



Big night in

Instead of hitting up the same restaurants, why not invite visiting colleagues or guests (even the boss!) over for dinner?

There are those who look at food as little more than fuel. For the rest of us, food can be a great source of joy, discussion, debate, even collaboration. What's better than breaking bread with friends? Trying new flavours while travelling? Nabbing a piece of the cake that showed up unexpectedly at the office? Exactly.

Whether you're looking for gas (meaning fuel, not, uh, gas) or a gastronomic adventure, we all have to eat. Sometimes we have to eat with those we work with.

This month, I propose you try something new. Don't take the visiting colleague to the same restaurant you always go to. Don't hold a dinner meeting in a crowded steak house. Don't try to network over menus and wine lists. Don't think I'm out of my mind for suggesting this: I say, invite the boss (or your team, or your guest lecturer) to your place.

"People can relax in their own homes," says Kurtis Ellis, founder and chef of P.E.I.'s Simple Pleasures Intimate Catering. "They don't have to worry about taking their children to the sitters; the home offers privacy if people want to talk about business."

And if you don't feel like doing the cooking, hire the pros.

Ordering in — in style

When Ellis started Simple Pleasures in 2002, the concept of having someone enter a home to cook dinner was not an easy sell. "But it's catching on," he says. "People are getting really comfortable with it."

Ellis' goal was to offer a restaurant-quality experience in a private home. Menus are discussed and decided on ahead of time. The preparation of the dinner can be as interactive as you'd like: watch

the chef at work, or sit in the living room and enjoy not having to chop and sear. It works because Ellis keeps the quality high, and the prices reasonable (a high-end multi-course meal, food and service included, starts at \$50 a person, for a group of six).

Bob Arniel offers a similar gourmet service through Chef to Go in St. John's. Chef to Go started catering small events in private homes back in 1995. "There are a lot of great homes in and around St. John's," Arniel says, "and it's been fun to work in so many of them."

These chefs do the prep work back in their own kitchens, and finish up in yours. They will craft menus, cater to special requests, and make sure that dishes are done at the right time.

And what does a host or hostess have to do to get ready for the chef? "Just make sure the counter space is clear," says Arniel.

More than a meal

Here's something else to think about. Arniel offers day-long corporate seminars from his kitchen. He develops sessions around the planning and preparation of a five-course meal, ending with a fine dining experience of the group's creation.

"It's team-building through food," says Arniel. "We get people a little out of their comfort zone, and inspire friendly competition."

Craving more?

Arniel periodically offers week-long foodie trips. There's one planned for the south of France in fall 2011. I would never suggest you take the boss away for a week of foie gras and Coquilles St. Jacques, but it does sound like a great getaway. Just in case you need one after all that party planning. | ABM

Advice from the pros

Whether you do the cooking or not, expert hints never go astray:

Go local "My clients love beef tenderloin from P.E.I., lobster, scallops ... whatever's in season," says Kurtis Ellis of Simple Pleasures Intimate Catering. Not only is local food likely fresher and thus tastier, but you're also supporting other businesses.

Think theme A theme can make it easier to plan a well-balanced menu, and spark discussion. Arniel says Italian multi-course meals — perhaps region-specific, from Tuscany or Venice — or Caribbean or French food are popular right now. Ellis suggests serving tapas (many small plates of appetizer-sized servings to share) for a more informal evening.

Wine and dine "People are really in tune to the wine and food matching," says Arniel. If you are hiring a chef or ordering a catered service, ask for advice on what to purchase (some businesses will even do the buying for you). Breaking out a new bottle of well-chosen wine with each course can be fun (careful, though, that it's not too fun).

Please share your business dinner stories, good and bad!
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