



Supper clubs:
food & friends
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Whether we're opting for more affordable choices at the supermarket or simply cutting down on our restaurant meals, the concept of dining has changed. Another trend: The comeback of supper clubs, those delicious at-home get-togethers that feature food, drink, music and engaging conversation. *Friends at the Table: The Ultimate Supper Club Cookbook*, by chef Debi Shawcross, sets the table with everything you need to know about forming your own supper club.

Here are Shawcross' tips and recipes for an intimate dinner with friends similar to the classic supper clubs in the 1930s, but with a modern-day spin.

What is a supper club?

According to Shawcross, the traditional supper club was a gathering where people met and enjoyed an evening of dining (often a “surf and turf” meal), drinks and usually live musical entertainment in a semi-formal setting. “These supper clubs launched many musical careers (i.e. Tommy Dorsey, Gene Krupa, Glenn Miller, etc.) and introduced the ‘doggie bag,’” she says in her book.

The resurgence of interest in supper clubs today comes from a longing to recapture a period when people made time for each other and gathered with friends who shared a mutual passion for food. We're looking for deeper connection with others, and in a way that is more affordable than an expensive night out with dinner and drinks.

A supper club is a different type of dinner party

Supper clubs aren't merely dinner parties that happen by chance or every once in a while -- nor is the supper club just about the food. “Members of a supper club commit to meeting regularly with common goals in mind,” Shawcross explains. “This built-in element of continuity enables the supper club to grow and strengthen relationships... on a deep ongoing level.”

How to form your own supper club

Cooking and food have never been more popular, says Shawcross, as evidenced by the growing popularity of the Food Network since its launch in 1993, as well as of the regular cooking segments on morning news programs, the tasty array of cookbooks and food magazines, and daily discussions at home or work about particular dishes or cooking [styles](#). Shawcross asks: Why *not* couple your love of food and cooking with an evening at home with friends?

1. Define your group

Shawcross recommends organizing your supper club with eight to 10 people you regularly want to meet and eat with, including neighbors, couples, professional singles, long-time friends or people you want to get to know better. You can even have a regular set of people with two guests who rotate at each gathering. Regardless, make sure everyone involved is committed to the same supper club goals. (It's a club, after all, and every club needs ground rules).

2. Get organized

Have an informal meeting with your group to decide on a schedule (every week, every month, quarterly) and discuss types of foods to serve. (his is a good time to ask about food allergies or aversions). Shawcross says, "The supper club experience will hopefully expand your culinary palates; just make sure you are in agreement." Now is the time to set your first supper club gathering.

3. Decide who brings what

Figure out how to handle menu preparation. For example, one couple can bring an appetizer, another member can bring the wine (appropriately paired with the dinner menu), the host can prepare the entrée, and another couple can bring dessert.

4. Manage the budget

Shawcross suggests a number of ways to manage the costs of the supper club meals. For instance, members can pay for the courses they prepare (it's fair to rotate course assignments each time), all costs can be tallied and divided equally among members, or you can choose another method that works for everyone in your group.

5. Consider cleanup

An inevitable part of your supper club gatherings, cleanup can be the host's responsibility (as long as it isn't always the same host) or decided in another way that suits your supper club's members.



6. Make it interesting

Simply bringing food and enjoying the supper club's company is quite fine. But you can make it interesting by varying dress code and formality of the menu, having an ethnic night (including some themed music), hosting a masquerade party, or even holding your supper club outside at a park, picnic [style](#).

7. Plan your table settings

Once you've set your menu and music playlist, coordinate your table settings appropriately. Tablescapes, as Shawcross calls them, will create an inviting atmosphere and can include tablecloths, candles and flowers that complement the china, flatware, glassware and theme of the gathering.

8. Test your recipes

If you are new to cooking, Shawcross suggests doing a trial [run](#) of your particular dish (or the entire menu if you are preparing the whole thing). She says practice boosts confidence and relieves stress.

For more supper club tips and recipes, visit DebiShawcross.com or pick up her book *Friends at the Table*, scheduled for release in June 2009.

Supper club menu

Friends at the Table includes a delectable array of menus to serve at your supper club gatherings. They are, to say the least, inspiring and convenient. Shawcross provides a comprehensive shopping list and time-saving make-ahead tips, as well as notes on equipment and cooking.

Here is one of Shawcross' four-course supper club menus (and a signature recipe):

- Shrimp, Avocado and Black Bean Bruschetta
- Mixed Greens with Crispy Tortillas and Jalapeno Vinaigrette
- Mesquite-Grilled Steak with Chimichurri Sauce
- Southwestern Potato Salad
- Blueberry Pie a la Mode

Mesquite-Grilled Steak with Chimichurri Sauce

Serves 6 to 8

Marinade:

1/2 cup olive oil
4 cloves garlic
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon freshly ground pepper

Chimichurri sauce:

3/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil
6 cloves garlic, smashed
1 cup Italian parsley
1 cup cilantro
1/4 cup fresh oregano
2 jalapeno peppers, seeds and veins removed
1 tablespoon lime juice
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon freshly ground pepper
2-1/2 pounds tri-tip steaks
3 cups mesquite wood smoke chips, soaked in water at least 30 minutes, drained
1 (8-inch) square disposable aluminum foil baking pan

Directions:

1. Whisk together marinade ingredients in a small bowl. Place steaks in a Zip-loc bag and pour marinade over steaks. Allow to marinate in refrigerator 2 hours. (Bring to room temperature before grilling.)
2. Meanwhile, place all chimichurri sauce ingredients in the bowl of a food processor. Blend until smooth. Set sauce aside. Heat grill to medium high heat. Place soaked wood chips in a foil pan. Place foil pan directly atop heat element in the bottom of the grill.
3. When chips begin to smoke, place steaks on grill directly over chips and cook to desired doneness, about 5 minutes per side for medium-rare. Remove steaks from grill and let stand 5 minutes. Thinly slice steaks across grain. Serve with chimichurri sauce drizzled over the top.

Planning a dinner party or supper club? Try these recipes:

[Six recipes for a green couple's dinner party](#)

[Recipes for an authentic Italian dinner party](#)

[Recipes for a terrific tapas dinner party](#)

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