



# The Secret Life of Feasts

Before you hold your next power dinner, read on to glean *Sue Russell's* tips from history. Your soiree probably has more in common with a decadent medieval banquet or a politically strategic White House dinner than you ever could have imagined

Nothing impresses your business associates or cements a burgeoning alliance like a soiree. Feasts, banquets, and dinner parties have signalled power, affluence and superior social status for centuries. The story is the same, be they the decadent bashes of Imperial Rome, the male-only “think tanks” of 7th century BC Greece, or the elegantly sedate state banquets that even today keep the Windsor Castle and White House kitchens buzzing.

True, some key elements have changed quite drastically. You're unlikely to be invited to a medieval feast where naked guests huddle together in a swinging bathtub set alongside a groaning banquet table. Communal bathing was practically *de rigueur* back then. And hopefully you won't witness the unseemly food fights once so popular at Versailles, or require a trusted knight to taste your food for poison like those serving King Charles VI.

One famous chef put Martha Stewart's perfectionism in the shade by killing himself after receiving an inferior piece of fish he couldn't possibly face serving to Louis XIV. Yes, hospitality could be a really deadly business. Nero was one jolly Roman who relished seeing a guest – even his own brother Britannicus – poisoned, then watching him writhe in agony at the table while he happily munched on a delicacy like roast dormice spiced with honey and poppyseeds.

Versailles, the height of opulence, was guaranteed to impress France's neighbours in the ultra competitive European banquet culture. No culinary or festive challenge was too great. In a fairytale environment created for an outdoor party in 1668, for instance, potted orange trees were hung with candied oranges. Delectable pyramids and palaces were also fashioned from crystallised fruit, marzipan and pastry.

Mercifully, the enormously popular medieval party trick in which living creatures wriggled out of pies, has disappeared. But raised pies were filled with bran or dry cereal which, after baking, was all shaken out through a hole cut in the base. “Then you popped your birds, frogs, snakes, or whatever you used, into the pie through the hole,” says Nichola Fletcher, author of *Charlemagne's Tablecloth, A Piquant History of Feasting*. “And when the pie lid was lifted, the creatures flew, hopped or wriggled out. Not very PC today! There are many descriptions of using animals (piglets, even) in pies at feasts.”

Thankfully, modern menus are comparatively simple. Yet experts contend that there's little straightforward about even

Jacqueline Kennedy and Robert Kennedy in the foreground at a dinner party hosted by the John Kennedys in Georgetown, 1957



This page:  
Rena Sindi co-hosts the Christian Dior Beauty launch party for the fragrance Pure Poison (right); Queen Elizabeth II hosts a state banquet in St George's Hall, Windsor Castle in honour of French President Jacques Chirac to celebrate the centenary of the Entente Cordiale (inset below)

Opposite page:  
Jacqueline Kennedy and President John Kennedy were guests of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip at Buckingham Palace in London, 1961 (left); Nan Kempner (right)



today's seemingly informal social gatherings. It's all power plays and hidden agendas, as rivals are impressed and allies affirmed. Jesse Browner, author of *The Duchess Who Wouldn't Sit Down, An Informal History of Hospitality*, thinks hospitality is about control and that the host always has the upper hand.

He has his own ulterior motives when he prepares divinely enticing lamb salad sandwiches for the guests at his Manhattan poker nights. He confesses that his hospitality is a Trojan horse camouflaging his true goal: to so distract his guests that he beats them at poker. To Browner, ego is central to jockeying for social position.

"Inclusion is power," he explains, "and the power to exclude is more intoxicating still. It doesn't matter whether the inclusion is to a mafia social club, an exclusive country club, or nights in the Lincoln bedroom, the principle is always, and always has been, the same."

He's not remotely surprised by how much of the old system remains. "I find it almost impossible to imagine a complex society being able to exist without it," he says. "This is not about snobbery – it exists at every level of society, even the lowliest. It is about the very meaning of the individual's standing in a society of social animals."

One-upmanship is rampant. In the mid-1400s, after King Edward IV hosted a 50 course banquet, the Earl of Warwick tried to outdo him with 60 courses. With no Spendaholics Anonymous meetings available, it fell to sumptuary laws to curb such extravagance. Some laws specified a maximum number of courses. King Richard II of England's wild spending was reined in thus. Sixteenth century Hungary's official banquets were also tightly regulated.

The marriage between dining and peace or power brokering favoured by politicians, presidents, prime ministers and social strategists seems literally indestructible.

"It's no coincidence," says Browner, "that many of the world's more sensitive alliances and accords are forged not in government offices but in the private homes of the world's leaders. Very simply, the more people you know, the greater your reach." That's equally true at Versailles or a peace summit. And ditto with Browner's own literary circle, "where the only thing that separates you from the thousands of would-be participants is the fact that you have met – at dinners, parties, clubs – the people who are in a position to help you."

"Sharing food has long had the connotation of truce, peace and (more or less) civilised behaviour," agrees psychotherapist Tina B Tessina, PhD, author of *It Ends With You: Grow Up and Out of Dysfunction*. Power is invariably part of the mix and there are plenty of signals to prove it, says Tessina: "How the host is regarded by a restaurant's staff, or how much staff he has at home, indicates power. Men who choose to host a dinner at a private club or gentleman's club can cause women to be uncomfortable with the setting and thereby demonstrate power over them, or even exclude them. A lavish party, perhaps on a private yacht or in an exotic setting, also displays the host's power, influence and wealth. And such events can also be used as perks to lure the best executives away

from one firm to another."

In December 1941, Britain's Winston Churchill paid a three week visit to president Franklin Delano Roosevelt, staying in the White House. Realistically, Churchill was the one doing the wooing, but that didn't stop him turning into a houseguest from hell.

University of Calgary history professor David Bercuson who, with his co-author Holger Herwig, wrote *One Christmas in Washington: The Secret Meeting Between Roosevelt and Churchill That*

## The dynamics when Churchill and Roosevelt dined together were fascinating

*Changed The World*, notes Churchill's brazenness with his list of gastronomic demands.

He imbibed sherry in his room each morning before his favoured breakfast of hot eggs, bacon or ham and toast, cold cuts with English mustard and two varieties of fruit. He also tiddled around the clock – and he temporarily set aside his disdain for the world famous American martini. "His idea of a great accommodation," laughs Bercuson.

Was Churchill really so wedded to having his food fancies met or were his demands merely a metaphor for a much larger power play? Although FDR held the power cards, it was vital for Churchill to keep up his self-advertised image as the centre of the universe. "I don't think it was a matter of, 'Well, I like brandy, I don't like port,'" says Bercuson. "It was, 'I'll have it my way.' It really was a power game."

Nitty gritty business took place behind closed doors. The dinner table was used more for positioning. Bercuson was fascinated by the dynamics when Churchill and Roosevelt dined together. "There was a lot of, you wouldn't even call it good-natured bantering," he says. "In some cases, it wasn't even all that good-natured." Roosevelt poked at Churchill's imperial sense, while Churchill retaliated with critiques of American life.

Successfully climbing the social ladder has always required more than the ability to make a passably decent cheese sandwich. In April 1972, America's first female Secretary of State,

Madeleine Albright – then still a Georgetown housewife – organised a black tie dinner for 3,000 democrats at the Washington Hilton to honour presidential hopeful, Edward S Muskie.

Albright's calm was shaken by the mystifying arrival of six African ambassadors in full tribal regalia, carrying invitations. Then crates of alcohol, floral bouquets and even 200 pizzas also began arriving, along with demands for payment. The mystery went unsolved until Republican operative Donald Segretti's 1973 confession that he'd tried disrupting Albright's dinner to stir up mistrust among the democrats while acting for the Committee to Re-Elect the President. His ploy backfired. Albright had proved herself unflappable.

The late Pamela Harriman, the British-born, former American ambassador to France and Winston Churchill's daughter-in-law, was one of Washington's tiny handful of extremely powerful hostesses. A major fundraising force for the Democrats, her life was one long round of parties. It didn't hurt her cachet that in her youth, she attracted many famous men as escorts and her not-so-secret affairs got her nicknamed "the courtesan of the century."

The very mention of Harriman's name had people manoeuvring for invitations and envying their social status crumbling were one not to be forthcoming. Her best skills were likely her ability to make small talk and to listen, which put all guests at ease. On Washington's private party circuit, the only thing that ranked

higher than an invitation to one of the soirees hosted by Harriman or the late *Washington Post* publisher Katharine Graham, was having them accept an invitation to your event. Or, of course, an invitation from Jacqueline Kennedy.

When the former Empress of Iran, Farah Diba, attended a state dinner for the Shah of Iran at the Kennedy White House, Mrs Kennedy knew she would be facing the personification of opulent glamour and some of the world's great jewellery. According to her social secretary Letitia Baldrige, the empress did make quite an impact, turning up in "a solid-gold dress and about a billion dollars in jewels."

Mrs Kennedy had devoted much time to planning her wardrobe (another vital facet of the recipe for successful entertaining). Finally, she cannily chose to go for a low-key and rather youthful look rather than get into any kind of competition with the tiara-wearing empress. Jackie opted for a simple pink and white gown, accessorising it with diamond teardrop earrings and a diamond brooch tucked in her upswept hair. Of course, she looked ravishing. That evening, Jackie chose Jerome Robbins's acclaimed *Ballets USA* to entertain their honoured guests and the jazz dancers were really dressed-down in sweatshirts and sneakers.

Rena Sindi, the 36-year-old daughter of an Iraqi-born financier and married to a private venture capitalist once transformed Mortimer's, the former East Side hangout, into an Arabian pleasure den, complete with belly dancers. Her book, *Be My Guest: Theme Party Savoir Fair* is a collection of 15 parties she's hosted, including some for the New York City ballet, Saks Fifth Avenue, and the



This page:  
The 200th anniversary of the White House dinner is held in the East Room. Seated at the head table, left to right, are Betty Ford, Jimmy Carter, Barbara Bush, Gerald Ford, Bill Clinton, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Ladybird Johnson, George Bush, and Rosalyn Carter (right); The Bush White House still uses the Clinton china which is set on tables in the State Dining Room of the White House (inset below)

Opposite page:  
Pamela and Averell Harriman arrive at a US\$500 per plate benefit dinner sponsored by the Democratic Party in honour of his 90th birthday in 1981



## Seats of Power

In the powerful heart of Asia, behind the closed doors of Hong Kong's exclusive dining rooms and seated at the heads of the finest tables are leaders from every industry. Here are Hong Kong's five power parties of recent years

### • The Handover Dinner: June 30, 1997

More than 4,000 Heads of State, including Chinese President Jiang Zemin; Charles, Prince of Wales; British Prime Minister Tony Blair, Hong Kong Governor Chris Patten plus leading Chinese business leaders such as Li Ka Shing, Victor Fung, the Kwok brothers and Stanley Ho attended a State Dinner as the Chinese military removed the British flag and replaced it with those of HKSAR and China. Held in Hall 2 of the HK Convention and Exhibition Centre.

### • Hong Kong Tatler Ball: Held Annually

Seen as the start of the year's social season, Hong Kong Tatler is the only host who holds an invitation-only, sit-down dinner for 500 people every year. There are no official corporate sponsors, no charity tie-ins, no selling of tickets. If your name is on the list, then it is probably also on a local building or, at the very least, at the top of a conglomerate's letter-head. Each year the glamorous September issue is hand-delivered to society's elite 500.

### • Lawrence Ho and Sharen Lo's Wedding Reception: November 16 & 17, 2000

This handsome and popular couple had more guests than could be accommodated by any of the local hotels. He is the son of gaming magnate Stanley Ho

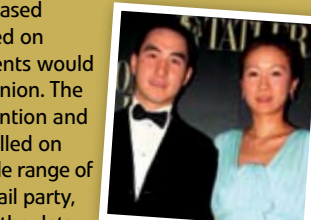
and Sharen's family is based in Hong Kong; and based on tradition, a series of events would be held to honour the union. The Grand Hall of the Convention and Exhibition Centre was filled on November 16 with a wide range of guests for a lavish cocktail party, while November 17 was the date for a sit-down dinner for more than 1,000 guests.

### • Richard Li's Millennium Party: December 31, 1999

Riding a magic carpet of dotcom dreams, younger son of Li Ka Shing, Richard Li, envisioned PCCW as a global IT powerhouse of the future, complete with a lavish home at Cyberport, Pokfulam. His 1999 party has gone down in history as a multi-million-dollar bonanza. Whitney Houston was flown in on private jet to entertain the crowd, and the Convention and Exhibition Centre was filled with 100 tables holding more than 2,000 VIPs.

### • A Night at China Club: November 2003

The city may have still been reeling from the Sars scare, but you wouldn't have known it if you were at China Club one night in mid-November 2003. Bill Clinton, in town as keynote speaker for CLSA's annual extravaganza; The Rolling Stones, winding up their Forty Licks tour with a Hong Kong show; tycoons Silas Chou and Peter Lam mingled with China Club owner David Tang and Hong Kong Jockey Club Chairman Ronald Arculli, while Denmark's Princess Alexandra shared dinner with two of the Miller sisters – all three of the ladies are Hong Kong-born, and two are daughters of Duty Free's Robert Miller.



## Conversation is often couched in symbolism, double entendres and veiled references

George VI paid a visit to the US. She wrote the note, even though the Brits had been welcomed with an all-American hotdog and hamburger cookout that left them completely cold. Eleanor's contemporaneous diary entry said it all. "The Queen would not eat a hot dog," she wrote. "She said her mouth was too small."

Today's White House protocol officers are at great pains to avoid offending honoured guests. Months in advance, the questions begin. Would alcohol or floral table centrepieces be welcome or taboo? It's all quite a minefield really. The dessert served to China's past Premier Jiang Semín at the White House included delectable marzipan panda bears. A nice personal touch and a nod to the beloved pandas.

President Jacques Chirac and his wife visited the UK in November 2004 to mark the centenary of the Entente Cordiale, Britain and France's friendship pact. Six months of planning went into the banquet at Windsor Castle's St George's Hall. The long mahogany table was polished until it glistened, then meticulously set for 136 guests. Spaces between chairs were measured to be exactly equidistant – an old ritual still observed. In perhaps the ultimate act of discreet diplomacy, The Waterloo Chamber was tactfully renamed The Music Room for that one night, and paintings of the generals most notable for helping Wellington defeat the French were quietly removed from the walls.

President John F Kennedy and his First Lady were certainly hospitable, hosting countless

events including a legendary evening for 49 Nobel Prize winners, known by staff as the "brains dinner." But Bill and Hillary Clinton really opened the White House floodgates and Mrs Clinton, author of *An Invitation to the White House: At Home with History*, quickly moved in top American chef, Walter Scheib. Formerly, French style serving had guests reaching over their shoulders to help themselves to food from tureens. But after two elderly guests in a single week ended up with food in their laps, this challenging style was swiftly replaced with the more diner-friendly American style of having ready-made plates brought to the table.

Outrageous excess does still exist in the world, and it can't all be laid at Donald Trump's feet. Delhi native Lakshmi Mittal, an investment banker ranked the world's third richest man by *Forbes*, spent around \$55 million in 2004 for five days of festivities for the 1,500 guests at his daughter Vanisha's wedding. Celebrations began at the 17th century stately home Vaux le Vicomte then moved to Versailles. And former Tyco head, Dennis Kozlowski (since disgraced and imprisoned), threw his wife Karen a now-notorious US\$2.1 million 40th birthday extravaganza in Sardinia. Expensive, yes, but hardly classy. Sparklers fizzed from the breasts of a giant cake shaped like a woman. And Stolki vodka was dispensed from the male appendage of an ice sculpture rendition of Michelangelo's David. It looked for all the world as if David was peeing into crystal glasses. Worse, these festivities, we now know, took place on the company dime.

Like hosts and hostesses the world over, staff at the White House, Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle all labour over the ever-delicate business of seating plans. Louis XIV's Versailles grappled constantly with the problem, given the 1,000 courtiers and 4,000 attendants living inside the chateau. Tiers of tables delineated social standing and different menus were served to each. Chairs with and without arms or backs also denoted social rank.

To Browner, Versailles' cramped conditions were, "Mostly a small price to pay for the opportunity to see and be seen among the nation's elite and to savour the perks of Europe's most elegant court society. We might not have enjoyed having to change our clothes five times a day and scuttle around the grounds spreading flattery and gossip, but who knows what we would have felt in the presence of the Sun King? Or worse, being excluded from it?"

In 2006, very similar principles govern power placements in dining. And every businessperson worth their salt knows exactly which restaurant tables rank as social outer Siberia. Of course, dinner party hosts can also manoeuvre via their seating plans.

"A wise and clever host (or protocol officer) can arrange seating strategically," notes Tessina, "so certain people are either coerced into conversation by being placed together, or prevented from conversation by being separated, or given the opportunity for private chat by proximity. It's a pleasant setting, often private and exclusive, which makes it safe to discuss sensitive information. And it's a relaxed atmosphere which tends to 'soften up' the guests and psychologically influence them to favour the deal."

Bottom line, it would be strange if deals weren't forged and agreements weren't reached over dinner. Precisely how many deals are brokered is impossible to quantify, of course, and bridge-building and peace-making can be quite subtle.

"Ah, this is a delicate matter," adds Tessina. "In these high-powered state affairs, everyone is usually well-versed in diplomacy and the conversation is often couched in symbolism, double entendres and veiled references. Points are made and taken in roundabout terms. It is not considered polite to talk too overtly about state matters at dinner – it is supposed to be a break from meetings and councils, but it is an opportunity to get and deliver information in a low-key way."

At every level of society, entertainment loosens up guests and helps break any tension. Thomas Jefferson, who played host almost nightly, was very aware of its value. And as Hillary Clinton has observed, "Some of the most successful diplomacy happens not at the negotiating table but after dinner, during the evening's featured entertainment." It's a match made in social heaven and after centuries of success, it's not likely to change any time soon. □

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Sloan-Kettering's Valentine's Day Ball.

No one would dare refuse an invitation from New York's all-time favourite wealthy socialite, the late Nan Kempner. At her famous Sunday night spaghetti dinners you could be dining in the company of people like Princess Diana and Nancy Regan. Kempner was however, critical of the media attention younger socialites crave and readily receive. "There's never been such coverage," she told the *New York Times*, adding "There's no such thing as privacy anymore. It's easier to create a great aura around yourself than privacy, and I guess that's what they want. I mean, these days all you have to do is hang out the ham."

Diplomacy is an art. The late Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother exhibited great diplomacy by writing a commemorative thank you note to Mrs Roosevelt, a year after she and King