The Dinner Party
Reworking Tradition Through Contemporary Performance

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Dinner parties can be understood as social and cultural performances. Most of what we know about these performances is however, historical, rather than contemporary, and pertains largely to the British and European upper classes (see, for example, Mennell 1985). While fascinating and instructive, these historical accounts offer little insight into the nature and social significance of the modern-day dinner party in Canada. As a performance, the dinner party has clearly lost some of its traditional formality—but precisely how, and how far, has it evolved? What meanings do we now ascribe to these social occasions, and what do these performances seek to accomplish? In this chapter, I present the results of a study I conducted into the nature and social meaning of the dinner party in its contemporary Canadian setting. Forty-seven people, all living in southern Ontario, from two generational cohorts (under thirty and over forty), shared their reflections on their experiences as both hosts of and guests at dinner parties—events that, I argue, constitute one of the increasingly rare occasions on which people engage in face-to-face socializing in an intimate setting. I am hopeful that the micro-perspective on dinner parties presented in this chapter will stimulate further research and discussion, as well as serving as a point of comparison that can help to illuminate divergent experiences of the dinner party.
No universal blueprint shapes festive eating patterns. Although all cultures construct communal eating customs (Lévi-Strauss 1969), they employ diverse sets of activities, foods, and objects. There is no basis from which to argue that using a fork is superior to chopsticks or one’s hand, that eating at a table is more civilized than eating on a mat on the floor. Canada embraces and celebrates diverse eating practices. At the same time, the nation has inherited some dominant eating customs, many of which can be traced to the period of colonization.

British and French eating patterns, in particular, influenced eating customs not only in colonized countries like Canada but around the world (Mennell 1985; Trubek 2000; Mintz 1986). Ken Albala (in this volume) helps us to understand how early cookbooks such as La cuisinière canadienne (1840) established a specifically Canadian inflection of French cuisine. As Albala notes, the first cookbook written and published in Canada—acceptably French, yet adapted to colonial circumstances. The diffusion of British dinner parties to Canada also demonstrates efforts to reproduce the ceremonial meals of the Empire. The careful historical work of Elizabeth Errington (2010), for instance, reveals the longings felt by wives of the early political elite in Upper Canada for London’s dinner party customs and their attempts to transplant to Canada the dinner parties they had left behind in Britain.

The structure of British dinner parties, which were strongly informed by the French, is generally associated with the bourgeoisie. Around 1850, this class comprised bankers, industrialists, prosperous trades people, professionals, and white collar workers, all of whom enjoyed unprecedented wealth and social mobility within the economic networks established by earlier industrial and merchant revolutions (Seigel 2012). So, too, did the bourgeoisie experience new political power enshrined in democratic legal systems. Norbert Elias (1978) demonstrates how the members of this class expressed their social position through the construction of new lifestyle practices, which included dinner parties. According to Elias, table manners, far from being trivial affectations, reflected shifts in the power structure of the nation. Elias’s subtle analysis of the British bourgeoisie acknowledges the strategic, conscious use of particular cultural practices to secure social distinction, but he also shows how less conscious emotions and sentiments shaped the particularities of the bourgeois lifestyle.
Elias focuses on the emergence of the bourgeoisie and its role in determining the canons of civilized behaviour. Unlike the aristocracy, who inherited superior social status, members of the bourgeoisie, despite their growing wealth and political power, had to construct their place in the social hierarchy, frequently asserting it through practices of material consumption. They also had to distance themselves from the working class, that is, those whom they employed or to whom they offered professional services. This struggle for class identity was, however, also reflected in the development of a distinctively bourgeois set of sensibilities, which emphasized refinement, decorum, and a sense of personal privacy. As Elias points out, for centuries prior, members of the aristocratic warrior class had found it quite acceptable to eat with their hands, taking food from communal dishes, to cut meat at table with hunting knives, to sprawl across chairs, and to belch, smack their lips, fart, and otherwise make no effort to conceal the bodily effects of digestion (1978, 57–64). In the eyes of the emerging bourgeoisie, however, such actions were deemed to betray a lack of concern for the feelings of others and to violate a newly valued sense of physical privacy.

Under the evolving conditions of modernity, the proper deportment of self and the observance of social conventions rose in importance. The bourgeoisie’s heightened sense of self-awareness and sensitivity to social interaction choreographed eating patterns that distanced diners from the material and bodily conditions of food consumption. Eating with one’s hands was banished in favour of utensils (including the fork and a downsized version of the knife), meals were served on individual plates, and diners were expected to discipline their bodies—to maintain an appropriate posture and suppress all external evidence of internal bodily processes. Embedded in these new conventions was a characteristically bourgeois fear of social embarrassment, against which the rules governing interaction at the table served as a sort of talisman, warding off the possibility of shame and loss of status. The assertion of these new customs, Elias argues, was a strategy that helped the bourgeoisie to construct, however flimsy, a sense of control over sexual urges and impulses deemed animalistic with the veneer of civility. With this civilizing process evident in new eating patterns, the bourgeoisie articulate their social position against that of the aristocracy as well as their power over the working class and colonial subjects.

Ample discretionary income and a servant culture ensured that the Victorian dinner party was special and exclusive. Without a private home
with considerable space, as well as access to abundant and diverse commodities and servants, it was difficult to enact this eating occasion successfully. Traditional feasting rituals were organized by men for men, but women oversaw dinner parties, albeit under their husbands’ advisement and with their social interests in mind. Although held in the home, public and private spheres crossed the table at these events, for the agenda of both hosts and guests was often social advancement and status (Habermas 1991, 44–49). The dinner party was not a family meal; it was an adult event, and children, who lacked the requisite training and understanding of the social importance of this event, were excluded. The most coveted guests at the bourgeoisie dinner table included members of the aristocracy, politicians, dignitaries, noted professionals, artists, intellectuals, and prominent business owners (McDiarmid 2008, 48). Customs dictated a special place for guests of honour at the table so that others could recognize who was important and so that hosts, who sat at the ends of the table, enjoyed the best view and were within hearing distance of influential guests (Jameson 1987, 57).

Dinner parties took place at a table in a room reserved for dining. Table talk was key, for it was through conversation that one could learn, display knowledge, and advance socially (McDiarmid 2008, 47). Around the table, diners might become aware of new business opportunities, potential places for their children in elite schools, or possible romantic unions. Alliances could be forged and general class-consciousness reinforced. Borrowing a page from the earlier court dining system, wit and expressiveness were prized at the mid-nineteenth-century dinner party. The manners of the table and the style of conversation promoted openness and candidness; dinner parties also offered reprieve from the formality of Victorian public life by including laughter (McDiarmid 2008, 51). Dinner party games, which were often part of the evening’s entertainment, encouraged strangers to play together, speak to one another, make physical contact, and laugh at each other (Logan 2006, 31). Still, despite the acceptance of candour, the spectre of social judgment always floated through the festivities.

Bourgeois women concentrated on creating a correct social mix at the table but also added feminine touches of atmosphere and beauty. The hostess oversaw the menu and had it served in a sequence of courses. Custom dictated that the hosts offer the meal to guests, so it had to be home cooked; however, servants undertook the labour of cooking and serving.
This division allowed the hostess to concentrate on keeping guests happy, ensuring a pleasing aesthetic experience, and exuding charm. A hostess being at ease became a sign of refinement and part of the sign of a “properly” conducted dinner party (Jameson 1987, 59).

Robert Jameson’s “Purity and Power at the Victorian Dinner Party” (1987) offers one of the most detailed and rigorous historical accounts of the Victorian dinner party. Jameson draws attention to how the Victorian dinner party moved guests around the house. While adding interest, movement also allowed the hosts to show off their house, particularly its most prestigious rooms. Guests moved from entryway to reception room, where they received a drink and a small portion of food to stimulate the appetite. The party moved to the dining room next, where most of the evening’s proceedings took place. After dinner, men typically moved into the library or smoking room for private conversation, leaving the women at the table (Rich 2011, 66).

The main meal was served in the dining room upon a large table. Victorian tables sat at least twelve people at considerable distance (Rich 2011, 63). Like the guests who ate around it, the table was wrapped in cloth. Tablecloths and runners made almost universal appearances. Candles, typically secured in large candelabras, lined the table, at the centre of which sat a large spray of flowers and other fresh vegetation. According to Jameson (1987), the hostess paid special attention to these centrepieces, often preparing them herself because servants were seen as lacking the necessary sensibility for such artful displays. The cumulative effect was sensuous, sparkling, fragrant, clean, and atmospheric. The contrast between this environment and the muddy, dung-ridden streets covered in coal dust was stark: nothing spoke more powerfully of the woman’s role as the creator of a domestic sanctuary (Draznin 2001).

Each guest was directed to his or her appointed chair, in front of which was a separate place setting, including a cloth napkin for keeping self and table clean. A series of utensils and stemware framed the diner’s place (Jameson 1987, 57). Servants removed and added dishes at each different course and for each type of food. Varying types of alcohol accompanied each course (Rich 2011, 63). This elaborate array of dishes, stemware, and cloth napkins enabled the bourgeoisie to mediate food—to distance themselves from it. But these dinner party props, the possession of which reflected wealth and good taste, also served as the medium for socialization into the class structure. Children of the bourgeoisie learned the customs of
the table—the correct use of utensils, when to begin eating and when to stop, how to chew food discreetly—so that when they found themselves in the homes of other bourgeoisie, they would be recognized as acceptable. The focus on the quantity and diversity of foods, which were central to previous periods, shifted at the bourgeoisie table to a focus on artful display, the ambience surrounding the experience of dining, and the objects on the table (Jameson 1987, 57–58). The dinner party also highlighted the taste and material wealth of the hosts. The customs they forged became an enduring template for eating.

The expansion of mass production and consumption during the twentieth century enabled a growing number of people to acquire the material means to engage in dinner parties, while visual media such as film and television illustrated the ritual of the dinner party. By the 1970s, dinner parties were such a commonplace form of social interaction that they became the subject of critique. Counterculture movements, filmmakers and theatre producers, and a host of culture theorists exposed the status-driven class pretensions that underpinned bourgeoisie eating habits. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, in his widely referenced study Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste (1979; translated 1984), drew attention to how class dispositions were expressed and struggled over through consumption practices. Bourdieu laid bare the ways in which the bourgeoisie employed elaborate eating habits to express their cultural superiority over others. Luis Buñuel’s well-known film The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie (1972) lampooned the dinner party as a domain of class pretentiousness and smug, insular ignorance of the politics of the age. Mike Leigh’s satiric comedy Abigail’s Party (1977) provided theatrical insights into the desperation and small-mindedness characteristic of the suburban British middle class, with its aspirations to upward mobility. Indeed, a study conducted in northern England found that dinner-party hosts continued to concentrate on the importance of social positioning and status. Participants spoke of how they changed the types of foods they served in order to make the best impression on their guests (Mellor, Blake, and Crane 2010).

THE CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN DINNER PARTY

But what about the Canadian dinner party? The initial aim of the research reported in this chapter was to gather some primary evidence of how
Canadians understand the dinner party, how they host, what pleasures and values they associate with these eating occasions, and how the dinner party is changing, if indeed it is.

The research was designed with the aim of acquiring a generational perspective in order to compare how older and younger Canadians conceive of the dinner party. In-depth interviews gave participants the opportunity to speak fully and openly, while an open-ended, semi-structured set of questions focused discussions, encouraged consistency, and asked people to consider dinner party experiences broadly. To make people feel comfortable and to ensure that they spoke openly, participants were given the choice of interview site: most chose their homes. Interview length ranged from twenty-five minutes to over two hours, with the average being forty minutes. A total of forty-seven interviews took place, twenty-five with participants over age forty, followed by twenty-two with those under age thirty.

By using an ad hoc method of recruitment—posters at local notice boards, community website Kijiji, door-to-door recruitment, and snowball sampling—I had little difficulty finding volunteer participants. Southern Ontarians demonstrated remarkable interest in sharing their dinner party experiences with me. The sample, neither random nor stratified, is confined to St. Catharines, Ontario, which does not necessarily reflect other parts of the country but does provide a small window onto everyday dinner party practices.

Of the forty-seven interviewees, six were men. Of the six men, two volunteered and four were recruited by their female partners, either because the latter insisted that they be present to accurately account for their jointly hosted dinner parties or because the men were at home during the interviews with their partners. Most participants described themselves as Canadian or Caucasian. Several participants identified with European cultures, and a smaller group identified with those of South Asia and the Caribbean. The lack of diversity within the sample not only cautions against generalizing findings but may suggest that women with Anglo backgrounds identify with and feel confident enough to speak about dinner parties because it is their inheritance.

An iterative analysis that moved from looking for patterns within the data to applying some general theoretical categories was used to produce the themes discussed below. Analysis began by “pawing” the data, which involves transcribing interviews, reading the text, and working with it in
various ways to uncover patterns (Dey 1993). After transcribing and reading the interviews, I converted them into a chart. One column recorded the generational cohort, the next the thematic identifiers, and the third the text. I identified the themes using the iterative process outlined above, compared the responses of the two generations, and interrogated the transcripts in relation to some broad theoretical categories (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In analyzing the transcripts, I considered a series of questions: What is the general structure or narrative of the event that people describe? How is food integrated into the occasion? What material objects are discussed and in what context? How is social interaction manifest? What are the tasks and pleasures of the dinner party?

TWO GENERATIONS AROUND THE SAME TABLE

A striking feature of the interviews was the remarkably similar ways in which the two generations spoke about dinner parties. Both groups distinguished them from restaurant meals as well as from everyday eating. When asked to contrast dinner parties with restaurant meals, both cohorts associated the dinner party with social intimacy, freedom, and privacy. Both also said they prefer dinner parties to eating in restaurants, although they do appreciate not having to put in the labour when eating at a restaurant. The two cohorts also prefer dinner parties to everyday meals, associating the former with a heightened sense of anticipation, excitement, and anxiety. They agreed that the dinner party meal had to be cooked from scratch. Both said that dinner party meals involve more complex recipes, ingredients, and preparation than regular eating. At a dinner party, they said, eating unfolds over a longer period of time and is more sociable. Everyday meals were associated with speed, simplicity, and eating alone.

The Dinner Party Format

Both generations described a dinner party structure that contains elements of the Victorian dinner party described above, but reworked to suit modern lifestyles. As established by tradition, participants designated the table as the dinner party’s sacred site. One young woman, who lives in student accommodations and lacks a table, said she enjoys hosting dinner parties, but stressed that she has to make do by converting a coffee table to an eating surface. She expressed anxiety about her lack of table: “You really
can’t do it properly without a table.” A young couple said that their current table is too small to be appropriate for dinner parties. They, too, aspire to acquire what they called a “proper” table in the future. All participants categorized eating events away from the table as another kind of event—barbecues, cocktail parties, or buffets, for example.

No evidence in the interviews suggested that the specific places for the host, hostess, and guests of honour have endured. Today’s hosts prefer sitting close to the kitchen, not at the head of the table, and contemporary hosts of both generations indicated that they rarely dictate where guests sit. They stressed the importance of allowing people to seat themselves, because it makes guests feel more comfortable. More concern was shown for guests’ comfort and ease than for status marking. In fact, one respondent noted that his guests seem conscious that the head of the table was a place of honour and tend to be reluctant to occupy the position. “They never sit at the heads of the table,” he commented. “I’m not sure why. I have to invite them to.” While people spoke of liking some guests more than others, and several interviewees reported valuing guests who bring humour and erudition to the table, no one spoke of their guests in terms of relative status and importance. Guests were more often friends and acquaintances than bosses or dignitaries.

Both generations said their dinner parties move in the traditional pattern, from living room to kitchen or dining room. Many of the participants’ homes did not have formal dining rooms. No one spoke of a clear practice of the men retiring to the drawing room, leaving the women behind. Participants described men and women mixing at their dinner parties, which speaks of more equalized gender relations. The number of women who volunteered for the study provides some indication that women may continue to be the key organizers of dinner parties; however, all of the men interviewed expressed great pleasure in these occasions. Some discussions indicated that the women did not like relinquishing the organizational role. For example, one older woman said, “Since my husband retired, we now fight over who does the dinner party.” She expressed some concern that her husband was a better cook than she was and earned more praise from the guests. Men defined dinner parties as somewhat informal gatherings that focused less on conversation than on watching or playing games or media, while their female partners balked at these suggestions. Men also expressed considerable interest in cooking but none at all in dinner party décor.
Both generations decorate their tables with flowers and candles, in keeping with tradition, but they prefer simple centrepieces, describing them as “plain,” “garden-picked,” and “minimal.” In the busy dual-income Canadian household, there is no time for or interest in toiling over ivy and lilies. Both generations showed greater delight in collecting and displaying decorative tablecloths and napkins. People spoke about these items in a way that suggests a connection to fashion: the point, they insisted, is not to use an enduring and finely made tablecloth but to acquire many table linens, mixing and matching and changing them at each party.

Another way in which both generations coordinated their material objects, food, and activities was by using themes. Over half of the participants from both generations spoke of theming their parties. Ethnic and national themes emerged as the most popular, expressing an interest or experience with travel and cosmopolitanism. Time periods (medieval, the future, the Roaring Twenties) and seasonal themes were also common. According to the under-thirty group, these motifs make parties more fun and interactive. Those over forty added that a theme provides a useful organizational focus.

Both generations serve food in courses, almost always three: appetizer, a main course, and dessert. Along with reducing the number of courses, both groups also use fewer utensils, plates, and glasses than was once the case. Everyone preferred a “family style” service—placing food on the table in serving dishes, which are passed around by the guests. Loading individual plates in the kitchen, people said, is time consuming, and it keeps them away from their guests. Participants also believed that guests feel more comfortable when they are in control of the quantity and type of food on their plates. All participants ask people ahead of time whether they have any dietary restrictions: none assume that all people eat meat, wheat products, or dairy items.

All participants said that wine is a dinner party staple. The amount of time spent speaking about wine varied among interviewees, with some providing considerable detail and discussing varietals, taste, and wine regions. Most people, however, distinguished wine chiefly by colour and said they serve both red and white, to cater to people’s preference. Only a few spoke of wine as an integral flavour, a complement to the food. For example, one person said, “The lamb simply does not taste the same without a deep mouthy glass of red.” More commonly, wine was spoken of as
disconnected from food and as served with the expressed purpose of “getting drunk and happy.” Older participants tended to say, “We can’t drink as much as we used to.” The young expressed more sensitivity to cost, which did not prevent wine purchase but encouraged an interest in larger quantities of cheaper wine.

The Dinner Party as Social Gathering

Both generations said they derive positive feelings from dinner party experiences. Some spoke of pleasures related to expressing culinary and decorative creativity, but many identified the primary pleasure of the dinner party as being the act of gathering people around the table for prolonged social engagement. Food was often seen as secondary to socializing. “The food is just a way to get them to the table,” commented one under-thirty participant, while a member of the over-forty group said, “Food brings everyone together.” The most common advice that participants said they would pass along to a novice dinner party host was “Don’t get fussy about the food. The most important thing is to show your guests a good time” (as an under-thirty respondent put it). When asked how they knew that the dinner party had gone well, participants said, “when I can’t get people to leave the table,” “when it goes on into the night,” and “when you hear laughter and loud conversation.” The social interaction at the table was described by others in quasi-religious terms such as “fellowship,” “communion of the table,” and “magic.” Both generations stressed how the richness of social interaction makes the dinner party more pleasurable than everyday meals.

Participants all expressed a desire to create uninterrupted time with guests. Many complained about how home layouts prevent this. The Victorians who relied on servants set a custom of having a private dining room for entertaining. Today, according to the hosts I spoke with, open kitchen plans are unanimously preferred. Representations from both generations said they do not like their partitioned kitchen because it isolates them from their company. Contemporary hosts in addition to socializing with their guests, must prepare the dinner, and if the kitchen and dining room are separate rooms, those two activities can clash. One young woman vividly articulated her concern over working while others enjoyed themselves: “I hate being stuck alone in the kitchen away from everyone. It makes me feel like a kitchen slave.”
Participants reported spending considerable amounts of time preparing for these social events—from three hours to as much as two days. Most participants stressed that preparation allows them to be calm and present in front of guests and to stem the anxiety that accompanies taking responsibility for others. Those under thirty were particularly concerned about displeasing their guests. They invite a mix of people whom they feel will be compatible. They prepare by ensuring that the house is clean and allowing themselves time to shower and to dress suitably. The younger cohort spoke more about dressing up: the dinner party seems to offer them the opportunity to wear some of the fancier clothes in their closet or gives them an excuse to purchase new clothes. Those over forty were more likely to see dressing up as a problem, something that makes their guests feel uncomfortable.

MEDIA AND THE DINNER PARTY

The use of media at the contemporary dinner party signifies a significant departure from the Victorian dinner party. The generations differed most notably in their use and opinions of media as it relates to the dinner party. In general, participants police media use, frowning on activities such as television watching, texting, and video gaming since they tend to be disruptive to social interactions and face-to-face communication. However, there was evidence that genders diverged in their opinions of these media. Two male participants spoke of enjoying television viewing during dinner parties, while their female partners insisted that it is not proper to watch television during a dinner party. Board or card games are commonly played after dinner, but several of the female participants questioned the use of video games.

Not surprisingly, those under thirty spoke much more about the issue of texting at the dinner party table than did the older participants. The general consensus was that although texting is part of life, it is rude to do it at the table. Guests appear to understand this, for interviewees said that people prefer to talk instead of text. Still, one specified that she and her friends have set a no-texting rule because they too easily fall into the habit of using their phones. Guests place their cellphones on the stairs as they enter the eating area. She claimed that without phones, conversations deepen. Several young hosts said that they seek to balance their guests’
texting needs with their desire to engage in face-to-face interaction. Several felt that it is fine to text before sitting down at the table, to alleviate a worry or deal with an emergency.

Both age groups considered music appropriate during dinner parties. The music, sometimes matched to the evening’s theme, was generally organized by a male host, and some participants spoke about creating elaborate mixes that move the party through different stages. Those who mentioned using music stressed that it has to be well integrated and unobtrusive. One interviewee said that instrumental music or non-English lyrics allow people to attend to each other fully and without disruption.

According to the interviewees, media are necessary for extending dinner party invitations. No one reported mailing invitations through the post, although one young host did so once “just so people could remember what it was like in the olden days.” Those over forty invited guests by word of mouth, email, and phone, while those under thirty also sent invitations by texting and through Facebook. The younger cohort spoke of how helpful Facebook is for coordinating parties, describing their social circles as very busy and with different schedules. They mentioned that since they cannot rely on friends being available on the date selected, they use Facebook and Doodle to post their intent to hold a dinner party and then set the date based on how many can attend. Several noted that they have to send follow-up messages to stress that people must be serious about attending, because it is common for people to accept but not appear. These media also allow people to assemble without a great deal of advance planning.

Media are also widely used as reference points for recipes and, particularly for those under thirty, for cooking instruction. Many participants said they have cookbook libraries and enjoy reading cookbooks and receiving them as gifts. Several of the over-forty participants spoke fondly of local community cookbooks that they have contributed to or used. Still, overall, this sample suggests that magazines and the Internet are replacing cookbooks, perhaps owing to their low cost, variety, novelty, and currency in terms of culinary trends.

The media sources used by participants provide such a volume of diverse food information that, at least for these participants, the era of a regional or themed cuisine fashioned around a cookbook has come to a close. Yet the loyalty that these southern Ontario participants showed
toward a common set of Canadian magazines is noteworthy. Canadian publications dominated their choices and, in order of frequency of mention, included *Food and Wine* (offered free by the Liquor Control Board of Ontario), *Canadian Living*, and *Chatelaine*. Each of these publications is inflected with Canadian sensibilities. The interest in regional ingredients, cooking techniques, cooking “heroes,” and “iconic” dishes (which Elizabeth Baird, in this volume, argues shape Canadian cuisine) is reflected in the media that these forty-seven southern Ontarians employed for their dinner party menus.

Many watch television cooking shows, yet find the recipes and menus inappropriate for dinner parties. As one respondent put it, “I watch *Diners, Drives Ins and Dives*, but I’m not going to serve people those huge hamburgers.” Others described Food Network programming as entertaining but not useful for home cooking. The few who take inspiration from television shows pointed to the same two cooks, both of Italian heritage and described as presenting accessible recipes: Rachael Ray (from *30 Minute Meals*) and Stephano Faita (from *In the Kitchen with Stephano*).

Overall, those under thirty mentioned more extensive use of Internet resources. In addition to using recipe ratings to decide what to cook, they find information about cooking time and level of difficulty helpful. Many appreciate blogs, which they found “approachable”: “real people” make the dishes in their homes and break down the recipe into meaningful steps with images. Novice cooks showed a strong preference for new media over television programming as a guide for instruction. One young man discussed the inventive transmedia technique he employs to produce a dinner party menu. He begins by finding an image of a tasty-looking dish, noting that television, with its rich visualization of food, is useful at this stage. He then searches for the dish on the Internet, and, if possible, locates a related YouTube video, finding the how-to demonstrations helpful since they are visually clear and well explained and enable him to control the pace at which instruction is delivered: “I can move it backward if I need to see the step again. It works.”

The young cohort reported documenting their dinner parties to a much greater extent than the older group. Such acts of documentation represent another way in which media are integrated into the dinner party. Three of the over-forty participants showed their dinner party diaries or logs during the interview. Contained in photo albums, scrapbooks, or notebooks, some
diaries were carefully detailed, while others were a more random pile of notes and images. The party logs variously contained dinner party dates, names of guests, menus, recipes, pictures, and notes. Some said they keep the logs for practical reasons: “Look, at my age you tend to forget what you did as the years roll, so this is kind of a calendar.” Others said the diaries help them to avoid serving the same dish twice to the same people and to gather favourite recipes in one place.

Those over forty spoke less about taking pictures at their dinner parties. In contrast, almost all of those under thirty acknowledged the presence of cameras at dinner parties—not surprising, considering the widespread use of smart phones, especially in that generation. The younger cohort said that if they do not take pictures themselves, someone will. Those under 30 also said the images are posted on Facebook. These participants said that the images allow them to talk about the party further after it is over, something they find pleasurable. Younger hosts said they like it when people also post compliments about the food and express their enjoyment of the party. One woman said she downloaded the best images, printed them, made a collage, and pinned it to the wall of her entryway. Another interviewee frames snapshots from past dinner parties and uses them to decorate the table at a subsequent gathering. One participant tweets about a dinner party before and after the event. These media extend the life of a dinner party beyond the table and display it visually for a wider group.

CONCLUSION

This small-scale study suggests that the dinner party continues to occupy an important place in the social and emotional lives of Canadians. The eating occasions described by those I interviewed drew upon shared traditions, yet the emphasis has shifted. The sharp gender divisions of past dinner party practices have dulled, although gender scripts still animate dinner parties. In this small sample, women remain the primary directors of the performance. The more ritualized elements of dinner parties of the past have given way to a less rigid structure, founded in part on a concern for the comfort and enjoyment of individual guests. Participants described fewer and less elaborate centerpieces and a reduced use of tablecloths and complicated place settings, with the focus falling on the creation of a more relaxed physical environment. They also expressed a preference for using
contemporary table settings, rather than heirloom china and linens, suggesting an alignment with commodity fashion cycles. The diminishing role of inheritance and marriage rituals in which the objects of the table were central and bespoke the status of the family and its ancestors, may figure into the transformation of the objects at play. Status now rested on display novel, more so than time-honoured, pieces. The ability to shop well, keep up with fashion instead of displaying the patina of family wealth in a set of aging objects, came to the fore in a society predicated on consumption. Participants still felt that it was important to produce a meal that featured varied and “special” ingredients, yet the number of courses had been streamlined to accord with standards set by restaurant dining: appetizer, main course, and dessert. Perhaps, in the absence of servants, complexities of food preparation and presentation have simply become too much for busy hosts.

Finally, people described their serious commitment to using the dinner party to construct an unmediated space of togetherness and to the mindful preparation and consumption of food, things that are rare in their everyday lives. They value the opportunity for enhanced and prolonged face-to-face communication and convivial social interaction. They both integrate and censor media to support commensality. Although dinner parties continue to act as a means of social positioning, today they appear to serve more as an escape from a widespread sense of social fragmentation and the constant shortage of time, media-saturated environments, and the isolation of eating alone.

REFERENCES


