



Forking Fantastic!

PUT THE PARTY BACK IN
DINNER PARTY

Zora O'Neill and Tamara Reynolds



GOTHAM BOOKS

INTRODUCTION

What kind of food do you cook? When people find out we run an underground supper club, that's often the first question out of their mouths.

We usually eyeball whoever's asking. If we're feeling polite, we say something vague about Southern and French (Tamara) or Middle Eastern and Indian (Zora). But the honest answer is simply: *fucking fantastic food.*

The ones who laugh when we say that, and nod in understanding—they'd fit right in with everyone who has been coming to our Sunday Night Dinners in Astoria, Queens, since 2003. They get that food doesn't have to be trendy, or authentic, or totally organic. They're happy to eat a Turkish street snack along with something we just happened to find in the market in our fabulously diverse neighborhood. They try out recipes from whatever cookbook we're reading, and from ex-mothers-in-law. They savor the best greens from the farmers'



Election Day Café
2004: We survived with
wine and coffee.

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market, but also anything that looks good at the corner grocer. All our guests—and we—care about is: Is it fucking fantastic?

Along with this basic principle, we're convinced that lounging around a big table after a multicourse feast, with the wine bottles nearly empty and the candles burning low, is one of the finer pleasures in life. All the work we've put into teaching ourselves to cook over the years culminates in this simple yet infinitely variable—and always satisfying—activity. Sunday Night Dinner began as a group of friends sitting around watching Sunday night TV. It has expanded into a twice-a-month supper club that's open to friends and friends-we-haven't-met-yet alike. Although we may cook dinner for twenty any day of the week, we still call it Sunday Night Dinner, because that's the spirit every event shares: a chance to sit together around a table, regroup, restore, debate and generally enjoy our free time.

THE SUNDAY NIGHT DINNER STORY

We met in 2002, after several years in New York with virtually no money. As an actress, Tamara opened off-off-Broadway plays, but had spent even more time as a server at new restaurants like Mario Batali's Babbo and Rocco DiSpirito's Union Pacific. Then she took a far less stuffy gig waiting tables at Prune. Zora was considering a career change from freelance writer to café proprietor and talked her way into a line-cook job at Prune, a restaurant whose chef-owner, Gabrielle Hamilton, she admired for both her food and her writing. At the Prune Christmas party, Zora overheard Tamara talking about grabbing a souvlaki in her neighborhood and correctly surmised that Tamara also lived in predominantly Greek Astoria, Queens. We promptly bonded over countless drinks, shared a cab home and woke up and couldn't remember any of the details of why we liked each other—just like a good first date.

No matter: We gradually pieced together that first conversation and very soon started cooking dinner together. Initially, the Sunday afternoon phone call from Tamara went something like this:

“Hey, wanna come over and slow-cook a pork roast and some cranberry beans?”

Who says no to a suggestion like that? Zora hopped on her bike with a few ingredients from her corner greengrocer and invited her old college friend and new neighbor, Peter (fresh off a job as a police officer, finishing grad school and getting down with his Greek roots in Astoria), and his girlfriend, Amy. Tamara called her opera-singing pals, Victoria the Sicilian and the lovely Mary Ann, as well as Val, a fellow server at Prune and a Greek who also appreciated Astoria.

After a few months, that evolved into:

“It’s the *Sopranos* season premiere! Let’s have a good old-fashioned red-checked-tablecloth dinner, with linguine with clams, bacalao fritters, Caesar salad and garlic bread!”

Hell, yes! By then, Tamara had had the pleasure of meeting Nicole (aka Golden), another neighbor, while doing a gay play involving lots of nudity and sacrilege—a bonding experience like no other. And Peter’s friend Katie now lived nearby—and she could totally understand the logic of the casual dinner party, because she’d done the same thing when she lived up in Boston, except on Wednesdays. She brought her hot-pink pants and some tasty blueberry pies, along with Boston veteran Joel and his girlfriend, Deb.

Not too long after, things started to snowball. Tamara would call Zora in a panic:

“Holy shit! Golden wants to bring her other friend too, so I have to go back to the butcher before he closes! Do you think I can drink my gin and tonic on my way there if I leave it in the Mason jar? The cops won’t arrest me or anything, will they? Ask Peter. And can you pick up some extra shallots on your way over?”

We rose to the occasion every weekend, no matter who showed up. It’s not like we set out to do anything big. We just started cooking together on Sunday nights because Tamara had a TV and there was good programming on, and everyone had to eat. When Tamara got TiVo, we no longer had to hustle to sit down in

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front of the TV—though we still tried to get an early start for the sake of regulars like Zora's college friend Karine, a high school teacher with brutally early

**Guests drop money
in the donation box.**

mornings. We started to spend the whole day on ridiculous projects—such as when Tamara's friend



Heather (better known as Mr. Shit) brought over some vintage Southern layer cake recipes. No watching TV meant Nicole could get the after-dinner dance party going in the kitchen, to entertain whoever was washing dishes. Now and then Tamara would invite a date.

Looking back, the real turning point was when Tamara invited Dapper Dan (his parents named him Michael Johnson). He was a regular at Prune who was far too well dressed for his surroundings, and he earned Tamara's re-

spect by eating everything in sight, often with his fingers. And even though she didn't know him too well, and didn't want to date him, she figured he was just the kind of person who'd enjoy our little Sunday gatherings.

He did. And he started inviting some of his friends. We went out and bought a few more folding chairs. And we carried on, spending the week scheming, planning bigger and more elaborate projects for ourselves. It was gratifying to read

some intriguing recipe on Wednesday, then serve it to friends—and a few strangers—on Sunday. Zora had started writing travel guides, so she'd often come back with great ideas for dinner based on the tacos she'd eaten in Puerto Morelos or the greens she'd tasted in Aleppo. Tamara was still working as a waitress, so she got lots of ideas from fancy New York City chefs and her new Edna Lewis cookbook, a gift from Mr. Shit.

But then we noticed that we were both broke at the end of the month. Sunday Night Dinner was obviously the culprit. We tentatively asked for a donation—twenty bucks, maybe, if you've got it? Zora, who'd run a supper club before she met Tamara, knew they'd be lucky to break even, and didn't want to earn money off the project, lest it start feeling like a pain-in-the-ass job. But at least this step kept us from resenting all our hungry friends when it came time to write the rent check.

As it turned out, not only were people happy to donate, but this meant they could now invite their friends with impunity because it no longer cost anyone but the diner any money. The last-minute repeat runs to the butcher increased, and, as if the New York City government were smiling down on us, the liquor laws were relaxed, so guests could buy booze on Sundays, on the way over—thus the “. . . and a bottle of wine” phrase got added to the suggested donation. Sunday Night Dinner was officially born—although by that time we were having the party on Saturdays just as often.

Now we have an e-mail list of more than four hundred names and regularly cook for twenty people every couple of weeks. It's still not a job for either of us, and it's a surprise and a challenge every time we do it.

It's a surprise for everyone who comes as well—we rarely cook the same thing twice, nor is the guest list ever duplicated. It all starts with an e-mail invitation describing what we've decided to cook—sort of an extended explanation of “fucking fantastic food!”

How We Came to Kick Kitchen Ass

We cannot stress it enough: *We taught ourselves how to cook*. Which means you can too. And we went about it in different ways—which means whatever path you take will be the right one. Here’s how we got where we are today:

ZORA

Raised in New Mexico. Mom had copy of *Larousse Gastronomique* but family often lived on food stamps. Important lessons about thrift, rare steak and nastiness of cheap chocolate imprinted at young age.

During grad school, finally forced to cook for herself. Cracked open copy of Indian cookbook from ex-boyfriend, subscribed to *Cook’s Illustrated* and started experimenting on equally broke roommates.

Quit grad school. Moved to NYC without enough money.

Continued to cook, even though New Yorker friends considered her weird. Embraced world cuisines (i.e., beans and rice) because of severe underemployment.

We owe home cooking for getting us through some really rough financial spots. Tamara still often improvises something tasty she once ate in a restaurant, while Zora goes for a more researched style of homey dishes. Either way, we’re constantly trying new things—and consistently pleased with how this one skill has changed our lives.

TAMARA

Raised in Arizona. Dad was a chef, until he quit drinking. Mom rolled out a mean strudel. Aspired not to cook, but “to be famous, and have other people cook for me!”

During college, got married to a man who cooked. Sick of washing dishes every night, she thought, “How hard can it fucking be?” Subscribed to *Gourmet* and started experimenting on husband’s navy buddies.

Got divorced. Quit grad school. Moved to NYC without enough money.

Continued to cook, even though New Yorker friends considered her weird. Worked front of house for fancy restaurants, picking up recipes along the way.

To: Sunday Night Dinner

Subject: Sunday Dinner This Sat., Oct. 14 @ 7 P.M.—Spain, Take 2!

Hey Hungry Kiddies—

I hope this finds you well and STARVING. Due to the holiday weekend, we decided to postpone the celebration of Cristóbal Colón and his bankroller, Spain, to THIS Saturday, Oct. 14 @ 7 P.M. Please RSVP by Friday, Oct. 13 @ 10 A.M., so I can Greenmarket accordingly.

What better thing to eat this post-Columbus Day weekend than some Spanish food? I know it is a tossup as to whether we should celebrate Italy or Spain, but we thought we would put ourselves in Queen Isabella's shoes for this revisionist dinner. You may be given your own knife upon entrance, just like Columbus's sailors! Don't worry, though—no guest will be conquered or enslaved without their specific consent. If you are sitting on the fence for this one, scroll down and read what his sailors had to eat, and maybe you'll be swayed in our direction, if only out of thankfulness that you are here now and not then.

Oh—and the menu is as follows:

Spanish cured ham (that you will get your own knife to cut to your heart's desire!)

Catalan tomato bread

Boquerones

Maybe a saffron-and-potato tortilla?

Mackerel in escabeche

Watercress salad

Potato salad with mussels

Lentils with leeks and mushrooms

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Orange-flower thingies (fried pâte à choux with orange-flower water)

Lemon fritters (oh wait—rereading recipe—it’s lemon leaves OR bay us, and you dip them in batter and fry, then eat them by scraping the dough off the leaf with your teeth)

As for the booze, bring however much you think you will drink. If, like us and some people we know, you are what some would term a harmless drunk, then feel free to bring two bottles. We do.

Saturday Oct. 14, 2006 @ 7 P.M.

Reynolds/Wasserman/Trainor Ranch

Front deck or backyard, uncertain at this time

In love and garlic,

Tamara and Zora

* According to L.M. Sorré, the menu for Spanish seamen consisted of water, vinegar, wine, olive oil, molasses, cheese, honey, raisins, rice, garlic, almonds, sea biscuits (hardtack), dry legumes such as chickpeas, lentils, beans, salted and barreled sardines, anchovies, dry salt cod and pickled or salted meats (beef and pork) and salted flour. The olive oil and perhaps olives were stored in earthenware jugs. All other provisions were stored in wooden casks, which, according to some reports, were of cheap and faulty construction, permitting the preserving brine to leak out of the meat casks and allowing moisture to invade the casks of dry provisions. All were stored in the hold, the driest section of which was normally reserved for casks carrying dry provisions. A cooper (barrel maker) was responsible for keeping the casks tight, an almost impossible challenge.

Food, mostly boiled, was served in a large communal wooden bowl. It consisted of poorly cooked meat with bones in it, the sailors attacking it with fervor, picking it with their fingers as they had no forks or spoons. The larger pieces of meat were cut with the knife each sailor carried.

From there, the RSVPs roll in fast and furious—all twenty seats are usually taken within the day. Come the weekend, these brave people arrive at the door, clutching their bottles of wine. Some come in groups—regular guests bringing new friends—and some come alone. Some have heard about us through the grapevine, and others are people we've met and wanted to get to know better—so we invited them to dinner. For many guests, it's their first time coming to Queens (New York's most unfashionable borough, we're a little proud to say).

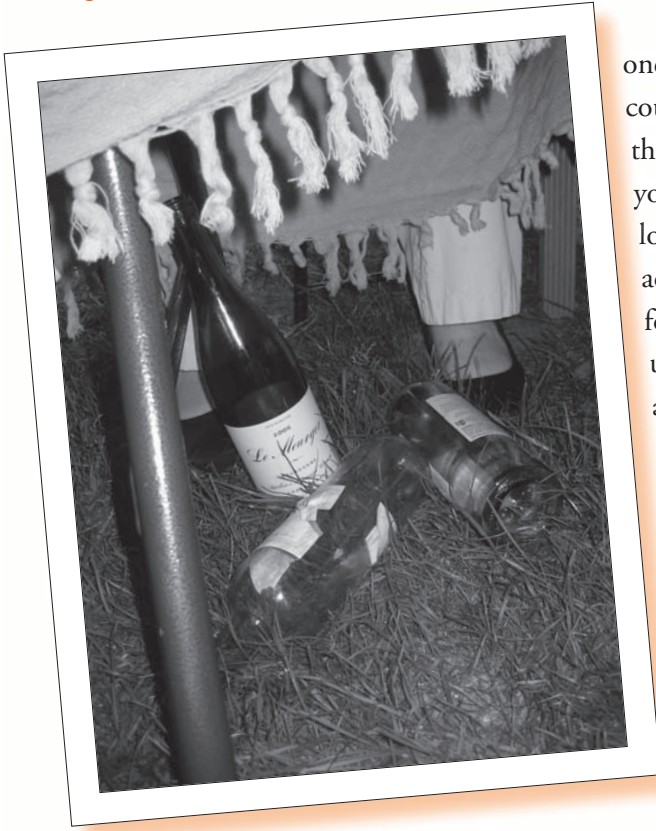
People are always boggled that we let total strangers into our home. We're more impressed that total strangers are willing to *come* to our home. For all they know, we could be axe murderers or white slavers. We at least know they like to eat, because they answered the e-mail. It only adds to their nervousness when neither of us answers the door—we're too busy cooking. Usually it's Tamará's husband, Karl, who lets people in, hands them a jelly jar for their wine and shows them around. New guests seem pretty relieved by the time they make it to the kitchen—we look normal enough, even if we're sweaty, wild-eyed and flinging cast-iron skillet around.

All of what would be the counter space is covered with food in various states of preparation. Led Zeppelin is blaring, spices are scattered all over the place and the room smells unbelievably good—savory, garlicky, rich. But no sooner do these people take in the scene and introduce themselves to us than we have to stop everything and shoo them back to the living room. Tamará's not



We ask guests to bring as much wine as they expect to drink ...

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...and we do our best to
drink it all.

are empty and the candles spent. Sometimes we have to kick the last few stragglers out, but not before they make sure they're on the guest list for good.

What's so special about Sunday Night Dinner—what our regulars keep coming back for, because they can't get it anywhere else—is that it's just like a regular family dinner at home (without gropey Uncle Fester). In short, we're not pretending to be a restaurant. We're not into matchy-matchy shit and pretty garnishes and cookbooks from the latest hot chef—all that is just trying to imitate the dining-out experience. The great thing about eating at home is we're *at home*. We can lounge around as long as we like—or until the neighbors complain about the raucous late-night bullshitting. No one's going to drop the check and make us feel like we should clear out for the next customers. If people want seconds or thirds, they can help themselves. If they overhear a good conversation to their left,

one to mince words: “Hey, so glad you could come—now we need you all to get the fuck out of the kitchen so we can finish your dinner!” The music gets cranked louder, and people go running. We can't actually say what happens at the parties for the next hour or so—but people tell us it usually involves heated discussions about politics, religion, street food in Vietnam and the relevance of 1970s thrillers. By the time we emerge with dinner completed, everyone seems to be fast friends.

We serve everything family-style, around a couple of tables set with mismatched plates, dishcloths for napkins and odd pieces of silver-plate cutlery. Wine flows liberally, and by the time the night has wound down, the bottles

they can jump in. If they want a recipe, all they have to do is ask and we'll write it down on a scrap of butcher paper. We've cooked Sunday Night Dinner in a number of different apartments along the way. Each place has been imperfect (small, dusty, still furnished with late-postcollege starter pieces) but each has hosted perfect meals—because it's home.

WHY SUNDAY NIGHT DINNER?

So, do you make money off this? is the second most common question we get from people.

Hard to believe, but—no. We lavishly pay the dishwasher (sometimes an out-of-work friend, sometimes the busser from our favorite neighborhood diner), and the rest goes to keep the house stocked with good olive oil, kosher salt, spices and emergency wine for when dinners go especially late. We've gradually picked up additional chairs and dishes, so people no longer have to sit on cinder blocks or bring their own soup bowls. Before you know it, the cash is gone.

So why do you do it, then? That's the obvious follow-up question.

We do it because at every meal, our extended social community reknits itself in a fascinating way: The former priest turned calligraphy professor sits next to the design-school student; the hedge fund guy chats with the environmental activist. Neighbors drop by and meet people who live on the other side of the city. Sometimes they've all been crammed on a sofa together; sometimes they get to sprawl out in the yard and spot lightning bugs in the grass. But our “hungry kiddies” (as we've come to call them in our e-mail invitations) always surprise us with their willingness to eat just about anything we throw at them and their enthusiasm for talking to whoever winds up sitting in the next chair.

We know from experience: Some of the best friendships are forged around the dinner table—and in the kitchen. Together, we've had wild successes and a couple of sketchy failures. We've had parties for birthdays and the Fourth of July, and for no other reason than there were delicious figs at the produce stand. We had parties when we wanted to celebrate, and when we wanted to stay home and drink alone after a bad breakup. Through the course of five years of dinners, we both went

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from single to hitched to fantastic men. Tamara finally brought a date to dinner who clicked with the group—Karl now mans the grill, whips up ice cream and strips meat from carcasses like nobody’s business. And Zora finally realized she loved her friend Peter—who has helped pave the way with Greek landlords and build spits and tables when called for. Over five years, Zora survived open-heart surgery (not due to her high-fat diet—don’t worry!), and Tamara had to move three times and change jobs many more times. Good friends left the city, and new ones moved in. Throughout, the dinners have been our ritual and our creative outlet—it was doubly fortunate that our ever-expanding circle of friends got fed and happy in the bargain.

Oh, we feel the sentimental tears and the chick-flick soundtrack coming on. So let’s talk about *you*.

WHY YOU SHOULD COOK DINNER

We’re not saying you need to run out and start your own underground supper club. We actually wouldn’t wish that on anyone. But we do want you to cook a little dinner for your friends, and maybe some of their friends, because we think it’s a fucking shame that no one does this anymore. We’re not making any promises, but once you get the nerve to serve, maybe you’ll fall in love, start a new career or change your life some other way.

We realize there are some hurdles to overcome before this dinner party utopia is reached. The largest is simply cultural. For some reason, a candlelit, wine-sodden dinner is socially acceptable only in your bohemian midtwenties. And some people don’t even get this postcollege slacker interlude—they graduate straight to takeout. After that, we’re all supposed to be too busy with important things and too in love with our fancy grown-up furniture to risk spilling wine on it. But this is no different from our grandparents and their “good” furniture covered in plastic—a tragic waste. So keep the Tide stain stick at the ready, and invite your friends over.

And the success of Sunday Night Dinner is proof that you don’t need a lot of gear to entertain your friends. Even if you didn’t get china for your wedding, or you lost it in the divorce, or you just plain forgot to get married, you can still have



We Don't Have Kids . . .

. . . but we support those who do. We recognize it's a colossal amount of work, and if you have a little one or two, you're probably reading this book and saying, "As if!" But please don't give up. Cooking good dinners and eating them with friends and family is one of the most rewarding things kids can experience. At least we think so, because that's how we were raised. Modern American convenience food culture presses parents to "spend less time in the kitchen, and more time with your family!" Better: Spend time with your family *in the kitchen*. Exploit your child labor force—cooking with kids keeps them occupied, makes them feel useful and teaches them valuable life skills. Drafting your husband or wife to be the sous-chef can teach you a thing or two about teamwork and giving orders. And if your friends can't get sitters for the night of your big party, have them bring the kids. Let them hang out on the staircase in their jammies, like in a Rockwell painting. They'll watch the adults and learn . . . and they'll be better for it in the long run.

a fucking fantastic dinner party. You don't need a mandoline (you don't even need to know what one is), you don't need a FryDaddy, you don't need matching flatware, you don't need any of the crap you see in magazines and on TV. Please ignore the trappings of obsessive perfectionism that surround the dinner party today: centerpieces, place cards, dainty food, polite conversation. All of these superficial things have nearly driven dinner parties to the brink of extinction.

What you *do* need are a few friends. If you're at all overscheduled like we are, even that element of the party can sometimes be difficult to muster. People are overworked and stressed out. They have kids and can't get a sitter. Press on: If your guests can't make a big-deal Saturday night, schedule a Sunday lunch or a simpler weeknight dinner. Even the most basic meal with friends can have amazing restorative powers. If someone's on the fence, remind them, as we often do to each other: "You gotta eat. And you may as well eat with friends." Even if you start out with only a couple of people, you'll wind up with more, once word gets out that you're known for cooking dinner.

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We want you to succeed and have just as much fun in the kitchen as we've had. This book provides you with the courage you need to entertain for the sake of food and community, not for the prize of being the most brainwashed host(ess) on the block. To conquer the Dinner Party Wasteland, you just have to do your part and invite a few friends over to dinner. Set up your kitchen with help from our Cautious Beginners section, if you like, and start with the simple roast chicken dinner there. If you already feel even a little bit comfortable in the kitchen, then you can tackle anything in our Four Foolproof Menus section—all good weekend meals, pretested at our Sunday Night Dinners. And if you, like us, crave a challenge, then Get In Over Your Head, the final section of truly over-the-top special-occasion dinners, will get your brain kicked into high gear. And no need to begin at the front and work your way methodically through—the last menu, for roast lamb on a spit, is one of the first big meals we ever cooked together. In testing recipes for this book, we've consistently been amazed at how a challenge turns into a breeze on the second try—and we hope we've streamlined the process enough to help you through the first time.

Along the way, we've also included tips on shopping, organization and all-around attitude. And for anyone who doesn't know much about wine except that they like to drink it, we've included general suggestions for vino and other boozy treats throughout. These notes come from our many years of enthusiastically drinking wine and Tamara's many years of selling and serving it. If there's one lesson we've learned, it's this: Excellent, very drinkable wine can also be cheap. Most of the wines we suggest can be had for \$15 per bottle, and some for \$10 or less. (They're a guide only if you want it—it's more important that you just drink what you want to.)

But perhaps most useful are the boxes labeled LEARN FROM OUR MISTAKES! We hope you'll find some fabulous wisdom in them that saves you from failure—though you may just laugh your ass off at how we could be so stupid. We also understand that not everyone has the cash, time and Californian produce to be Alice Waters. We dig local, seasonal and organic, but we live in the real world. We understand the occasional off-season weakness, think canned black beans taste just fine and know there's nothing handier than a bag of frozen peas. With a few exceptions, the recipes use ingredients you can get in any large American supermarket. If



Terms & Conditions

In this book, we've used some rather vague terms of measurement—*glug*, for instance, when it comes to olive oil; *handful* when referring to herbs. We thank Jamie Oliver for first introducing these words to the cookbook lexicon, and we encourage you to get comfortable with them.

Whenever you see some imprecise measurement like this, don't stress out: The underlying message is that *the precise amount just doesn't matter that much*. We're sick and tired of recipes that command you to measure out "1½ tablespoons olive oil" (which is probably what a *glug* amounts to). Doing this takes a ridiculous amount of time, and it also means you have to wash those measuring spoons. The sooner you can shake off the tyranny of precise measurements, the faster you'll get to real cooking and learning to trust your instincts. (Baking, alas, is another story—there you do often have to measure things precisely. Which is probably why we don't do it that often.)

your area just doesn't have the ethnic diversity New York does, you may have to mail-order a couple of items (see Where to Get the Goods on page 227 for suggestions), but they're the kind of thing that will last you a good long time.

To be honest, we wrote this cookbook not only to help you but also to help *us*. That's because between the two of us, we've received only five invitations to dinner at other people's homes in the past year. (We do cuss a lot, but honestly, we're still great guests.) And we're getting a little tired of holding up our end. Our vision is this: We persuade you to get into the kitchen and cook, and then maybe you'll persuade your friends, and they'll persuade theirs, and pretty soon you'll all be inviting *us* to dinner.

But don't sit back and read for too long. Cooking dinner for your friends is one arena in which the glow of accomplishment can be gained in just a few hours. And it is a supremely generous gift that we believe beats the hell out of anything you can buy. Your friends are dying to be invited over, so damn it, give them a call. Take a chance, crank up the flames on your stove and cook some dinner! It just may be the best gift you give yourself (and maybe us?) all year.