

Want a supper party without all the hard work? Then get someone to cook it for you, says Rachel Johnson. All you have to do is turn up



DINING OUT AT HOME

In October 2010, my husband said something as I was clearing up the wreckage of a dinner party (when the guests leave after midnight he always begs, 'Please don't let's do this now,' but I can't bear to come down to mess in the morning, so I send him up and do it on my own).

'I know,' he said solicitously, as he headed up the wooden stairs after midnight, and I clattered in the sink. 'I'll take over dinner parties from now on. You always do it. It's My Turn.' I didn't contradict him: we have been married almost 20 years and I can confidently say that I have cast, invited, re-invited, shopped, *pour-memoir*-ed, cooked, served and cleared up every single dinner party 'we' have given for the past two decades. 'OK,' I said. 'I accept.' And that was October 2010.

So how's it going? I hear you ask eagerly. How many dinner parties – or cocktails, lunches, even – has he laid on for friends and family, repaying hospitality, spreading good cheer, or simply out of the joy of sheer, Rabelaisian revelry? The answer is zero. Not one.

The months passed. 'How is our series of scintillating dinner parties going?' I would ask acidly every six months. 'Very well indeed,' my husband would reply, picking up a newspaper. Then I had an email, which went as follows: 'I'll be brief. My brother-in-law, Paul Collins, has started his own business. With over 25 years' experience, including a number of years as executive chef at Daylesford, Paul now offers his services for private dining. He would absolutely love the opportunity to cook for



Paul Collins

you and your family or a few friends to give you first-hand experience of his food.' Even more time passed until Ivo's birthday and by that stage life was so busy that I replied 'yes please' to this email and from then on, I promise you, I knew this was the way forward, dinner-party-wise.

Come the night of the birthday dinner for 12, I had a list of only two things to do: 1) I had to show Paul my tragic kitchen, sputtering Aga and *batterie de cuisine* and 2) I had to show up.

On the evening of the birthday dinner, I went to work and to a book party and did not enter my front door until 8pm. I went downstairs to show my face and do the 'placement', then upstairs to change.

So, for the price of four in a London restaurant (though each evening is tailored individually), Paul cooked an astonishing three-course feast of Ivo's favourites – lamb, peas, cheese and claret – having come in at lunchtime and cleaned my kitchen (I found the bread bin in the glory-hole), made canapés, and all the bread rolls for the crab starter. All this domestic *martyr-familias* had to do was chat, eat, drink... and write the cheque. So it really was like going out to dinner in my own home. And the most perfect way of solving the problem of who was in charge of 'our' entertaining anyone could devise.

TORY COLLINS