

# CONTEMPLATES

DINNER PARTY TOOLKITS BY HELEN RUSSELL BROWN

COOK

CONNECT

CONTEMPLATE

**HUMOUR**

# 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

## HUMOUR

It's all too easy to meet the trying tribulations of everyday life with a less than sunny disposition. The cat leaving a present in our favourite shoe; being soaked in muddy puddle water by a passing lorry; a trip to A&E caused by a rogue avocado. Being able to find the funny and ridiculous in our own misfortune is one of the best coping mechanisms we have. We all know laughing is good for us. Cackling our way through mishaps keeps us going in the darkest of times. A good howl can lower stress levels, anxiety, and anger. Not to mention the rushes of endorphins catapulting our energy levels and sense of hope.

Humour makes us more emotionally flexible, able to bend rather than break in adverse situations. We can even think of it as a kind of emotional filter, preventing negativity from entering our minds during trying times, allowing creativity and productivity to flourish instead.

As well as lifting our spirits and self-esteem, humour is an incredible tool for connection. Having a giggle with pals or a smirk with a stranger while admiring greetings cards in the post office queue- these are delicious moments of human connection. Breaking tension, putting others at ease, finding common ground. Comedy is a universal language allowing us to delight in the ridiculousness of the human condition.

When it comes to our edible escapades, we shouldn't take ourselves too seriously either. Rather than get hot and bothered in the kitchen making perfect hollandaise or immaculate macarons, we should be having fun. This is your invitation to let go of glossy ideals of pristine plates and iconic instagram feeds. Splatter and splash sauces; use your hands as salad servers; lick the bowl. Experiment, get messy, enjoy yourself!

We are often told by others where and when we can play- football on the football pitch, sandcastles in the sandpit - but play should be about breaking the rules, experimenting. The kitchen is a great place to start.

# KEY INGREDIENTS

## LIME. PLAYFULNESS.

When we think of play we often think of childhood. Messing around in the playground, making mud pies, hosting tea parties with the neighbour's dog. Meandering afternoons reaching heights of gleeful giddy joy. Play is free, play has no rules. In adult lives so punctuated by achieving goals and ticking boxes, play can feel aimless and scary. It means taking risks, and therefore potential failure. So we avoid it. But by allowing ourselves permission to play we can connect not only to our inner child, but to others. We can drop the pretenses of adulthood and, just for a moment, fly free from the responsibilities it bestows upon us. A childlike state connects us to a time when we were loved just for existing, when we were good enough just the way we were. Lime, like play, doesn't often take centre stage even though it can uplift and amuse. The playful and zesty cousin of lemon, lime is the slightly more nuanced of the citrusy duo. Not as widely appropriate for every occasion, but pair it with the right ingredients - tangy margaritas, zingy salsa, spicy Asian broths - it can stimulate the palate towards humour and jest.

## CAPERS. CYNICISM.

A dry and salty wit is one of the best antidotes to life. The humorous friend who sees the world through discerning, cynical eyes, is one you treasure fondly. Cynicism allows us to keep a distance from things, hold life at arms length and examine it carefully rather than rushing in blindly. There is an observational realism to cynicism. It cuts through the fluffy and glossy ideals of modern life and instead brings a kind of wry wit that dissolves the saccharin. On its own, cynicism cannot transform our lives for the better. The pure cynic is unpleasant. Similarly, a mouthful of capers would offend the most amenable of guests, but dotted among a concoction of other ingredients the little bursts of sharp saltiness add delicious punctuation. Just like cynicism, cutting through sweetness with a blunt tang to make us wince and smile.

## HUMOUR

# KEY INGREDIENTS

## INTELLIGENCE. CARDAMOM

Intelligence, fittingly, requires rather a lot of thought to define. Subjective and personal, pinpointing a definition can be cause for a tension headache. At base level, intelligence is an understanding or insight into something; more complex than common sense but requiring less life experience than wisdom. Fixing a computer problem, guiding a troubled friend, or rescuing a ruined cake, intelligence is the ability to acquire and apply information to a specific context. Academia, logic, emotional maturity, creativity, and critical thinking, are some of the ways we recognise this.

Observational comedy is a shining example of intelligence applied to humour. It takes a sharp mind and clever wit to digest and reflect the curious nature of humanity. The successful comedian examines and exposes seemingly mundane but often poignant details of our everyday lives, twisting them with an elegant satire; a level of intellect that is both detailed and charming.

When it comes to food, we all feel the effects that food and drink can have on our cognitive abilities. We actively seek to suppress or stimulate our minds with caffeine, alcohol, and sugar to name but a few. Cardamom has long been heralded for its stimulating effects on the mind, specifically linked by ayurvedic medicine to transcendental thinking (along with lavender, turmeric, and cinnamon). These zesty pods infuse a clarifying and uplifting flavour, perfect for being switched on and tuned in to whatever the mental task is at hand.

## HUMOUR

# STARTER. **PLAYFULNESS**

WHITE BEAN & LIME DIP, PICO DE GALLO, HOMEMADE CHIPS

Serves 4

## **LIME DIP**

**400G cooked white beans**

**Zest of 2 limes, juice of 1**

**1 tbsp good quality olive oil**

**1 tsp ground cumin**

**Pinch sea salt**

## **PICO DE GALLO**

**2 tomatoes, finely diced**

**1/4 red onion, very finely diced**

**Juice 1/2 lime**

**Salt**

**Small bunch coriander, leaves only**

- + Blend hummus until super creamy using a stick blender, adding a little water if needed until super smooth and spreadable. Season to taste.
- + Combine pico de gallo ingredients in a small bowl
- + Layer into a serving bowl and serve drizzled with olive oil.

## **TORTILLA CHIPS**

**4 corn tortillas**

**Olive oil**

**Smoked paprika**

**Salt**

- + Preheat the oven to 180C
- + Brush the tortillas with olive oil and sprinkle a little paprika and salt
- + Bake 10-12 minutes until golden



**HUMOUR**



**AUBERGINE CAPONATA**

Serves 4

**1 Large aubergine, 2cm dice**

**1 Large courgette, 2cm dice**

**1 tbsp dried oregano**

**Olive oil**

**1 Large red onion, sliced**

**1 small carrot, very finely diced**

**Pinch chilli flakes**

**150g ripe tomatoes**

**40g capers**

**40g raisins**

**1tbsp raw cane sugar**

**300ml passata**

**2-3 tbsp balsamic vinegar**

**TO SERVE**

**40g pine nuts or flaked almonds, toasted**

**Parsley**

**Crusty bread**

- + Preheat oven 200C
- + Roast aubergine and courgette tossed in olive oil, salt, and oregano 15-20 mins until soft and golden
- + Fry onion and carrots with a pinch of salt until softened, then add the tomatoes, capers, chilli, raisins, passata, vinegar and sugar. Bring to the boil for 10 mins before adding the aubergine and tomato. Simmer 30 mins.

**HUMOUR**

# DESSERT. INTELLIGENCE

## CARDAMOM AND ORANGE PANNA COTTA

Serves 4

**400ml Full fat coconut milk**

**3 tbsp cornflour**

**2 tbsp raw cane sugar**

**Zest 1/2 orange**

**1 tsp ground cardamom**

**50ml plant-based milk**

**Small pinch salt**

**TO SERVE**

**Chopped pistachios**

**Slices of orange**

- + Heat the coconut milk and sugar in a saucepan over medium heat.
- + Mix the cornflour and milk in a separate bowl until smooth, then whisk into the coconut milk with the orange zest, cardamom, and salt.
- + Whisk on medium heat until the mixture is a thick custard consistency but can still be poured.
- + Pour into individual glasses. Leave to set in the fridge for at least 1 hour or overnight.
- + Serve topped with slices of orange and sprinkled with pistachios.



**HUMOUR**

# CONVERSATION MENU

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

## Starter

### **PLAYFULNESS.** Lime.

- + How would you describe your sense of play?
- + Talk about some of your favourite comedians and their style.
- + What was your favourite game as a child?

## Main

### **CYNICISM.** Capers

- + What would you do if you knew you could not fail?
- + Talk about the time that you assumed the worst about someone but were wrong
- + What's your favourite thing to be cynical about

## Dessert

### **INTELLIGENCE.** Cardamom

- + If you had to run a workshop, what would you teach?
- + What does intelligence mean to you?
- + If you had the chance to study again, what subject would you choose?

# STARTER. **PLAYFULNESS**

WHITE BEAN & LIME HUMMUS, PICO DE GALLO, HOMEMADE CHIPS

Serves 4

## **LIME HUMMUS**

**400G cooked white beans**

**Zest of 2 limes, juice of 1**

**1 tbsp good quality olive oil**

**1 tsp ground cumin**

**Pinch sea salt**

## **PICO DE GALLO**

**2 tomatoes, finely diced**

**1/4 red onion, very finely diced**

**Juice 1/2 lime**

**Salt**

**Small bunch coriander, leaves only**

- + Blend hummus until super creamy using a stick blender, adding a little water if needed until super smooth and spreadable. Season to taste.
- + Combine pico de gallo ingredients in a small bowl
- + Layer into a serving bowl and serve drizzled with olive oil.

## **TORTILLA CHIPS**

**4 corn tortillas**

**Olive oil**

**Smoked paprika**

**Salt**

- + Preheat the oven to 180C
- + Brush the tortillas with olive oil and sprinkle a little paprika and salt
- + Bake 10-12 minutes until golden



**HUMOUR**