

CONTEMPLATES

DINNER PARTY TOOLKITS BY HELEN RUSSELL BROWN

COOK

CONNECT

CONTEMPLATE

COMFORT

CONTEMPLATES

Welcome to CONTEMPLATES.

Mood themed dinner parties to encourage connection, contemplation, and culinary curiosity.

Most of us sense that food is capable of altering our moods, not just our health. The right dish can uplift and inspire us, make us smile. Eating cannot directly solve our problems, but food has a marvellous way of reassuring us that good things do exist no matter how hectic the world outside seems.

The daily practice of eating is one that unites us all. In busy lives where self-care often falls to the wayside, mealtimes are reliable rhythms that provide opportunities for self-nurture. The act of cooking can feel like therapy, inspiring hope and taking us away from other worries. A few mindful adjustments to these daily habits is surely one of the easiest ways to add a little more kindness into our lives.

Food is a crucial source of gratitude, comfort, affection and optimism. Exploring how we might employ specific ingredients to trigger such emotions, Contemplates imagines character traits of modern day contentment as inspired by Aristotle's 12 virtues for the 'Good Person'. Each menu revolves around key ingredients chosen for their association with these traits. Think dark chocolate for self-care; lime for playfulness; pistachio for patience.

In a dream world we would tailor every meal to satisfy and soothe our souls. In reality, the occasional dinner party is the perfect vessel to lift our moods.

If food is the support act of a successful dinner party, then good company and stimulating conversation are the headliners. Contemplates conversation menus host the evening by providing questions to uplift, amuse, and spark connection. The company is yours to choose.

Many of the prompts in the conversation menu spark the recollection of happy memories. We spend so much time worrying about the future, looking for new experiences, the next thrill.

What if we designated time to evoke past adventures in order to lift our spirits? Using memory as a therapeutic tool, we can recall and recapture fond feelings that we already lived through. By honouring and celebrating our past triumphs in all their glory we can remind ourselves of the possibilities of life that still lay ahead. Not to mention providing an abundance of free entertainment for ourselves and our guests.

Knowing how to look after ourselves deserves to be counted as one of the great arts of life. Our dinner table is a great place to start.

Happy dining

Love to you and yours

HRB

HOW IT WORKS

In the following pages you will find recipes and a conversation menu to create your 3 course dinner party. Cook your way through the original plant-based recipes or use the key ingredients as a starting point for your own culinary experiments. The conversation menu includes themed questions to uplift, amuse, and spark connection.

Recipes are calculated for 4 diners, but are easily divisible 1 or 2 people, or make the full quantity and enjoy delicious leftovers for the week ahead. Each menu has been created for easy assembly—either made ahead of time and reheated or chilled as instructed or whipped up in mere minutes.

Solo dining

An opportunity to indulge in some self-nurture and cook a 3 course meal just for you. Set the scene for yourself. Tidy your space, lay the table, put on some music, light some candles, wear something that makes you feel great. Get your favourite pen and notepad ready and journal your way through the conversation menu.

Group dining and couples

Contemplates conversation menus work best in intimate groups to 2-4 to allow guests the chance to waffle and reflect at will.

Video call

Invite a friend you've lost touch with. Can you send them a care package with some of the key ingredients? Set the scene for yourself even though you're not actually hosting someone in your space. Make an effort and dress up for the occasion in a way that makes you feel good. Light some candles, lay the table, prep the menu ahead of time.

In person

Enjoy time together with guided conversation. Reconnect with housemates, parents, and partners. Make an effort to dress up for each other and set the scene with candles and music. Share the kitchen duties or treat others to an act of generosity.

cook . connect . contemplate

COMFORT

Comfort is a basic need that we all share. Physically and emotionally, we seek it in a multitude of situations; in times of failure, restlessness, heartbreak and despair, or simply on a particularly grey and dreary day.

The act of comforting more often than not involves others. We comfort and console friends, or look to those close to us for kindly words and reassurance. With it's wonderful ability to soothe and nourish, food is a nurturing way to practice self-comfort.

Eating cannot directly solve our problems, but when it is not only the problem itself that we confront, but the feelings of weakness and inadequacy in tackling it, the right dish can be transformational. It can fill our reserves, bolster our energy, provide sustenance and courage.

The right soothing or indulgent flavours can reassure us that everyday good things can exist no matter what is going on in the world outside.

KEY INGREDIENTS

MISO. REASSURANCE.

The opposite of panic is not blind hope and positivity. It is taking a deep breath, grounding oneself, and calmly carrying on knowing that we have the resources to handle whatever life throws at us. Miso brings with it a wonderful sense of reassurance and stillness. The poetic antithesis of stress, with its slow fermentation process steeped in generations of tradition, yet a nourishing broth can be ready to restore you in a matter of moments. There is a certain nod of wisdom in the complexity of the umami flavour, a grounding satiety through the hot salty broth. Supporting gut health and the assimilation of nutrients, miso is the perfect companion to soothe and reassure.

CINNAMON. NOSTALGIA.

Most of us are blessed with many happy memories. They flutter back to us when we return to childhood haunts; rush ecstatically into vision as we reminisce with old friends; fill our senses as we tuck into festive baking. We can generally define the moment of recall as prompted by our senses or a conversation; occurring only by chance. Recalling every jubilant moment of that hot and dusty road trip across Morocco, getting stuck in the mud at your first festival, or baking cinnamon buns with your grandmother. It feels so good to remember. Imagine if we practised intentionally drawing from this pool of fond memories simply to make ourselves feel better.

DARK CHOCOLATE. SELF-LOVE.

Some days we can't bear ourselves. We see our flaws and follies laid out before us, the inner demons come out, we beat ourselves up. In order to carry on with life, pick ourselves up, and celebrate our strengths, we must practice being kind to ourselves. Self-love is a muscle that needs to be consciously flexed. It is vital to our survival that we take charge of loving ourselves. From time to time we must allow a little self-afforded luxury and indulgence. In its simplest form of a slab of dark chocolate, possibly eaten under a duvet, and some self-assuring words on how unfair life can be and how brilliant we are in the face of everything.

COMFORT

STARTER. REASSURANCE



MISO BROTH.

Serves 4

4 heaped tbsp white miso paste

1 litre water

**A handful of spinach leaves or other seasonal greens cut into strips
(cavolo nero, kale)**

8 chestnut mushrooms, thinly sliced

1 tsp toasted sesame oil

2 tsp soy sauce (to taste)

2 tsp sesame seeds, toasted

Pinch chilli flakes (optional)

2 spring onions, thinly sliced

- Add the water to a saucepan and bring to a simmer
- Stir in the miso paste until dissolved, then add the leafy greens and cook until wilted and tender
- Add the mushrooms, oil, and soy sauce and simmer another 30 seconds or so
- Spoon into bowls and serve sprinkled with sesame seeds, chilli flakes and spring onion

COMFORT



CINNAMON SPICED SQUASH with TAHINI LIME DRESSING
+ BLACK RICE, TOMATO, AND ORANGE STEW
Serves 4

FOR THE BLACK RICE STEW

200g black rice (red or brown rice also work)
650g cherry tomatoes (or other sweet tomatoes), halved
300g onions, cut into bite-sized chunks
100g black olives, halved
4 garlic cloves, sliced
1/2 tangerine or clementine, quartered and thinly sliced
1 tbsp dried thyme
2 tsp smoked paprika
2 tsp cinnamon
1/2 tsp chilli flakes
3 tbsp good quality olive oil
2 tsp balsamic vinegar
Seeds as saved from squash (overleaf), or 75g almonds
Sea salt + freshly ground black pepper

- Preheat oven to 200C
- Put everything except the black rice and seeds or almonds into a large deep roasting tray, season and stir well.
- Roast for 40-50 minutes until sticky and luscious.
- Meanwhile cook the rice according to the packet instructions.
- Once the veggies are roasted, stir the cooked rice into the roasting tray, taste for seasoning.

COMFORT

FOR THE CINNAMON SQUASH

1 medium squash or pumpkin, about 500g, save and roast the seeds.

2 tbsp olive oil

1 tsp cinnamon

1 tsp mixed spice

Sea salt + freshly ground black pepper

1 lime

1 green chilli, thinly sliced

15g tahini

TO SERVE

Pomegranate seeds (save a few for the dessert)

Small bunch coriander, leaves only

- Cut the lime in half, juice one half and set aside.
- Remove the skin from the other half, quarter, and cut into thin slices. Place the slices in a bowl with the sliced green chilli, a little salt and 1/2 tbsp of the olive oil.
- Halve and deseed the squash, cut into 1cm thick slices, skin on.
- Arrange the slices on a lined baking tray.
- Mix the remaining oil and spices with a large pinch of salt, then brush or smear over the squash slices.
- Bake for 15-20 minutes until tender when pricked with a knife.
- Whisk the lime juice and tahini together with a little water until you have a runny dressing. Add salt to taste.

TO SERVE

Return the squash and stew to the oven to reheat when ready.

Serve by spooning out the stew and arranging the pumpkin slices on top drizzled with tahini dressing and scattered with lime slices, chilli, coriander leaves, pomegranate and roasted seeds.



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DESSERT. **SELF-LOVE**

BOOZEY DARK CHOCOLATE POTS

Serves 4

100g dark chocolate, minimum 70% cocoa solids

300g silken tofu

80g agave or maple syrup

Small pinch sea salt

Single espresso (approx 2 tbsp strong coffee)

2tsp dark rum, brandy or whiskey

TO SERVE

A few whole or flaked almonds, toasted

A few pomegranate seeds (saved from main, if using)

- Melt the chocolate in a heat proof bowl over a pan of simmering water
- Add the rest of the ingredients to a large jar or jug and blend until smooth using a stick blender.
- Spoon into ramekins or glasses and set in fridge for at least 1 hour.
- If using whole almonds, chop them into shards. Sprinkle almonds and pomegranate seeds to serve.



COMFORT

CONVERSATION MENU

There are no rules, no wrong or right answers.
Elaborate, waffle and meander to your heart's content.

Starter

REASSURANCE. Miso.

- + Talk about 3 people who reassure, nourish; and encourage you.
- + What was your favourite comfort food when you were a child?
- + What is your favourite rainy day activity?

Why not call those 3 people, make that childhood meal for yourself, do your favourite rainy day comfort this week.

Main

NOSTALGIA. Cinnamon.

- + Who was your childhood best friend? What did you get up to?
- + Talk about your earliest happy memories of being in nature; at the beach, camping in the fores. Describe as much sensory detail as possible.
- + Talk about your favourite teenage summer memories.

Can you reach out to that childhood friend and make a plan to visit any of those landscapes?

Dessert

SELF-LOVE. Dark chocolate

- + Talk about one of your proudest life achievements so far.
- + List 5 simple pleasures that bring you joy.
- + Name three things that you love about yourself.

Include those 5 simple pleasures in your next week.

COMFORT