly to dinner on different occasions.

Invite a number of guests that you can cope with easily. It's better to have two smaller dinner parties than try to squeeze too many people around your table. Between six and eight people is a good number for which to cater and this ensures you get to chat with everyone.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION



Menu and Shopping: Before you start your menu planning, check if any of your guests have special dietary requirements (eg food allergies and intolerances, non meat eaters, vegetarians etc).

Plan your menu at least a week in advance and prepare a shopping list to ensure you buy everything you need in one go. To save time and stress when doing the shopping, write your shopping list in a coherent order (eg all vegetables together, all bakery items together) - so you're not dashing from one aisle to another.

Ingredients: Buy the best ingredients your budget will allow. Most butchers and fishmongers are happy to give advice if you need it. Always buy fresh herbs and spices; the aromatic flavours will be more prominent than dried varieties.



Test New Recipes: If you choose a recipe you have never prepared before, do a test run so that you have the cooking experience under your belt and you can do a taste test (remember to buy double the ingredients if you're testing recipes). Do the test run several days before the dinner party, not on the day itself!

Prepare Courses in Advance: If any of the chosen recipes can be prepared in advance, prepare them the day before and store safely.

Remember to transfer any frozen items from the freezer into the refrigerator in plenty of time, so that they are ready to serve at the appropriate time.

THE BIG DAY



The Table: Lay the table before you start cooking. This way you'll be sure that everything looks great when your guests arrive. Even if there are still a few bits and pieces to complete in the kitchen, your table will look welcoming to your guests and show you are in control.



Cooking: Start early, so that the meal is ready well before your guests are due and you have plenty of time to get ready later on. Starting early also leaves room for adaptations - in the unlikely event that something doesn't go quite to plan, you can improvise and avoid getting into a panic.

To be super efficient, before you start cooking, assemble all the ingredients and the equipment needed to prepare each course. When you've finished a course, clean-up before you start on the next course.

It may seem logical to start preparing the meal in the order in which it will be eaten, but you should start by preparing the dish that takes the longest to prepare (for example, dishes that need to set in the fridge or be frozen). This will ensure that all the menu items come together at the right time.



If you're preparing vegetables as an accompaniment, cook them within a couple of minutes of being fully cooked. Arrange the vegetables on the presentation plates and cling film. Just before serving the main course, put the vegetable platter into the microwave on steam to finish cooking.



Confidence Booster: If you need a confidence booster, ask the guest you know well to come half an hour early - he or she can help you with any last minute things that need to be done. Then you can both relax over a long, cool drink and wait for the other guests to arrive.

Good luck with your dinner party!