

SUSTAINABLE DINNER PARTY: GETTING STARTED

WHY HOST A SUSTAINABLE DINNER PARTY?

You love food and get-togethers and you're interested in sustainable, local food. Sharing a meal is a capital way of building community, and hosting a sustainable dinner party is the perfect way to integrate your interests. Of course, you'll want to keep the food seasonal, local, and organic, but there's even more you can do.

MAKE THE WHOLE PARTY SUSTAINABLE, NOT JUST THE FOOD.

Here are some ideas to help get you started planning your gathering from beginning to end with an eye toward sustainability.

Invitations:

Send email or an evite or even make a phone call, but try to avoid using paper invitations. If you must resort to snail-mail, look for invitations printed on recycled paper with soy-based or vegetable oil-based inks, which are more environmentally friendly than petroleum-based inks.

When you provide directions to your location, suggest mass transit as an alternative to driving. Be as specific as you can about bus (or subway) stops; since the invite is electronic, it's easy to include a link to your local mass transit map leaving nothing to the imagination. If you live in an area that isn't serviced by mass transit, suggest car-pooling as a means of getting to the party. Of course, biking and walking are ideal for guests who are coming from nearby.

Decor:

Forget traditional party decorations and take a tip from nature's way of decorating the planet. In addition to offering healthy sustainable food, farmers' markets can be spectacular home decorating centers! Fresh cut flowers

are always a welcome centerpiece, but don't forget about potted varieties like marigolds that not only decorate your party, but enhance your garden afterwards. In autumn, dried flowers and grasses can provide an attractive backdrop, along with traditional fall decorations like gourds and Indian corn. Some farmers' markets feature goods from an apiary — there's sweet, delicious honey, of course, but also beeswax candles to brighten your table.

If you live in a part of the country where chilly temperatures impart a breathtaking array of fall color, you may be able to ferret out some ornamentation from your own yard. Gravity has done the work, now you only need to gather nature's suggestions. And summer beachcombing can result in an enormous variety of seashells, smooth variegated pebbles, bits of driftwood, and other surprises.

Green Up Your Clean Up:

Avoid plastic cutlery, paper plates, and anything disposable. The obvious solution is to bring out your real dinnerware, but don't let washing up turn into a headache. If everyone pitches in, it will go a long way towards making clean-up time fly by. If you don't have enough dishes, or don't want to be stuck with a big cleanup, ask each guest to bring their own plate, bowl, and cutlery along, and with them the responsibility of cleaning them up afterwards. In some cities, it's even possible to rent dinnerware and glassware!

Use earth-friendly cleaning solutions and materials like biodegradable soaps and unbleached, undyed sponges. These products can be found everywhere from your local food market to that mega-housewares store anchoring the mall. There are dozens of products on the market that perform as well as or better than the most toxic cleaning products, some of which are far more hazardous than the germs you're trying to eradicate. And when you do wash your dishes, don't let the water run while sponging

(continued)



SUSTAINABLE DINNER PARTY: GETTING STARTED (CONT.)

or scrubbing. Fill the sink and let them soak; then you'll only need to run the water to rinse them clean. If you use a dishwasher, make sure it's full before you start a load.

Composting 101:

Think of it as organic alchemy, except instead of turning lead into gold, you're turning garbage into a nutrient-rich medium for plant life. By adding compost to the soil in your garden or houseplants, you provide natural fertilizer without relying on dangerous chemical fertilizers. There are many methods of composting — indoor and outdoor, wormless or with the aid of those happy little critters (see Vermicomposting 101 at www.sustainabletable.org/2008/05/vermicomposting-101), small scale, massive, and everything in between. You can find a tremendous amount of information on the subject on the internet or at your local library. Choose a method that works for you, and take this major step that hits all the R's — reduce, reuse and recycle!

Post-party Possession (a/k/a The Party Favor!):

Here's another opportunity to let your imagination run wild. Again, your farmers' market can be a great source of ideas for gifts: potted herbs, baked goods, heirloom seeds, local honey and wine, and so much more. Other options include fair-trade chocolates and herbal teas. And of course, nothing is more personal than something you've created in your own kitchen, prepared for your friends with the ultimate sustainable ingredient: love.

Not to Mention the Food!

Your sustainable dinner party can be anything from a potluck to a showcase for your culinary talents; the food can be ultra simple or as intricate as you can imagine. To make it sustainable, keep the focus on seasonal, local and organic food as much as possible. The folks at the farmers' market are always eager to tell you about their wares — including how to cook what they raise and grow. Feel free to ask questions — they'll be happy to provide answers. Were those veggies grown organically? Were pesticides used? Maybe the farm isn't certified organic, but their practices are. Were your cows raised on pasture? Were your chickens confined? Take a look at our "Questions To Ask" series at www.sustainabletable.org/shop/questions; we give you the questions to ask, as well as the answers you'd hope to hear.

SOUND LIKE A TALL ORDER?

Remember that the longest journey begins with a single step. No one expects your party to be 100% sustainable and local. Not every ingredient of every dish you serve will fall within strict definitions, but don't let that stop you. The object of hosting a sustainable dinner party is to share ideas you care about with people you care about. It's an opportunity to introduce them to the delicious joys and delightful flavors of sustainably raised food and the bounty that your region offers. Do what you can do and your passion will speak for itself.

To learn more about sustainable local food, visit Sustainable Table at www.sustainabletable.org

