

FASHION & STYLE

Guess Who Isn't Coming to Dinner

By GUY TREBAY NOV. 28, 2012

It is, according to Susan Gutfreund, the society hostess, the epitome of civilized living. It is, said Karen Mordechai, an entrepreneur behind the successful dining series Sunday Suppers, in Brooklyn, a far less geeky way of networking than a Meetup. It is, said Alex Hitz, the author of a new cookbook, “My Beverly Hills Kitchen: Classic Southern Cooking With a French Twist,” the great social equalizer.

It is the dinner party. Remember those?

“The world is so changed, hardly anyone does them anymore,” said Louise Grunwald, widow of the former diplomat and Time Inc. editor in chief Henry Anatole Grunwald and among the last left standing of New York’s acknowledged great hostesses.

“It’s over,” Ms. Grunwald said, not entirely convincingly, given that invitations to her dinners remain much coveted, only partly because her kitchen turns out great food. “You may want the dinner party to come back, harkening back to another era. But it will never happen.”

There was a time, not so very long ago, when any such doomful pronouncement would have sounded far-fetched. New York, after all, has always been oversupplied with those who pride themselves on their tables, competing to populate them with lively strivers who do their social networking

not on tiny, glowing screens but cheek by jowl.

Increasingly, such gatherings seem outmoded, squeezed out by overcrowded schedules, the phony urgency of affinity sites, restaurants cultism and overall tectonic shifts in how New Yorkers congregate.

“When I think of all those great hosts and hostesses who were around when I moved to New York,” from Atlanta in the 1980s, Mr. Hitz said, “many are now gone with the wind.”

Mr. Hitz was referring to types celebrated by *Women’s Wear Daily* as social lions and lionesses, people like Patricia Buckley, the wife of the conservative pundit William F. Buckley Jr.; the clotheshorse gadabout Nan Kempner; the philanthropists Judith Peabody and Brooke Astor; the designer Bill Blass; or the cabaret artist Bobby Short.

“Every single one was different,” Mr. Hitz said. “What they had in common was a sense of fun and community and gathering people together for good simple food.”

Naturally they shared other likenesses: social prominence, deep pockets, commodious apartments, household staffs and no allergy to drink.

Yet that is not entirely the point. Trained from birth or on the job, the best hosts of another era commanded their tables as though part of the European Theater of Operations, emplacing and deploying and juxtaposing guests in charged combinations, going to the rescue when conversation flagged and a combatant went down. Of course, they made sure the blowhard mogul was seated beside the lissome ingénue. What else is a dinner party besides a comic operetta without a score?

But they also orchestrated every element of the evening, arrival to departure, most crucially directing the conversation, which they either allowed to follow a traditional serve-and-volley pattern (20 minutes right, 20 minutes

left), or else commandeered for so-called “general discussion” as provocateur hosts like the television journalist Barbara Walters still do.

“I can remember a dinner at Jimmy Davison’s, when he was living on 72nd Street, not in the biggest apartment,” Mrs. Grunwald said, referring to a cowboy socialite whose grandfather owned a chunk of Arizona. “There were a couple of tables for the grandes dames like Mrs. Gilbert Miller, and the rest of us ate on the floor.”

Plenty of New Yorkers eat on the floor, of course. They do it in their sweat pants while juggling an iPad, a remote wand and the chopsticks that they use to share General Tso’s chicken eaten straight from the carton.

The seated dinner, with its minuet of invitation and acceptance, its formalities and protocols, its culinary and dietary challenges, its inherent requirements of guest and host, alike is under threat, many say.

Or is it? “If there’s one thing you learn in the etiquette business, it’s that life is cyclical,” said Judith Martin, the etiquette arbiter known as Miss Manners. “The idea of cooking for others is not something that is going to die.”

It is the idea that, having cooked for others, one will then invite them to table that has run into problems. “Conversation is in trouble,” she said. “People have been brought up to express themselves rather than to exchange ideas.”

What Ms. Martin termed “food fussing” has had the effect of giving hosts the jitters not just about the quality of their cooking but also about its possible adverse effects. Nut allergies anyone?

The influence of hand-held devices, Ms. Martin said, has been disastrous for the social contract. “People don’t even respond to dinner invitations anymore,” she said. “They consider it too difficult a commitment to say, ‘I’ll come to dinner a week from Saturday.’” Not only do they cancel at the last

minute, they do it by text message.

Those who show up find an additional challenge to keeping things lively, given that in a litigious age, that durable staple of dinner parties, the innocent flirtation, has become a minefield of signals missed or, worse yet, taken up.

What has also occurred, said David E. Monn, a prominent event planner, is that party manners have become so rusty from disuse, and guests so generally clueless, that a need has emerged for people like him to train socialites not to eat peas with a knife.

“People want to be civilized, so it all doesn’t turn into Caligula, and so they come to me saying: ‘I don’t know what to do if I’m having friends over for cocktails. What tray do you use? What do you put on the tray? Do you put out a piece of cheese?’ ”

Understandably, few anymore can tell at a glance the difference between a fish fork and a dessert fork or whether the curious tongs inherited from Aunt Mabel are meant for serving asparagus, or else flipping a hamburger on the grill.

What is surprising is that fewer still see the point in accumulating china, silver and crystal at all, a truth driven home by the dwindling of departments devoted to table-top appointments at traditional purveyors like Tiffany & Company. Prime real estate once allotted to the staples of the bridal registry at Tiffany’s Fifth Avenue flagship have now been supplanted by cases of leather accessories.

Things like the classic Tiffany bamboo silver, designed by the midcentury design god Van Day Truex in 1961 and kept in stock for years, were discontinued some years back, part of a purge that swept away all but a handful of patterns. “I freaked out when I heard they were discontinuing bamboo,” said Todd Alexander Romano, an interior decorator and man about town. “I bought every piece I could.”

Mr. Romano seldom uses the silver, however. Why bother, when it's so much easier and more convenient to meet friends in restaurants.

Yet even the best restaurants don't approximate the intimate spirit of eating at home, said Ms. Mordechai, a photographer who developed the Sunday Suppers to renew an experience recalled from the Sabbath dinners of her youth. "My favorite part of dinner is just sitting at the table talking for hours, and that doesn't exist when you are at a restaurant," Ms. Mordechai said. "I was born in Israel and grew up in a big, Jewish, Middle Eastern family. We think there's nothing better than sitting around the table with family and friends."

The point of Sunday Suppers was not originally to turn dinner parties into business, Ms. Mordechai added. "I photographed our first one and posted it to a blog. Suddenly we were getting e-mails from strangers and people from all over who, I guess, wanted that old-school dinner-party feel."

Now the dinners, for which subscribers pay \$150, sell out as soon as the reservation list is posted online. "It's basically about making friends and hanging out," Ms. Mordechai said. "And eating good food."

The food itself is kept deliberately simple; her preferred culinary style, like that of Mr. Hitz, Mrs. Grunwald, Mrs. Gutfreund and Mr. Monn, is home cooking. Unlike the giddy society matron Billie Burke played in the George Cukor classic "Dinner at Eight," these cooks don't worry about the aspic crashing to the floor.

"Only real food," said Mrs. Grunwald, who like the late and celebrated hostess Nora Ephron likes to keep her hors d'oeuvres simple ("Nora put a can of nuts on the coffee table, and that was it," she said flatly). She serves her guests meatloaf or veal stew and shuns every manner of culinary affectation and fad.

"No filet mignon, nothing nouvelle," Mrs. Grunwald said. "No pyramids

and no foam.”

The standard for a certain kind of ideal dinner party was probably set by the Hollywood hostess Connie Wald, who died this month at 96 and at whose tables so many stars routinely gathered that, as her obituary pointed out, guests didn't drop names so much as trip over them.

At her rambling, unpretentious house on North Beverly Drive in Beverly Hills, Ms. Wald assembled newcomers and the Hollywood gratin at a table where she served them meatloaf, roast chicken or veal stew.

“Connie was relaxed and cozy, and it worked on a level that wasn't grand,” said Shelley Wanger, a Random House editor whose parents were Walter Wanger, the film producer, and Joan Bennett, the patrician movie star. “It was not caviar pie.”

Guests at Mr. Monn's dinner parties are served hors d'oeuvres of raw fennel, celery and carrots, with a spiced dipping powder of turmeric and curry, a recipe swiped, he said, from the repertory of Mrs. Grunwald. He also serves pigs in a blanket, which he stocks up on at Costco.

“I grew up poor in a farm town in Pennsylvania,” said Mr. Monn, whose client list includes many of the city's most prominent names. “It took me years in New York to learn that the simplest things are usually the best.”

There is no leveler quite like a dinner table, said Mr. Hitz, a longtime bicoastal whose dinners at his California digs, an aerie perched high above Sunset Boulevard, tend to be populated by Hollywood types from across the demographic spectrum. “The 20-year-olds enjoy the 90-year-olds,” he said. “And I can assure you the 90-year-olds enjoy the 20-year-olds.”

It is safe to assume that former first lady Nancy Reagan, widow of Ronald Reagan and a frequent guest at Mr. Hitz's table, has dined at the finest tables. What she likes best, Mr. Hitz said, is a simple chicken potpie.

“If anyone tells me, ‘I’m freaking out, I have six people coming to dinner, what do I do?’ ” Mr. Hitz said, “I say serve chicken potpie and a salad, make sure there’s plenty of wine and keep the lights low. How can it go wrong?”

After all, Susan Gutfreund said, what draws most people to the bright lights of big cities is not the lure of minced peacock tongue on anchovy toast points.

“The most important part of entertaining is being able to mix people,” Mrs. Gutfreund said. “If you live in New York and don’t take advantage of that ... well, you might as well stay home in Butte.”

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