

# Of Course I Want to Know Who Else Is Coming to the Dinner Party!

There's no point in surprising people about their tablemates, and while we're at it: Stick to two courses and limit opportunities for bloviating



Diego Blanco

By

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No matter where you socialize, there are two types of dinner party guests: those who want to know the guest list ahead of time and others who prefer the serendipity of a naive encounter.

Though attitudes on this issue differ, everyone agrees on one party foul: You cannot ask who else is coming before committing to a dinner. And if your host is the helpful type who discloses some or all of the attendees as the event approaches, no canceling because you find one of them annoying.

“It is arrogant to ask,” says Gahl Burt, who perfected her entertaining chops as Nancy Reagan’s social secretary. “Plenty of people have their staff call, and I respond, ‘I’m still working on it.’”

In other words: Ask not what the party can do for you. Ask what you can do for the party.

The actor and comedian Larry David has other ideas. “The thing about the dinner party is you don’t know who’s going. That’s what really bothers me about it, that it’s such a f—king secret as to who you’re inviting. *Why can’t I know?*” he recently pleaded on the *Shameless* podcast, a theme he has reprised in his TV show.

I’m on team Larry. I love giving and going to dinner parties. Knowing something in advance about the other guests lets me size them up better in person, which is half the fun. That way I know that the guy droning on about the history of Sunni secularism is a self-obsessed bloviator and not the former U.S. station chief in Jordan.

I say that giving your guests an idea of who will be there is downright good hosting manners. Having at least some attendee information lets us know what to expect, so we walk in feeling our best. We all have crater-sized holes of ignorance. You know what they say: The more you don’t know, the more you know you don’t know.



Recently in Paris, my dinner partner dissected the blockbuster Surrealism exhibition at the Pompidou Center. He then paused, “You follow my work, right?” Way too proud to say, “Actually, no.” Instead, I answered, “Oh, yeah, sure, yeah, read you often.”

He was too snooty to provide a life raft, so I dug myself deeper into the muck and offered platitudes that might engender hints. “Didn’t I hear you on…” or “Didn’t I read it in…” I then took an indelicate gulp of vintage Bordeaux to quell my stress of faking it.

What’s worse than not knowing who your dinner companion is? Mistakenly assuming they are someone they are not. Many years ago, I had the glamorous bad-boy photographer Peter Beard as my dinner partner. A most regrettable placement by the hostess. I chattered about my favorite recipes because I thought he was the renowned, portly chef James Beard.

Yet these risks of flubbing it or flunking it don’t scare off half the people I surveyed. In both Europe and the U.S., many consider free-flowing kismet much more amusing. “Ruins everything to know. If I know who’s coming, it feels like an advertising party, and my head of sales is taking me around with a crib sheet,” says Lauren Zalaznick, who ran a division at NBCUniversal. “If I’m invited to a friend’s house, it’s a club I’m a member of, and no need to ask. If I’m not a friend of the person, it’s a one-time commitment. If I say yes, it’s my decision, and I’m a big girl.”

Comtesse Isabelle d’Ornano made a *Mon Dieu!* expression at the mere question. At 87, the French iconoclast—who combines the style of Catherine Deneuve with the command of Christine Lagarde—still oversees divisions at the Sisley cosmetics empire she co-founded with her husband. She told me that asking for a guest list is “pas tellement dans les habitudes françaises.” This is a titled woman’s way of saying, “No friggin’ way can you ask.” She continued, “Once, the president de la République was coming, and I didn’t even tell anyone in case he was too busy to show.”

A good thing she didn’t invite me to that one: I might have confused a chef d’État with a chef de cuisine.

Whether your guests know who’s who or what’s what, do arrange your dinner party with other key considerations in mind. Remember the “bucks or f—ks” rule. More politely said, people like to make money or make whoopee. So place people with either endgame in mind—or, I guess, both.

No matter how successful your seating plan, also remember that nobody wants or needs three courses. Serve one course family style and move about for dessert. Ninety minutes is too long to talk to just the two people you’re sandwiched between. If dinner is over in half that time, it feels like the teacher let everyone out for recess early.

Especially with New York’s high-octane achievers, chances are good you’ll be sitting next to someone with a healthy sense of self-regard. We all know the type: They won’t ask you one question, then wrap up saying, “Fascinating discussion!”



The host may then make the whole table listen to this person. “Oh God, that is the worst of anything in the world. And, thankfully, they only do that in America,” exclaimed coveted British guest and decorator Nicky Haslam. He responded so emphatically that I had to turn the phone volume down. “You know,” he mimed with fake pretension, “So and so, please say a few words about Harvard or [Elon Musk](#).’ These bloody communal subjects ruin a dinner party.” My aforementioned pride kept me from admitting to Haslam that I do this all the time.

If you do have a one-conversation tradition, please ask a woman to expound, not a man. I can’t be alone in thinking that men have exceeded their dinner party lecture time limit in life.

Worse, men play a game of “keep away,” throwing high-arched policy questions at each other to display their expertise. I’m very much an extrovert, but I go silent in these exchanges because I can’t pontificate about, say, the approaching cryptocurrency utopia or apocalypse. I usually offer, “How about we tackle the topic in a way where everyone has something to add?”

Hereafter I will stop the dreaded clinking of my glass to get everyone’s attention for remarks. Haslam is right—it always feels like forced grandeur, like I take myself for Pamela Harriman. As Larry David puts it, “I’m golden ruling it.” I will host unto them as I want them to host unto me.

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