



## **The Tio Pepe *Eating-In* Study**

**Conducted by the Social Issues Research Centre**

**September 2006**

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# 1 Introduction

There have been several gloomy reports over the past few years which claim that a fundamentally important aspect of our lives and culture – the convivial business of eating and drinking together with friends at home – is disappearing. It is an element of that broader prognosis, fuelled by self-appointed experts and social commentators, that society itself is falling apart and with it the ‘good old’ traditions of British life that we used to treasure so dearly.

‘Death of the dinner party’, trumpeted the *Observer* in 2000. “The middle class has had a bellyful of the Saturday night ritual that turned into social terror” wrote Kathryn Hughes, claiming, without much in the way of evidence, that “The dinner party qua dinner party is stone cold dead, suffocated by its formality and pretension. Sometime around 1997 people stopped enjoying the palaver of playing restaurants in their own home.”

Like many, perhaps ‘wrong’, analysis of British social mores, this one continues to pop up in newspapers and magazines at regular intervals. In March of this year, for example, Datamonitor released the news that the ‘Culture of eating out signs death of the home meal’. But while they suggested that the *family* meal was more likely to be eaten in a restaurant, pub or fast-food outlet, they had little to say about home entertaining – about which we continue to receive so much advice in the glossy magazines and colour supplements.

This was left to the *Independent* a couple of months later in their report of a study conducted at Manchester University: ‘Chattering classes have conversation to go as eating out replaces home dinner parties’. Here, we had surely the final nail in the coffin – a piece of research drawing on the government’s Time Use Survey which looks at, as the title suggests, how people divide their time between various activities.

Never mind that the most recent Time Use survey was conducted six years ago, the report on which the pundits of gloom seized was not all that it seemed. The idea that the dinner party is dead was based on the finding that between 1975 and 2000, the time spent entertaining and visiting others in their homes had fallen, on average, by 5 minutes per day. They also noted that the decline was slightly higher for the ‘educated’ classes. The authors concluded: “This provides circumstantial evidence of the decline of the middle class dinner party and ... that middle class sociable dining has shifted from the private to the public sphere – or from homes to restaurants.”

It is certainly the case that we eat out now a lot more frequently than we did thirty years ago. In Britain we are now Europe’s second biggest spenders on meals eaten outside of the home, just behind Italy but ahead of even France. We each spend, on average, £1,224 in this way per year and increasingly we dine out with friends and colleagues as well as family members. But does this mean that the reciprocal cycle of inviting friends to dinner at home, and in turn dining with them in their homes, has been broken? Has the nouveau chic brasserie or bistro, spawned in the wake of a distinct cultural shift in British food tastes and the ubiquity of restaurant review columns in just about every national and regional newspaper, replaced the homely setting of the kitchen or dining room as the location for social bonding and what anthropologists call *commensality* – the timeless, cultural ritual of food sharing –

‘com’, together; ‘mensa’, table? Or does the dinner party still live on, reflecting the fact that we are simply finding additional, rather than replacement, opportunities for sociability?

Our approach at the Social Issues Research Centre is generally to distrust the conclusions of pundits and social forecasters, especially in the absence of incontrovertible data to support their views. Instead, we talk to people about what they are doing and what has or has not changed, and we listen to them carefully. We consult the data that stems from regular government surveys and commercial monitoring services. We also frequently commission our own polls to put this material into a proper national perspective. This gives us, we claim, a rather more solid basis for the conclusions that we draw.

There is also one other very useful indicator of trends in lifestyles – the magazines that purport to tell us what we should be wearing, what are the colours we should be using to decorate our homes and what is the most appropriate starter for a ‘modern’ dinner party with friends, together with the type of napkins to use and the shape of plates that we should put in front of our guests. There is no shortage of these sources of ‘cultural wisdom’ and when Tio Pepe approached us to undertake a study for them about changes in dining habits over the years, this is where we started – by poring over copies of *Good Housekeeping*, *Tatler*, *Woman’s Realm* and the like dating back to 1970, all fortunately preserved in the underground stacks of the Bodleian library here in Oxford.

With some ideas in our heads about the past and the changes that had occurred, we hosted two focus groups – with suitable drinks and snacks of course – to explore the dining and entertaining habits of a carefully chosen mix of people. The sessions illustrated clearly the amount of importance that most people attach to the social giving and sharing of food – whether it be a simple pot of stew placed in the middle of a pine kitchen table or a culinary *tour de force* compiled using the latest glossy cookery book by the currently trendiest TV superchef. The idea that the dinner party was dead did not ring true at all in these discussions – it was just that they didn’t call them ‘dinner parties’ any more. The occasion was a ‘meal’, or people coming round for ‘something to eat’ – exactly the same as before but with a less formal or, for some, less pretentious, appellation.

The final stage of our research was to commission a poll from IMRS using a sample of 2,000 respondents between the ages of 25 and 65. To what extent were the reports of behaviour and the sentiments expressed in our convivial and sometimes quite passionate focus groups representative of the population as a whole? Together, these methods all triangulate to give us an accurate picture of what is really happening to home entertaining – what things have changed and what have stayed the same. You may be pleasantly surprised.

## 2 The main study

**"There is no culture that promotes solitary eating. Food is an extremely valuable social instrument for humans because it promotes social interaction." (Paul Rozin)<sup>1</sup>**

The business intelligence company Datamonitor has estimated that more than 313 million dinner parties or similar soirées are held in Britain every year – only the Germans and the Italians, it seems, entertain their friends at home more frequently. The huge success of cookery books and home entertainment guides by celebrities such as Nigella Lawson, Jamie Oliver and others reflects this trend. Such books have also provided people with increased confidence to try their hand at being amateur chefs and hosts, thus accelerating the home-cooked dinner party phenomenon to new heights.

The impact of all of this is experienced by the nation's supermarkets. While sales of ready meals have soared over the past two decades, they tend to be mid-week purchases – for families, couples or singletons leading busy lives and needing something quick and tasty when they get home from work. At weekends, however, it is the ingredients for 'proper' meals that fly off the supermarket shelves – the components that will, in many cases, form the basis for an eating-with-friends occasion ranging from a simple stew to elaborate, colour supplement style, four-course meals. Some supermarkets, recognising this pattern, now provide guides to how much of each ingredient we need to purchase. ASDA, for example, tell us that we need two packs of their 'Extra Special' rocket salad to serve with eight portions of cherry tomato and mascarpone tart.

In the way that we now view mascarpone as a perfectly 'normal' ingredient, to be found in the cheese rather than cream chill cabinet, we also expect our supermarket shelves to provide the most appropriate drinks to go with these new-found tastes. Where once we would have been content with a box containing a plastic bag full of only semi-drinkable white wine, we now expect to find that particular Sicilian red so recommended last week by one of the wine buffs in the Sunday papers.

But what lies behind this modern flurry of culinary ambition and the continuing desire to share it with our friends? Is it just the chattering classes who are committed to the 'domestic goddess' or 'new man' chef roles, or is dining at home with friends a much more widespread and classless phenomenon? How often do we entertain our friends in this way, and for what motives? What do we call these occasions. Are we doing it more or less often than in the past?

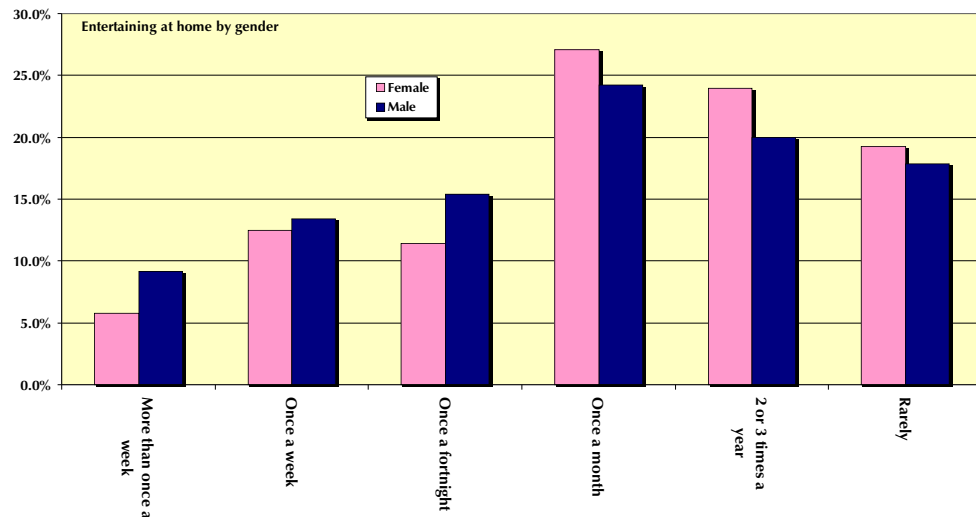
The core of the Tio Pepe *Eating-In* project was designed to answer just these questions. The main study consisted of focus groups, with additional face-to-face interviews, from which we developed questions for a national poll conducted by IMRS. These in-depth, real-life experiences, together with the national poll responses, are summarised below.

1 Rozin, P. (1996) Sociocultural Influences on Human Food Selection. In: E. Capaldi (ed.) *Why we eat what we eat*. Washington D.C. American Psychological Association).

2.1 How often do we have friends round for a meal at home?

Figure 2-1 below shows the frequency of entertaining friends at home for both men and women. On average, it seems, we are most likely to arrange such occasions on a monthly basis. We can also see that men tend to have people round for a meal slightly more often than do women – they are comparatively over-represented in the more frequent categories.

Figure 2-1 Frequency of entertaining at home by gender



In many cases, of course, both men and women are parts of couple, so the differences must be explained by the fact that single men are rather more sociable in this sense than single women. This was very much borne out in our focus group discussions and some participants suggested that the 'new' man in this context had been influenced by 'role model' chefs:

*"I think Jamie Oliver and people like that have also taken a lot of the myth out of that kind of cooking, you might of thought it was really complicated. Seeing Jamie Oliver or Rick Stein or whatever knock it up in five minutes and it's got five things in it and you think well actually I could do that."*

This is not to say, however, that single women are reluctant to cook for their friends. They may do it slightly less often, but they see it has having the same social value.

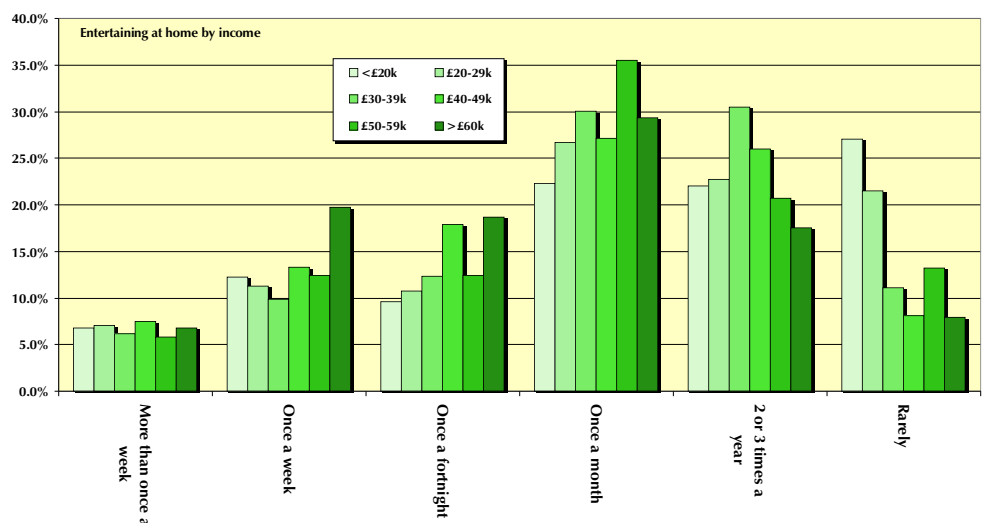
*"I think it's nice to do something nice for your friends, you know if they don't have to cook and they come round and they have a nice evening and some treats and things like that and you share a nice experience with them, and showing them how much you appreciate them."*

*"It is an effort cooking but it's also a giving thing as well and that element of saying to your friend, you know I don't know what it is, but it's that subliminal thing of doing something for your friends as well."*

Those women who were single parents were more likely than any other group to have friends round once a week, perhaps solving the babysitting problem involved in eating out or at other people's homes.

The frequency of entertaining at home was fairly even across the age ranges but the youngest group (25-34) hosted dinner parties (or what ever equivalent term they used to describe them) slightly more often than those in the 35-44 and 45-65 age groups. The biggest differences, however, were in terms of income level, as shown in Figure 2-2 below.

Figure 2-2 Frequency of entertaining at home by income level



We can see from Figure 2-2 that the highest earners are over-represented in the 'once a week' and 'once a fortnight' categories of holding dinner parties and under represented in the less frequent categories. Having money, it seems, dictates how sociable, in these terms, we can afford to be.

*"I have people round for dinner very rarely at the moment actually, one because I'm skint..."*

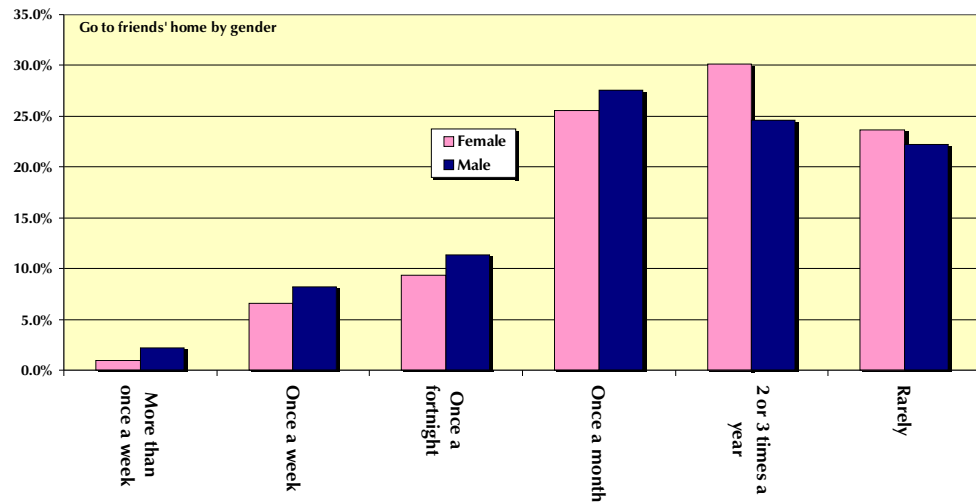
- 2.2 How often are we invited to friends for a meal? Because of the reciprocal nature of dinner parties, we tend to eat in our friends' homes as much as we do with them in our own. The pattern shown in Figure 2-3 is not, therefore, dissimilar to that in Figure 2-1. Men, again, seem to be socialising in this way slightly more than women, but the differences are small.

The real difference, however, is that while we think we have friends round to eat about once a month, we tend to remember going to their homes only two or three times a year – the largest categories in the two cases.

Could this be just forgetfulness? Or could it be that we like to stress our own sociability rather than that of friends? Or is just the sheer effort of preparing meals that we remember most – something that is absent from the equation when we are the guest rather than the host? It was certainly the case in the focus groups that most people talked about meals that they had prepared, rather than those that had enjoyed (or not) in other people's homes. The joy of giving, rather than receiving,

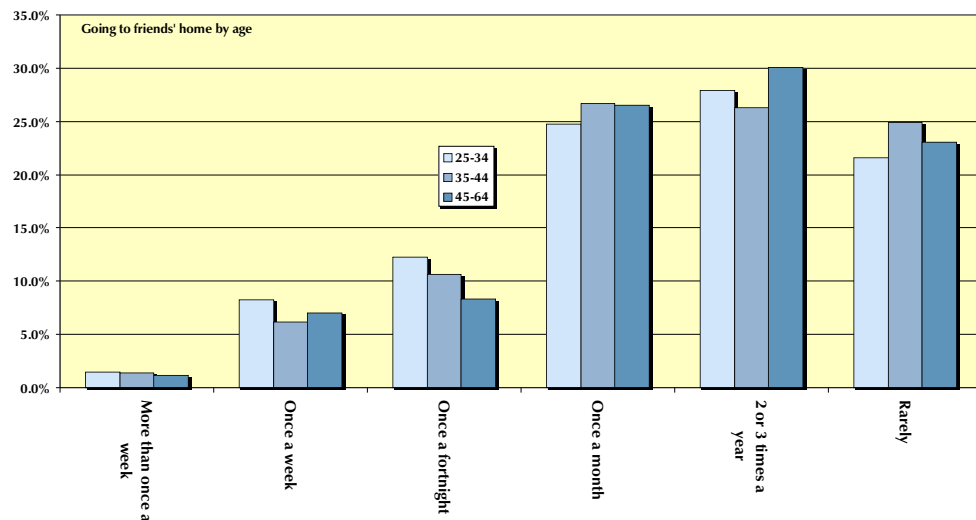
seems to be the most important factor in this context, and therefore more memorable.

Figure 2-3 Frequency of eating with friends in their home by gender



People in the older groups tend to be the most prone to report acting as hosts with about the same frequency as younger people, but they say that they are entertained by friends rather less often. They are under-represented in the most frequent categories shown in Figure 2-4.

Figure 2-4 Frequency of eating with friends in their home by age

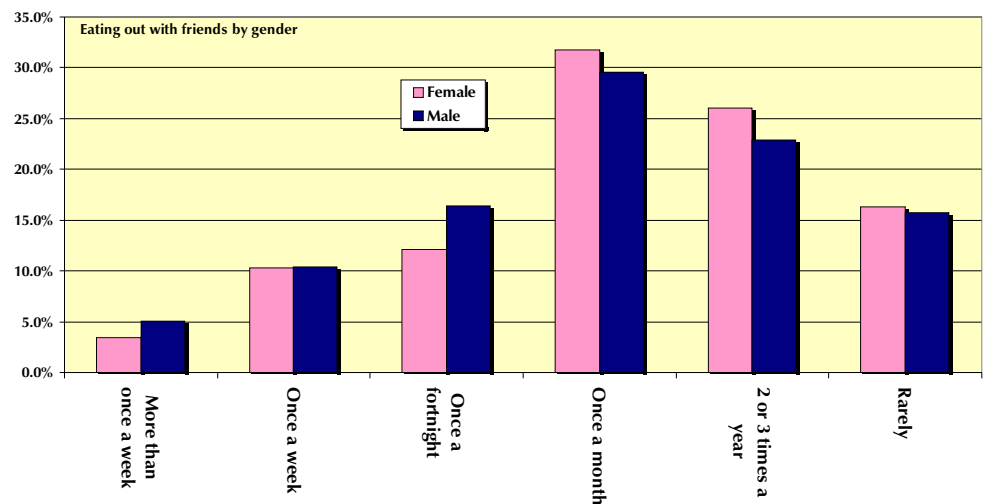


Level of income, however, is a factor in how often we are invited out as much as it is in the frequency with which we entertain ourselves. Those with the highest salaries eat at friends homes significantly more often than those on the lowest wages. This is not to say, though, that eating with friends at home is purely a middle-class pursuit, as the stereotypes would often lead us to believe. A quarter of all those on salaries of less than £30,000 per year still entertained at home, and were entertained by others in this way, on a monthly basis.



- 2.3 How often do we eat out in restaurants with friends? The frequency of eating out with friends in restaurants is shown in Figure 2-5 below. Here we can see that this is typically a once-a-month activity with men doing so slightly more frequently than women. About 10% of both men and women, however, dine out with friends every week. Although the distribution of responses to this question was slightly different from that shown in Figure 2-1 above relating to dinner parties at home, the average frequency of eating with friends in our homes and in restaurants is almost exactly the same – 58-59% on a monthly or more frequent basis.

Figure 2-5 Frequency of eating out with friends in restaurants by gender



In our focus groups, some participants said that they preferred the restaurant to the home in this context. One said:

*"Definitely eat out more than in, it's just simpler you can suddenly have a couple of extra people at the last minute because there's no preparation and it's more of a kind of trip out and event and less stress."*

In contrast, another participant commented:

*"Definitely at home far more often. It's less expensive, less stressful, there's more time to spend with your friends."*

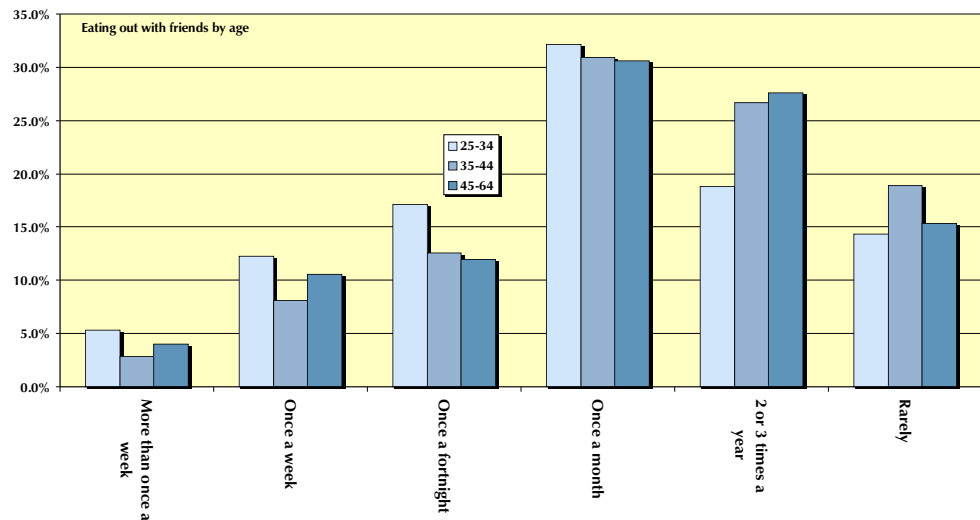
This was the more dominant view, with others emphasising the more intimate nature of the home dinner party, the lower levels of formality and, in some cases, the higher quality of food.

*"I love going out to restaurants but what I often find in I'm underwhelmed by what you get ... it's often a very expensive thing and the food on offer is not very good and you think why have I spent fifty pounds on a meal that's pretty rubbish when for a ten pound bottle of wine and ten pounds of ingredients I could have made something really, really nice which would have been a lot better? It's*

*this constant feeling that this food is just not good enough to warrant the occasion or the money."*

While the frequency of having friends round for a meal at home is virtually the same across all age groups, this is not the case for eating out. Figure 2-6 shows that younger people are eating out with friends significantly more often than those in the older categories.

Figure 2-6 Frequency of eating out with friends in restaurants by age



We can see from Figure 2-6 that those in the 26-34 age group are more likely to be in the most frequent groups of once a fortnight or more often than those in their forties or fifties. This may, however, be something to do with having children as much as with modern trends. Starting a family now occurs later in life than it did in the past – mid thirties is not uncommon. People with children are much less likely to dine out with friends in restaurants on a frequent basis and they are most likely to be over the age of 34.

**2.4 Who cooks?** In our focus groups and interviews we found, as we expected, that men are increasingly involved in preparing meals for dinner parties and the like.

*"In fact my husband does a lot of cooking and what's happened over the years is that I used to be the one who was the main cook, but as we've had children we've had this sort of deal that I put the kids to bed and he cooks, so it works really well."*

*"My ex husband, who is about 55 or something, he always liked to do the cooking. He would cook all sorts of elaborate things that I just wouldn't be bothered with because, you know, they don't think about all the pans and pots."*

In many cases, though, it was clear that the workload was shared between partners:

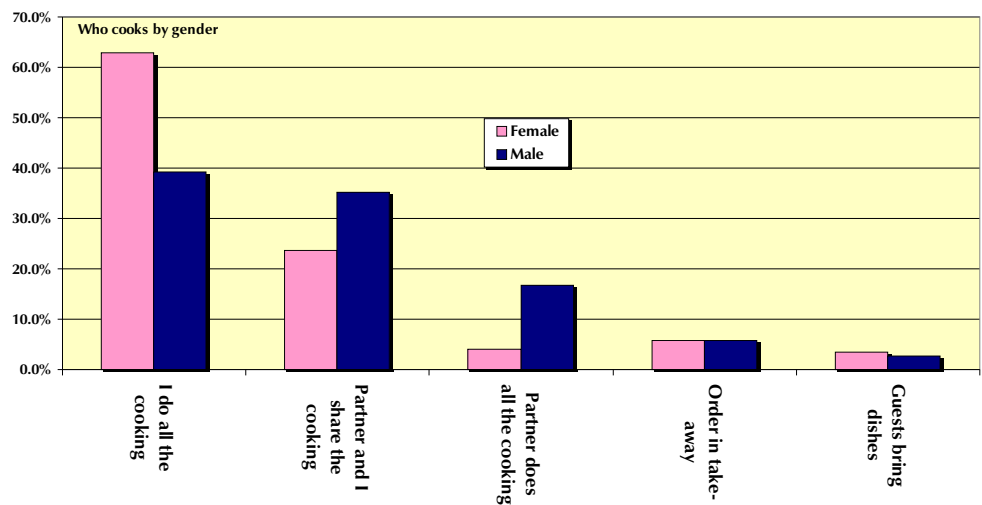
*"I think my girlfriend would have lots of input, I'd get plenty of the work to do, probably fish or a pasta dish."*

There is, however, a universal tendency for men to exaggerate the amount of 'chores' that they actually undertake in the home, and there were some indications of this in the focus groups. Even when men do their fair share of the cooking, especially when preparing meals for friends, many women thought that this could be a mixed blessing.

*"If my partner cooks, which he does more than me actually ... he will leave even his onion choppings, there'll be mushrooms on the floor, there'll be mince over the cooker, you know it'll be trashed. So he'll cook and I just sort of go round cleaning up after him and washing up."*

It was the poll data, however, that gave us a true picture of what really happens in the home when guests come for a meal. We can see from Figure 2-7 that, as we expected, women do considerably more of the home entertainment cooking than men – 63% are the sole cook, compared with 38% of men. It is the category 'Partner and I share the cooking' that is the most interesting. Thirty five percent of men think that they share in the cooking, but only 24% of women think that this is the case. The notion of 'sharing' in this context is clearly different for the two sexes.

Figure 2-7 Who cooks for friends by gender



- 2.5 **Why do we have friends round for a meal?** The focus group participants had a lot to say about the motives for having dinner parties. Many stressed the 'treating' aspect – being able to give something to your friends and, in return, enjoy their company and the social interaction with them. These are the aspects stressed by anthropologists who argue that eating together (commensality) is an essential feature of all known human societies and serves to reinforce specific patterns of social bonding. We do not share food with our enemies.

There is also a big difference between a dinner party and a drinks party in this sense. As one of the *grande dames* of anthropology, Mary Douglas, has noted:

*"Those we know at meals we also know at drinks. The meal expresses close friendship. Those we only know at drinks we know less intimately. So long as this boundary matters to us ... the boundary between drink and meals has meaning ... Friends who have never had a hot meal in our home have presumably another threshold of intimacy to cross"<sup>2</sup>*

Our participants put forward this sentiment in a less academic, but equally cogent manner:

*"I think it's nice to do something nice for your friends, you know if they don't have to cook and they come round and they have a nice evening and some treats and things like that and you share a nice experience with them, and showing them how much you appreciate them."*

*"It's kind of a bonding I suppose isn't it really with the people that you get on well with."*

Others in the groups stressed the informality of eating with friends at home, rather than going out to a restaurant with them.

*"It's a slightly more informal setting than going out to dinner where all of a sudden the plates are cleared away and you've got to go. When you're at home you can stay as long as you like, you can listen to music, you can move off somewhere else after you've eaten, you can extend the evening if you want to."*

The poll results reflected much of what was said in the focus groups and interviews. We can see from Figure 2-8 below that both men and women viewed the relaxed aspect of home dinner parties, as opposed to restaurant meals, as the major motive for inviting friends for a meal. They also noted that dinner parties were most often an opportunity to celebrate special occasions, such as birthdays or anniversaries of one kind or another.

Apart from these practical or 'occasional' issues, however, the 'treating' and 'bonding' functions of meals with friends at home were very evident. The opportunity for social bonding was seen as being particularly important by the youngest age group – 25-34. Older people, with perhaps more established social networks, emphasised the relaxation and the 'love of cooking' aspect that also featured prominently in the focus groups.

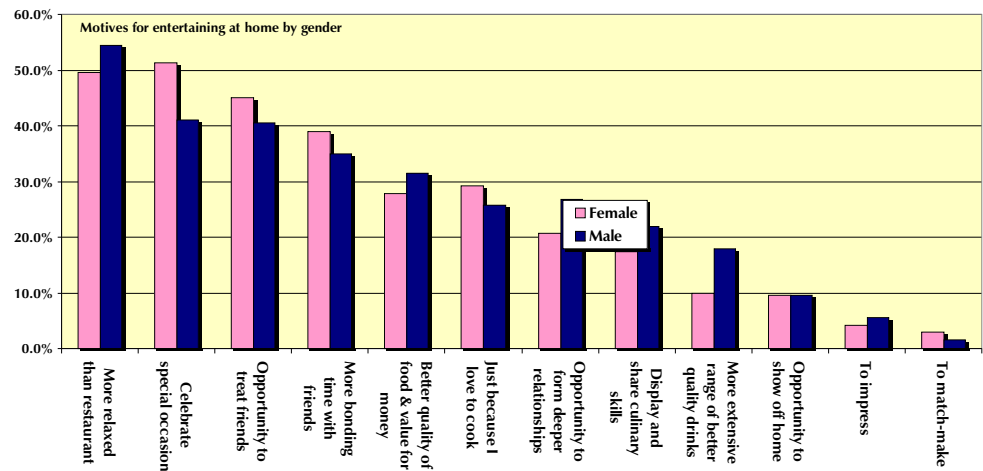
*"I love to cook, but I'm also a parent so I don't spend that much time in the week on it. That's why it's nice to sometimes have people come round for supper or a meal ... so that I can get to cook."*

In the poll, nearly 30% of women and over a quarter of men also felt that it presented an opportunity for them to engage in a creative and enjoyable process of preparing food. For some, and men in particular, there was also the opportunity for

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2 Douglas, M. (1972) Deciphering a Meal. *Daedalus*, 101 (1) 61-81

Figure 2-8 Motives for entertaining friends at home by gender



a bit of showing off – over 20% of men said that they were motivated to invite people to dinner in order to 'display and share their culinary skills'.

*"I think the last time I had a dinner party was about a week ago with a couple of my close friends. I enjoy having such a party because I enjoy cooking and I suppose in some sort of way it's a chance of showing off and having private time with the people who you like and get on well with."*

The ability to provide a more extensive range of better quality drinks was seen, particularly by men and by those in the higher income brackets, as a further reason for entertaining at home rather than in a restaurant.

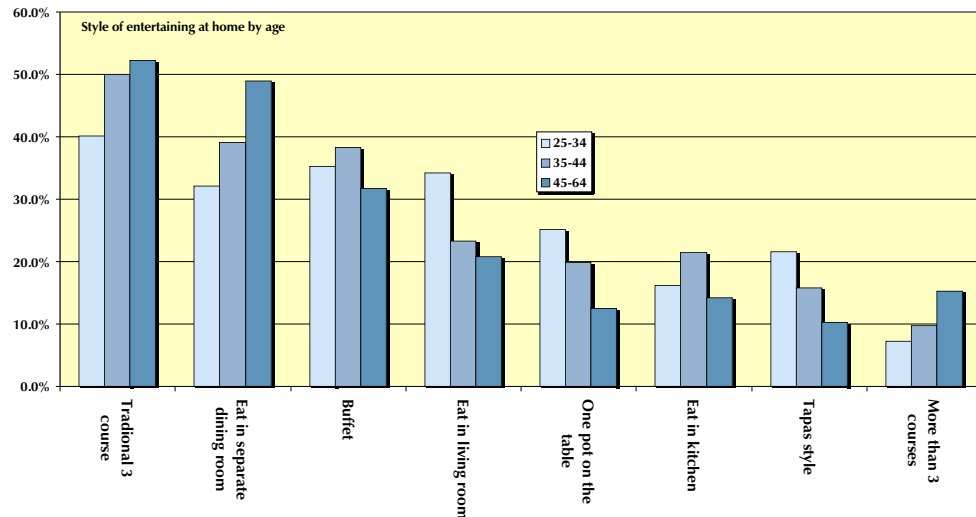
**2.6 How do we eat with friends?** From the focus groups it was clear that the style of dinner parties varied considerably. For some it was a matter of a properly laid table in a separate dining room, with napkins, cutlery and plates reserved for special occasions. At the other end of the scale, hosts and guests would sit in the living room and help themselves to food from dishes and pots. The type of food served also varied very much with the setting in which it was consumed:

*"My dinner service is mismatching and my tables scratched and my music collection is shit and you're sitting there and you don't want to put them through a filo parcel of this and of this and then pigeon breast, you just want one pot, dip in, loads of bottles of wine on the table. That reflects me as an entertainer or as a person that invites people round and it also reflects the friends I have around me."*

The national poll reflected this diversity. Figure 2-9 shows how the style of meals with friends at home varies considerably with age. The youngest group of people are least likely to provide traditional three course meals in a separate dining room.

Compared with older people they are more likely to eat in their living room, place a one-pot meal on the table or entertain with tapas-style food.

Figure 2-9 Styles of meals at home with friends by age



This level of informality may, of course, be reflective of the fact that younger people tend to live in less spacious houses where their entertaining options are more limited. It was certainly the case that those in the higher income brackets were more likely to entertain in what we might take to be the more 'traditional' styles. The money factor does not, however, fully explain the differences. Younger people seem to be reacting in some cases to the stiff formality of dinner parties of their parents' era, and the food that went with it.

*"They came in long dresses, it was all very exciting and you'd sit at the top of the stairs and watch everybody. And the day before they did petit fours and the tiny little paper doily things and you put a bit of chocolate in and we all had the job of putting the ginger in one and a bit of something else in another. They used to hand round these things before with the drinks in their long dresses and then ... I don't quite know what the big meal was, but baked Alaska? And then there was the same thing round at the neighbour's house the next week."*

*"I think the first time I remember [my parents] having friends round was when they did this New Year's Eve type party, and they did Quiche and terrible things like Primula soufflés. Quite fussy stuff really ..."*

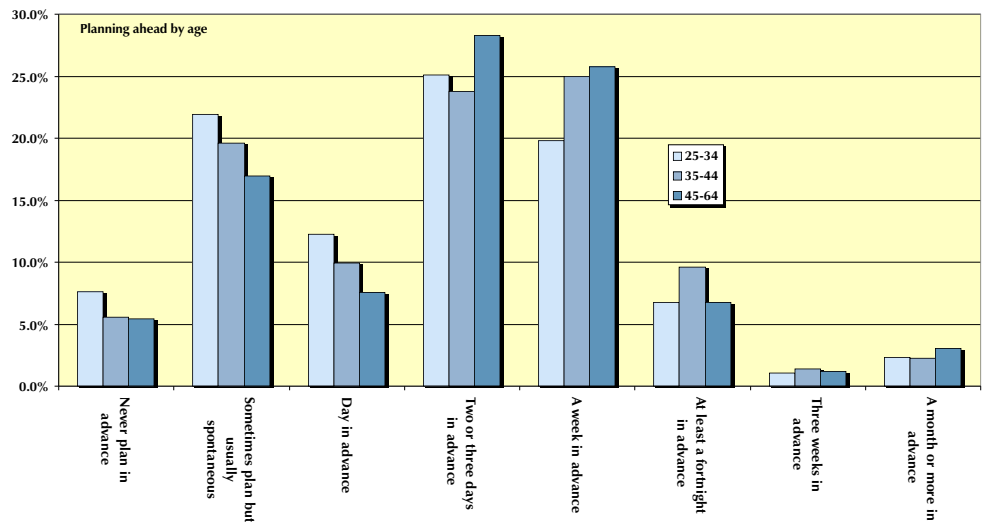
**2.7 How long do we plan ahead?** In the way that younger people favour less formal styles of dinner parties, the meals they organise also tend to more spontaneous.

*"If it's a big deal you plan ahead and give people a week's notice but it can be spontaneous and you just go with the flow."*

Figure 2-10 below shows that the average length of planning ahead is around two or three days – from the invitations to people sitting down to eat. We can see,

however, that those in the youngest age group (25-34) are much more likely than older people to arrange things only a day in advance or even 'on the spot'. The 'modern' dinner party, it seems, can arise simply from finding that you have people in the home and then cooking and sharing a meal with them.

Figure 2-10 Planning ahead by age



This level of spontaneity, of course, has been made possible primarily by the advent of local supermarkets with longer trading hours and which have on their shelves the basis for an easily prepared meal. A number of focus group participants pointed to the fact that even quite exotic ingredients together with chickens and fish can be obtained at virtually any time of day or night at the local Tesco or Sainsbury.

*"We were only literally invited about an hour before we went because we met the host in Tesco Express and she said come round, bring some food with you if you have some and eat with us."*

- 2.8 What do we serve? In the focus groups participants described a wide range of dishes that they would typically cook for a dinner party – from simple pasta and baked fish to Thai, Indian and Chinese dishes using recipes from the store of cookery books that most of them seemed to have.

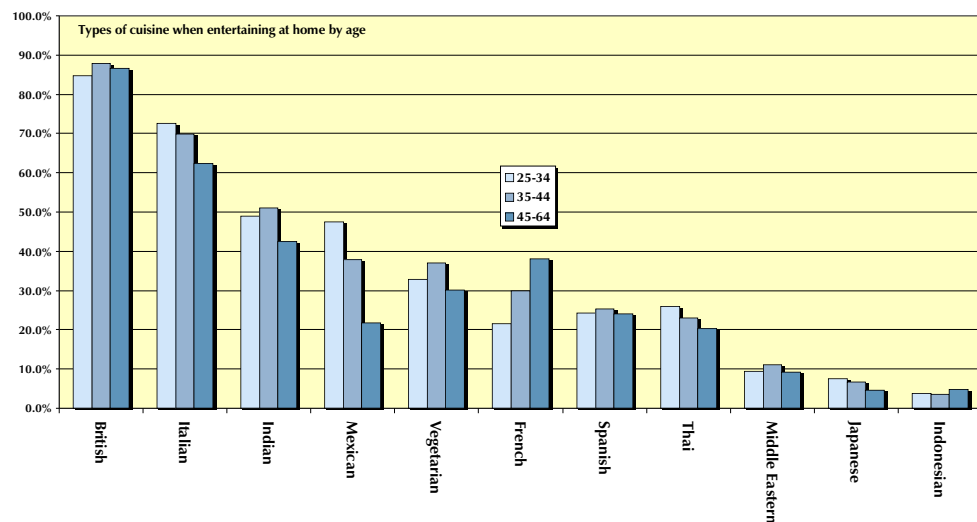
*"I'd most probably start with some sort of soup, it's an easy one to kind of get into ... I cook a lot of Thai and Indonesian food but it depends on what mood I'm in, mostly fish I don't eat a lot of meat anymore so, a lot of seafood and there's a lot of weird things I like to cook, strange things like octopus or squid."*

Running through the discussions, however, was a consensus that people were increasingly returning to simpler and more traditional dishes. The idea that British food was something that one could now present to guests without embarrassment was also evident.

*"We like good meats, so rabbit, venison, steaks, slow roast pork."*

The poll results reflected this trend. As we can see from Figure 2-11, British food was the most common basis for eating with friends at home across all age groups. While the younger respondents may have had to learn this style of cooking, perhaps from Delia Smith or Gary Rhodes cookery books, older people might be returning to what they know best, abandoning the styles of earlier decades which often involved 'frenchified' dishes or pastiches of restaurant food.

Figure 2-11 Types of cuisine by age



The second most popular style of cuisine, especially for the younger groups, was Italian. This came as no surprise. The ease with which one can rustle up a perfectly acceptable *pasta carbonara*, or even more easily using a jar of ready-made *sugo* available in every supermarket, makes Italian food a quick, inexpensive and relatively fool-proof way of feeding one's guests. We might also be seeing a Jamie Oliver or Antonio Carluccio factor at work here as well.

Indian and Mexican dishes feature in a significant number of dinner party menus while French food, once *de rigeur* for dinner parties, has slipped to sixth place. Spanish food, rapidly becoming fashionable with the spread of tapas bars and trendy restaurants such as Moro, makes an appearance in home entertaining in seventh place. Few people, though, are attempting to provide their guests with authentic Japanese food – probably quite wisely.

### 2.9 How we choose the drinks?

There was much discussion of dinner party drinks in the focus groups, especially towards the end of the sessions when perhaps the effects of the half-decent wines that we had provided began to be felt. Some spoke of the 'wine revolution' that had occurred in Britain over the past decade or more.

*"What I think has happened in this country in the last ten years has been a revolution in wine. I think before you used to go to bar and if you drink wine you just got the lowest of the low ... now I think most people have a wine book at home [half the group did] I think most people at dinner parties have at least three or four wines that they like and they know what they're good with."*



*"I think what changed was that the New World made the old Europe sort of get it's act together and it sort of created wines which were fairly affordable but the qualities were pushed up."*

There was a strong consensus that a dinner party style occasion meant that you had to provide 'good' wine with the meal, or take a bottle of similar quality if you were a guest.

*"If I'm going to somebody's house then I would usually take a more expensive wine than I would buy for myself."*

There was also discussion about the need to bear in mind your guests' personal tastes when choosing drinks for a meal.

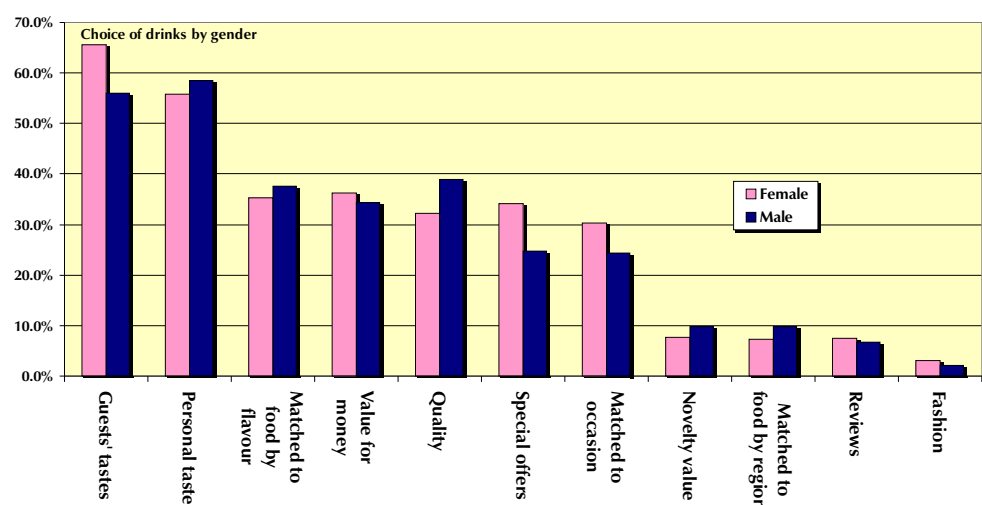
*"I think you get to know individual friends' tastes though as well because I have friends who wont drink any New World wine so you end up with a more complicated choice ... I think probably years ago you would just plonk something on the table wouldn't you?"*

One participant took this concern to what other in the group thought were rather extreme limits.

*"If we're having people round who are as equally passionate about wine as we are then before we get together we'll have a little chat. 'What do you fancy drinking?' and so on, and they might bring something white from their cellar and they'll say what they want to drink and then we'll choose something around that."*

The concern with taking into account guests' tastes when choosing dinner party wine was equally evident in the national poll responses, as shown in Figure 2-12.

Figure 2-12 Choosing drinks by gender



From Figure 2-12 we can see that women, in particular, were keen to make sure that their guests were provided with drinks that were consistent with their

preferences. Men, on the other hand, were more likely to be guided by their own tastes, perhaps reflecting a male 'I know best' approach. Matching the drinks to the food, perhaps surprisingly, ranked only third in the list of considerations, just above 'value for money', 'quality', and 'special offers' at the off-licence or supermarket. Those on the lowest incomes, as we might expect, put more emphasis on the 'value for money' aspect, but even they place personal taste and the preferences of guests as the two most important considerations.

2.10 What do we call the 'dinner party'?

We had carefully phrased the way in which we opened the focus group sessions. We said that we wanted to concentrate on eating together with friends – primarily in the home, but also in restaurants and other places. We were interested in how people defined these occasions – what did they call them?

While a few participants used the term 'dinner party', most did not. There was also a strong consensus that when giving an invitation you certainly did not mention 'dinner party'.

*"Well you wouldn't say 'do you want to come round for a dinner party?' would you? It sounds like something off Abigail's party!"*

There was the strong feeling in the groups that the term belonged to a by-gone age – one characterised by stiff, formal, middle-classness.

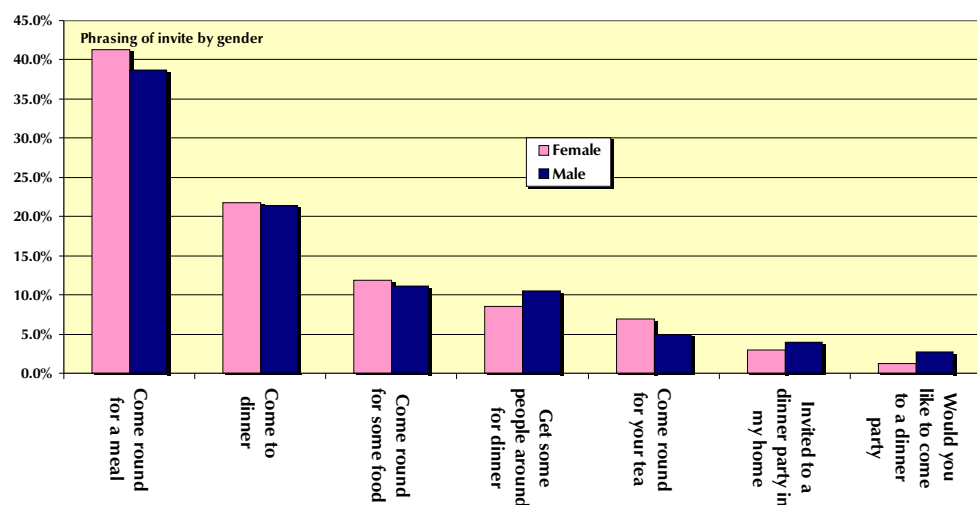
*"Dinner party just says 1970's hostess trolley to me."*

*"Nobody does that anymore, no one has a dinner party as such, at least that's not what you call it."*

*"A dinner party is dead formal and you would dress for it as well. Dinner party is formal without a doubt."*

This reluctance to use the term 'dinner party' was also evident in the national poll results, as shown in Figure 2-13.

Figure 2-13 Phrasing of invitations by gender



From Figure 2-13 we can see that when issuing an invitation most people, both men and women usually ask others simply to 'come round for a meal.'

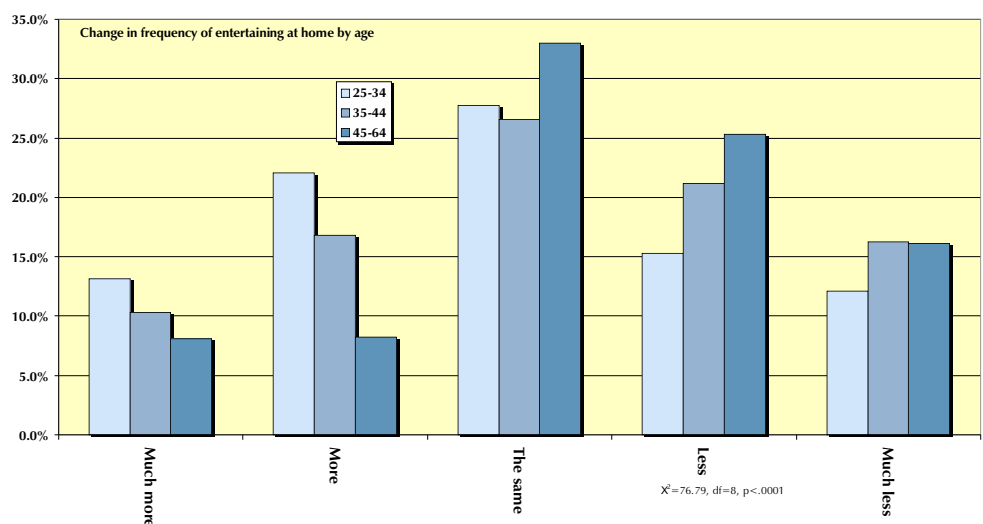
We can also see from Figure 2-13 that although around one in five people might ask people to 'come to dinner', very few use the term 'dinner party'.

Could it be that this why some commentators, as we noted in the Introduction, have claimed that the dinner party is dead, implying that this fundamental form of social bonding around a meal has also withered away? While today's 'dinner party' might be a less staid and formal affair than that of previous decades and previous generations, is it the case that *commensality* is in decline?

**2.11 Is eating together with friends in decline?** Our focus groups participants and interviewees tended towards the view that they had friends round for a meal, or went to their home to eat, with about the same frequency now as in the past. Some, who had recently developed from being a 'poor student' into a reasonable wage earner said that these occasions were now much more frequent than before. So too did those who had bought their first home and now had an appropriate setting for such occasions. On the other hand, those with small children took the view that they were now less able entertain others at home and that the shortage of baby sitters restricted their ability to visit others.

The national poll data were interesting. We can see from Figure 2-14 that most people, of all ages, typically say that they eat together with friends at home with about the same frequency as in the past. We can also see, however, that younger people are much more likely to report an increase in frequency, and less likely to report a decrease in frequency, than older respondents. The differences between the age groups is statistically very significant.

Figure 2-14 Change in frequency of eating with friends at home by age



What we see reflected in this simple graph is a fundamental aspect of human social life. Engaging in bonding rituals, which is what the dinner party or its equivalent constitutes, is something that is more central to the lives of younger people, who are building up their social networks, than for older people, whose social worlds

are more established and stable. Thus, people in their mid forties up to retirement age have less need to reaffirm social bonds by inviting people round for a meal.

It is also the case that people in their mid twenties to mid thirties are often in a better position, both financially and in terms of having their own home, to host meals than was the case in their early twenties, as reflected in the comments of our focus group participants.

Not only is there no support from our study for the notion that the dinner party is dead, there are distinctly positive signs. The new generation of hosts and guests, perhaps enthused by the rapid rise of celebrity chefs and their cookery books, are returning to what we might take to be 'honest' food and wanting to share it with their friends. The elaborate preparations required in the 1970s, as we will observe in the next section of this report, have largely disappeared. We don't want 'showy' food any more – we want something that allows us to relax in the convivial company of our friends. That, after all, is what the enduring ritual is really about.

### 3 The changing face of the dinner party

We have seen that the dinner party is far from dead – it lives on very healthily in a different disguise. The staid formality against which commentators have raged has all but disappeared, leaving more relaxed, informal and infinitely more enjoyable social occasions. While today's meals shared with friends may still sometimes be culinary *tours de force*, put on for show as much as conviviality, we no longer dress in our Sunday best when invited for the 'special occasion' in the way that we might have done 30 years ago. Increasingly, the simple but thoughtfully prepared meal – proper 'home' cooking – is replacing the poorly attempted emulation of Raymond Blanc gourmet-dining.

One easy way of observing this transition from the era of the hostess trolley to the relaxed shared meals of today is by scanning magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* or the BBC's *Food Magazine* over the years. What were they defining as the most appropriate ways of entertaining our guests with food in the 1970s through the succeeding decades up to the present day? What has changed in the space of 36 years? In what new directions might we be heading? Here is just a taster.

**3.1 The 1970s** In the 1970s dinner parties were formal affairs – advertisements for crystal glasses and hostess trollies displayed a smiling, beautifully dressed hostess amid a formal crowd of guests. We also get an indication from these adverts of what was expected from a dinner party. The host couple were smartly dressed (in 'evening wear') and surrounded by a select group of other couples. The guests voiced their admiration, not only of the food and their surroundings, but also of the hostess's ingenuity in using, say, a freezer to keep her bread fresh. The dinner party was presented as an exhibition arena, to show off your home, your furnishings, your housekeeping skills, your marriage and your impeccable taste.

Menus from this period were stiff and formal, and the dominant influence was French. Even dishes with no real French origins were given French names, such as '*Mushrooms a la Grecque*'. France also dominated the drinks table, although German wines were also very popular. Cooking was fussy but often used shortcuts, which indicates that impressive appearance, rather than quality of ingredients, was the goal. A recipe for *pâté maison*, for example, suggested: "A quick way to home pate is to buy your favourite rather 'chunky' kind and pack it into small ramekins. Then simply set with melted butter – or decorate this way: lay on top of each ramekin a slice of hard boiled egg topped with a small diamond of blanched red pepper" (*Good Housekeeping* 1970).

An example of a similarly fussy approach comes from *Woman's Realm* in 1973, where a recipe for plaice with grapes recommended that the cook peel the grapes and then "remove all pips with a very clean new hair pin or a half straightened new paper clip." Other typical recipes in *Good Housekeeping* in the 1970s included prawn bisque, veal escalope Madeira, broccoli Spears, buttered carrot sticks, orange soufflé and duckling with peach sauce.

Recipes and advertisements from this period also suggested that a dinner party 'chef' was clearly expected to be a woman and that this woman was also the housekeeper. An advertisement for a hostess trolley, for example, suggested that

not only could you use their product for dinner parties but that it was also useful "for your husband's meal."

Dinner party recipes, while focusing on exhibition, also kept an eye on cost, with entire articles devoted to cooking with cheaper cuts of meat, or keeping a dinner party drinks bill down. In a number of cases a 'ready reckoner' was provided to allow the reader to calculate the exact cost of an entire dinner party.

Advice on new 'foreign' cuisines was provided in some magazines, with reference to Chinese, Indian and other ingredients. These were still seen, however, as quite new and exotic. To be on the 'safe' side you needed to stick with the French cuisine, including the fiddly *hors d'oeuvres* of salami cornets, liver sausage with gherkins, cucumber and tuna barrels, egg mayonnaise and prawns with melon.

Along with 1970s dinner party food went 1970s drinks, again with a strong emphasis on keeping costs down. An article on 'Drinks for a Crowd' from *Good Housekeeping* suggested that "Handing out drinks to your friends these days is like inviting them to dip their hands into your bank account." A 'play safe' dinner party list included: Sherry (dry and medium), "gin, with all its satellite bottles", Scotch, beer and tomato or orange juice – little mention of other wine here.

Where wine was featured it either focused on, say, the snob value of French wines – an entire feature on claret in *GH* 1970 – or on ways of 'padding out' the expensive element. Recommendations for summer dinner parties, for example, included a 'wine cup' based on two bottles of Hock or Moselle mixed with sparkling water, lemon and Curacao. To this, they suggested, one could add some fruit to make it go even further. There was even the idea that *Sanatogen* tonic wine could be served to guests – "Ask for some today. You can enjoy it doing you good" (1973).

**3.2 The 1980s** At the beginning of the 1980s, the French dominance over dinner party recipes diminished somewhat, with new recipes from India and China making an increased appearance. Features on Asian and Chinese food, however, mostly presented it as something that you would encounter in restaurants rather than at home, although there were some suggestions for including such dishes in dinner party menus.

Recipes continued to be fussy, but there was an increased emphasis on labour-saving and making the most of your leisure time. Advertisements for microwave ovens suggested that the hostess (still always female) wanted to maximise her leisure time as well as impressing her guests. Nineteen eighties drinks suggestions continued to be dominated by French and German wines, although a new fashion for adventurous cocktails was evident.

*Tatler's* 1987 'Cordon Blah' column provided a useful overview of culinary trends. On the subject of summer buffet food, for example, it suggested that "Above all, keep it simple. What could be better than the finest cold beef, home cooked gammon in cider with brown sugar and cloves, and a fine selection of salads."

*Good Housekeeping* recommended the following 'make ahead meals for summer days': Salami stuffed chicken, hot corn filled tomatoes, smoked mackerel *gougère*, veal *Hongroise* (note the continuing French appellations), pork and olive pie, bacon apple and celery salad.

Other 1980s dinner party menus featured in magazines included melon and salami mayonnaise, fricassee of veal, mushroom stuffed tomatoes, blue cheese straws, beef in brandy and mustard, melon in ginger wine, roast stuffed ducklings, and the timeless lemon meringue pie.

*Good Housekeeping's* dinner party menus from this decade also often included a box for wine tips to go with the meal – mostly French or German. "A truly dry white, well chilled, is first choice for the creamy sauced fish pie – more particularly a Loire wine – a white Saumur for instance."

We also start to find articles on 'starting a modest cellar' which also maintained an emphasis on French and German wines, although some other nationalities were mentioned. A *GH* article recommended choosing 'some for now': "They should be straightforward wines – reds and whites – for everyday drinking, maybe a rosé or two for warm weather, and then a handful of vintage reds and whites, mature vintage wines to open for the unexpected guest, or for yourself when you feel like indulging. "The reader is then recommended to 'save some for later': "There are wines that will bloom after a term in bottle ... Most of this, it should be said applies to red wine."

As early as 1980, however, Australian wines creep into the dinner party recommendations, alongside Eastern European offerings and the more recognised Italian wines: "The Muscat Blanc 1979 in our Australian wine offer is fresh, flowery and with an 'Alsace' style that would take well to the veal and its definitive accompaniments. If you prefer a red, you'd do better with something less heavy than the Australian ones on offer." Note that here the Australian wine is described with reference to the taste of a European one, suggesting that the New World was still in the process of establishing itself as a rival to Europe as a wine region.

- 3.3      **The 1990s** In the 1990s the *Tatler's* 'Cordon Blah' column continued to focus on 'high end' food fashions. Early in 1990, columnist Tessa Waugh wrote: "When I was in France last summer I discovered a new fashion for serving hot goat's cheese." Emphasis was still on French cuisine, with Mediterranean touches. Another article discussed *foie d'oie entier en bloc* (preserved goose liver from which *pâté de foie gras* is made): "Surprisingly there is nothing more delicious than Sauternes to drink with a good foie, although some people may prefer champagne."

*Good Housekeeping* ran a special feature on the Alsace region in May 1990. Recipes include *Potée Boulangère*, *Poulet à la Bière*, *Croquettes de Semoule*, *Soupe aux Lentilles*, *Potage à la bière* and *Truite au riesling*.

The somewhat less up-market *Woman's Own* ran a feature in 1999 looking at 'Family Favourites' such as cottage pie with horseradish mash, bread and butter pudding with apricots, herby toad in the hole and macaroni cheese with gammon.

Diet and health issues became much more prominent in the 1990s. Advice on cooking a sea salt roast chicken pointed out that "Research has revealed a link between high levels of salt consumption and high blood pressure, increasing the risk of stroke and heart disease. The key is to use it moderately" (*Woman's Own*, September 1997). A Rosemary Conley diet supplement from 1997 suggested "Low fat recipes to help you lose weight and still eat – Pasta, chilli, curry, tacos, risotto and chocolate mousse!" Such health concerns were seen as important not

only in guiding personal food choices but also appropriate when considering what to serve to your guests.

The geographical expansion of dinner party menus was very evident during the 1990s. In the *Woman's Own* 'master chefs' readers were introduced to fragrant Thai vegetables; California loin of pork with mango, date and apple salsa; North Indian keema curry; smoked salmon salad with potato cakes, tomato and cardamom coulis and similarly exotic offerings.

The BBC *Good Food* magazine's features from the 1990s tended to focus on traditional meals 're-vamped' or re-examined. A feature on 'the best Sunday lunch for you and your guests' included recipes for herb and lemon roast chicken with bacon wrapped leeks; roast carrots, sausage and apricot nuggets; stir fried snap peas with sesame seeds and soy sauce; wine-baked potatoes with gruyere and red wine gravy. Another menu for a similar occasion involved roast pork with sage and onion crust and crackling chips, spicy roast parsnips, cheese-topped carrot and potato puree and cranberry red cabbage. The fussiness of previous decades had clearly not been completely lost in the 1990s.

Suggestions for vegetarian dinner menus also started to appear in the 1990s, reflecting the new 'touchy-feely' sentiments of the decade. A letters page in *Good Food* magazine in 1997 asked about cooking for a mixed party of vegetarians and meat eaters. The magazine recommended saffron risotto cakes and risotto stuffed chicken as a main course, with marinated vegetables and olive and rosemary bread to start (1997).

Italian wine, which apart from Chianti or Barolo had previously been ignored by all but the most enterprising dinner party guides, now started to make an increasing impression in the 1990s, along with a much stronger emphasis on the acceptability of Italian food at dinner parties. Recipes for Pesto Vermicelli and Spaghetti Carbonara now started to oust the more familiar Spaghetti Bolognese – a dish that has never actually existed in Italy. Mention of it the 1990s now tended increasingly to use the correct term of '*spaghetti al ragù*'.

An edition of *Good Housekeeping* from 1990 included a feature on 'The Allure of the Alsace', with recipes, cooking tips and wine suggestions. Alsace drinks were recommended for cooking as well as drinking in recipes for *Truite au Riesling*, *Soufflé au Kirsch* and *Potage a la biere*. We were told that "In the area around Strasbourg, people go out for *Tarte Flambé* the way the rest of the world goes out for pizza. It's eaten as a first course or as a snack – and always washed down with local white wine."

Calorie-counting came into play in the 90s not only in the context of food but also in relation to drinks. A Rosemary Conley pull out from *Woman's Own* 1997 provided detailed information on the calorie content of a range of alcoholic drinks. The standard measure for a glass of wine, though, was given as 125ml – much smaller than the standard Noughties pub wine measures or those put in front of our guests at home these days.

In the 90s there was much more mention of supermarket own-brand wines, as the UK supermarket developed into a confident rival of the traditional off-licence. A Valentines Day special from *Woman's Own* in 1990 recommended serving



Monsigny Champagne – "Littlewoods' own label Non Vintage, a dry yet relatively inexpensive champagne, made from Chardonnay and Pinot Noir grapes."

In contrast to an increased focus on a wider variety of wines, dinner party menus from the *BBC Good Food* magazine and *Woman's Own* often now omitted specific wine recommendations, perhaps suggesting either that the reader was thought to be confident enough about wine to choose for themselves, or else perhaps that the occasion was no longer seen to be so formal as to merit carefully-matched wines.

While we find mention of Australian, Italian, Spanish and even Yugoslavia wines in the 1990s' guides to successful entertaining, we still find a rather conservative approach to accompanying drinks. There were also reminders in some articles of the 'mixers' of previous decades as replacements for 'serious' wines. Sangria, Calvados sparkle and even Greek Honey Brandy Cup still cropped up as something we might sip with our food. There was, however, a recognition that we had come a long way since the Hironnelles and Mateus Rosés of yesteryear as the British, it was alleged, were finally coming to terms that they were a part of Europe and the tastes in food and wine which go with that.

**3.4 The Noughties** It was at the start of this decade (the Noughties) that the reaction against the formal dinner party became evident. For the previous three decades we had been urged to provide our guests with 'restaurant food' – posh stuff that we never ordinarily cooked for ourselves at home but which showed that we had gone to the appropriate level of effort in order to put on a show. Such food may have fitted the formality of 70s and 80s dinner parties, when people dressed up and hosting husbands acted as amateur *mâitre d's*, but now the emphasis switched to less formal sociability. In *Good Housekeeping* in 2000 we read: "Don't waste time cooking restaurant food – we've all wept over a recipe too hard for anyone but a Michelin-starred chef. Or grumbled at paying restaurant prices for food we could easily cook ourselves." The magazine recommended much less formal recipes such as Crisp Roast Pork with Apple Sauce, Savoury Bread and Butter Pudding and, with a somewhat retro view, Baked Alaska. Continuing the 'healthy eating' theme of the 1990s it also suggested that "Those not watching their weight can be as greedy as they like with the crackling."

The Noughties also became the decade of the celebrity chef and this was reflected, and continues to be reflected to some extent, in food writing in magazines and newspapers. A spread from *Good Housekeeping* in 2000 contained recipes from "Three of Britain's top chefs," challenged to come up with a 3 course dinner for 6 on a budget of £20 including wine. James Martin came up with a 'relaxed Friday night dinner': Melon, ham and pecorino salad, salmon with beetroot and cauliflower and steamed jam sponge pudding, with suggested vegetarian alternatives. Nick Nairn provided a 'special menu for friends': Gnocchi with roast butternut squash and sage, chicken with chorizo and butter beans, and warm chocolate fondant. Paul Rankin's menu was for an 'easy any time lunch': Tomato salad with pickled shallots, Turkey Escalopes with vegetables and almond stuffed baked pears.

*Good Housekeeping* also offered recipes for 20 'Beat the Clock Suppers', including pasta with chilli and tomatoes, chicken with black eye beans and greens, lamb with spicy couscous, halloumi and avocado salad, salmon laksa, garlic prawns with courgette and mint, potato and chorizo tortilla, cod with olive and tomato salsa, and so on. The idea that 'housewives' had unlimited time to prepare

elaborate meals and play hostess roles had clearly been rejected. The emphasis was now on expediency and taste rather than on laborious preparation.

The emphasis on healthy eating took a further step forward at the beginning of this decade. A very typical article in *Good Food* magazine gave tips on how to "Make comfort food healthy." They included buying a heavy based non-stick frying pan, griddling and roasting, and using fromage frais, yoghurt or buttermilk in place of cream or full fat milk. Elsewhere, the notion that such health-correctness should be applied to feeding one's guests was also evident.

With the rise of recipes provided by TV celebrity chefs in magazines and newspapers, recommendations for wines to accompany them also started to appear in the 2000s. Many of these avoided the traditional burgundies, clarets and Tuscan 'super wines' and instead pointed us towards supermarket offerings such as Hungarian Chardonnay 2003 from Asda, Minervois reserve selection 2002 from Sainsbury's, and Australian Unoaked Chardonnay 2004 from Somerfield.

In general, wine recommendations from the Noughties reflected two main developments – massive growth and increased acceptance of New World wines (and a generally wider range of international wine choices) and the increasing dominance of supermarkets as wine retailers.

There was an increased confidence evident in serving suggestions – dinner party serving plans recommended alternatives to the traditional red/ white wine choices of the past. For instance, an Irish themed menu recommended serving Guinness, despite the relative formality of the recipes – smoked salmon salad, beef stew.

The increased occurrence of wine and drinks columns in magazines in this decade was accompanied by a decline in wine recommendations made on cookery and recipe pages. Wine (and drinks more generally) became thought of as warranting their own reporting. Readers themselves are now perhaps felt capable of matching wine to food without specific 'guidance' – a recognition of their increasing knowledge and sophistication in this area.

Drinks are always subject to fashion and nowhere is this more evident than in the noughties' realm of cocktails. An article in Debenham's *Desire* magazine, for example, claimed that "If you're still drinking Bellinis, it's time for a new tippie!" Cocktail recipes became influenced by, among other things, celebrity bar tenders and pop culture references. The explosion in the consumption of the Manhattan and the Cosmopolitan in the late 1990s and early 2000s was arguably almost entirely due to the influence of 'Sex and the City.' Debenham's recommended recipes included: Mela Magic (Calvados, mint, Champagne, Limoncello), Rosso di Sera (pomegranate, vodka, apricot brandy) and Italian 74 (Aperol, gin, champagne).

A further development in drinking tastes occurred in the 2000s with the expansion of tapas bars throughout the country, led by the *La Tasca* chain. Sherry, sales of which had been in steady decline since the 1970s, received a partial filip as a result, with finos and manzanillas – very different from the ersatz 'creams' or even 'Cyprus' offerings of yesteryear – now seen as 'cool' to drink.

Finally in the noughties, we find recognition in the media that although the 'dinner party' might have been a 'fashion' of earlier decades, it was either making a

come-back or else had not, in reality, faded away in the first place. Debenham's *Desire* magazine from summer 2006, for example, features suggestions for a summer garden party:

*"For a while it seemed the notion of throwing a dinner party had all but disappeared... However, like many Seventies fashions, the dinner party is making a glorious return, just in time for summer. This time, though, it's minus all the fuss and flourishes that made it such hard work (so no stuffing mushrooms, life really is too short!) relying instead on fresh, flavoursome food set against an elegant yet simple backdrop..."*

How very true.

## 4 Summary and conclusions

**4.1 The dinner party is dead. Long live the dinner party!** Contrary to the professional pessimists who would have us believe that society is falling apart and that we are increasingly less sociable as a nation, eating together with friends at home is alive and well. All that has changed is that we no longer use the term 'dinner party' so much. It is a bit pretentious and conjures up images of the stiff, formal gatherings that are as now as dead as the hostess trolley. Instead, more relaxed more sociable gatherings continue the timeless rituals of sharing food and eating together – traditions that have been with us since the Stone Age.

**4.2 Keep it causal** We can see these changes in the magazines devoted to informing us about what constitutes 'good taste' at any one point in time. The recipes and serving styles that were so fashionable in the 1970s would now seem very out of place in today's kitchens and dining areas. We no longer 'dress up' in the formal manner that was once required. Rarely do we encounter lead crystal glassware or silver serving spoons. Instead, however, we probably eat much better food and certainly drink much better wine

As a nation we engage in over 300 million eating-in gatherings every year, with over half us playing host or guest every month or more often. The well-to-do among us tend to be the most frequent social diners, but many of those on relatively modest incomes are equally keen to have their friends around for a meal every few weeks or so. It may not be in a dining room as such – today's 'starter home' rarely comes so equipped – but with a Jamie Oliver or Nigella Lawson 'bible' to hand we can make up for that.

**4.3 Keep it 'British'** While the hosts and hostesses of the 1970s and 80s sought to impress their guests with pastiches of French restaurant cuisine (rarely successfully) today's modern equivalent of the dinner party is more likely to feature 'good old' British fare – the roasts, stews and puddings that previous generations would have recognised as 'proper home' cooking. Equally, we are comfortable with proving classic Italian dishes – what could be simpler than boiling a pot of pasta and adding a jar of quality sauce – or Indian curries and tikka massalas, now almost redefined as British 'classics' themselves. French dishes, once so *de rigueur* at the dinner party *qua* dinner party, have now been relegated to sixth place in today's eating-in popularity.

**4.4 Men in the kitchen** Another big change over the past few decades has been in the involvement of men in the preparation of food. In the 1970s their role was primarily that of meeters and greeters, pouring the drinks and, of course, carving the meat – that legacy of our hunter-gather past. Today, the meal is provided by the male half of the couple on almost 40% of occasions. A further 35% of men also claim to 'share' the cooking with their partners. Here, however, there might be a special interpretation of the word 'share'. Only 24% of women think that what men contribute constitutes 'sharing'.

This rise of the male home 'dinner party' cook is undoubtedly due in part to the advent of the TV chef. To cook is now to be trendy, even macho and 'pukkah'. And the recipes of the modern cook book, conveniently using ingredients to be found on the shelves of supermarkets that the authors themselves promote, are

such that it doesn't matter if you never did home economics classes as a lad at school. They will work just fine.

- 4.5 **Wine** In the 1970s the dinner party meal would most likely be accompanied by one, perhaps two, bottles of hock or generic claret. Today, much more attention is paid not only to the quality of the wine (today's stuff is infinitely more drinkable) but also to the known tastes of one's guests and the way it matches the food being served. The Australians played a big hand in demystifying wine in the 1980s, making it accessible to those who didn't know their white Burgundies from their Bordeaux blancs. The bottles simply said 'Chardonnay' or 'Sauvignon Blanc', which made life so much easier.

Today, of course, we are generally much more educated – just walking along the several hundred or so different wines in a single supermarket section bears witness to the increasing range and sophistication of our palates. And we have greater experience of travelling and eating in other European countries. We know that Italian wines are rarely now just 'plonk' and our increasing appetite for tapas – reflected in the expansion of chains such as *La Tasca* – has taught us that dry sherry is also a 'proper drink'.

- 4.6 **Meal bonding** In an age when we seem to be obsessed about the dangers of 'junk food', the rise in the prevalence of obesity, food allergies and 'healthy eating', we might draw some comfort from the Tio Pepe *Eating-In* study. Food is not just about calories and nutritional value. The sharing of food among friends and eating together is an essential ingredient of our social and cultural well-being. We do not invite friends round to our home just to ensure that they don't go hungry. We eat with them because that is what we have done since our earliest ancestors realised that it served to establish and maintain the reciprocal bonds and loyalties that were essential to our cultural survival. In that sense, nothing has changed.