

The Dinner Program

Throwing a dinner party with one knife, 11 militant chickens, and your design degree

by Ellen Beldner



Entertaining, like design, is some combination of rhetoric and execution. When you design a product or a piece of software you have an audience and an effect that you're trying to elicit: that's the rhetoric. Maybe you want your desk accessories to convey "sophistication" or "subtlety" or "fun"; and perhaps you want your tea party to convey "anger" "despair" or "angst." The burden of delivering the message falls on your skill as an executioner: A spicy curry wakes everyone up; a too spicy curry makes everyone cry and drink all your lassi.

The first big dinner party I ever threw was an eleven person, five course meal for my best friend. The main course was Cornish game hens, which are to chickens as crawfish are to lobsters—small enough to make meat extraction annoying; large enough to look like animal corpses. I returned home from work that day to find the hens on the counter still frozen solid. I spent the next two hours in a pre-launch bug-fixing panic getting the evil little chickens of doom thawed, stuffed, roasted, and served. While I rassled the chickens out of the oven, the guest of honor—acting like a typical early-adopter—"hacked" the raspberry coulis, using it as a decorative tableware dye rather than a condiment.

By profession, I am an interaction designer, and that day, with the combination of unexpected failures and reappropriation, I started to appreciate how the process I get paid to practice at the office actually serves me everywhere, including dinner.

What's the vision?

A good dinner party, like a good design, needs a coherent vision to guide each decision. For example, the vision for the iPhone is "Messiah come down to Earth." Most dinner parties are slightly less ambitious. You may devise

something like "a formal and daring Saturday night dinner to welcome my roommate's parents to town" or "a comforting post-snowboarding dinner for everyone staying at my cabin in Tahoe." The vision keeps you focused and serves as a succinct reminder of what you're trying to accomplish and convey. Brunch before taking people salsa dancing? Keep the food light—heavy food will make people want to fall asleep, not dance. Pick some easy recipes to minimize clean up and maximize your time dancing. And keep with a theme—forgo the borscht and potato pancakes for Latin American and Caribbean flavors. Your food fits into a larger narrative, similar to the way that commercial products are part of people's life stories.

Who are your users?

There is very little joy in making a product that has no users—you need a guest list. The members of a user base at a dinner party always have a few things in common: people expect something edible and they hope to have a somewhat enjoyable time. Your dinner party guests have preferences and cultural needs that constrain your menu. Participant observation of your friends in the wild can help you glean data about their eating habits,

but a dietary restriction survey in the invitation will also suffice.

Over the years, I've learned the following heuristics about my typical user base. With 14 dinner guests, only 11 will require chicken-of-doom. In Northern California, one person ends up vegan, and two vegetarian. Two are Jewish (no shellfish or pork), and one, despite mild alcoholism, is nominally Muslim and doesn't eat pork either, so that rules out the bacon wrapping on the steaks. Once in a while, I have a guest who is severely allergic to eggs, gluten, and/or nuts, just to keep life interesting. Killing your guests is the opposite of entertaining, unless you happen to be Hannibal Lecter, so when in doubt about allergens, stick to tofu. Oh wait! people can be allergic to soy, too...

In addition to your guests' physical comfort, consider their interactions with one another over dinner. Conversation between friends is, naturally, more personal; conversation between acquaintances will tend towards external topics like books, movies, art, travel, and the like. When you mix social crowds, mix them well. If you invite one coworker over for dinner with 10 of your best friends, she'll feel left out. As a design principle, every guest should be acquainted with at least two other guests.

What are the technical constraints?

If you live in a studio apartment, inviting 12 people for dinner will require that you empty your apartment and rent a table. Your oven probably will be too small for a cookie sheet, and your fridge will have room for beer but not much else. You will not reasonably be able to prepare a seven-course sit-down dinner. Order Indian food.

Cooking for two to eight people is more doable. You need a decent set of pots, pans, baking sheets, and knives. More than 12 guests will create challenges for anyone, regardless of household size. Most recipes will have to be tripled, and the food will require more space than standard pots and pans afford. You'll have to work in batches, which means doubling cooking time and letting one batch get cold while the next one cooks, unless you start buying mixers and ovens the size of a petite human.

Interaction design: The menu

When you plan an interaction with a product, you want to ensure that each user can fit the product into their mental model of how the world works. With food, this means that you plan a menu so that each guest, regardless of dietary preference, can eat a nutritionally complete meal by allowing them to pick out what they need.

A dish like lasagna is a suboptimal choice because it mixes everything (carbs, meat, dairy) into one dish—the Microsoft Outlook of main courses.

Instead, you want to give your guests a suite of food elements that let them fulfill different needs: eat enough fiber, prevent global warming, indulge their chocolate craving, or get tipsy. It's also good to have a default serving suggestion prepared for the occasional guest who isn't a complete

food-obsessed crazy like the rest of us. Your vegetarian users will go for the white bean soup (made with veggie broth) and the bread. Your low carb eaters will skip the bread and eat the soup with the evil chickens of doom. The Francophiles will love the cheese plate and can ignore the tiramisu; everyone will eat the salad and steamed artichokes. Mind that you serve the garlic-butter sauce on the side so the vegan can have his artichoke without the toil of a thousand cows.

Serving one big course instead of a few smaller ones is like launching a single monolithic application in one shot—people have to wait longer for the goods and your launch is way more stressful. Serving several courses lets you get your hors d'oeuvres out the door and the main course can follow

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afterwards when you're good and ready. Appetizers are like a good alpha release; they tantalize your users into wanting more, and if they're sufficiently tasty they'll carry you through a few buggy releases like a wilted salad or an overcooked fish.

Visual design: Place setting and decor

80% of a good dinner party is enough wine; 10% is the guests; 5% is the lighting; and 5% is food and music. If everyone is drunk enough and can't see their plates, they won't notice or care what they're eating and they'll all find each other hilarious. But until sobriety slips away, you'll need to ensure that the physical form of your party jives with the emotional tone you're trying to create. For example, if you are

throwing a Bauhaus-themed party, you might want to hang gray canvas to form a perfect cube, install one fluorescent bar light, give your guests water, and serve emergency nutrition tablets on clear glass plates. Similarly, if you are designing an Oracle interface you make it beige; if you are designing rebar cozies for Burning Man, you make them fluorescent with rounded corners.

Finale and follow-up

The next day some of your guests will send thank-you emails or notes. These are less useful than typical customer feedback since this is polite society, not a business transaction. Even if you serve swill and hardtack, your guests will be thrilled at your company and appreciative of your hospitality. The best time to get honest feedback is

during your next chat with one of the guests. Similar to usability tests, you have to make participants feel it is safe to criticize and critique. Your opening response (after they presumably thank you) can be something like "Oh, you're welcome, it was lovely to see you too...say, I thought the fish was a bit salty. What did you think of it?" or "You know, I liked the way the artichokes turned out, but next time I think I might steam them a little longer. Did you find them tough?" This will give your friend an opening for some feedback. Keep in mind these basic design principles and design process steps, plus your user feedback, and next time you host, you'll be sending everyone out the door with their needs satisfied and their stomachs filled.

