



THE AUTHOR, DANA SHAVIN (CENTER) WITH HER MONTHLY SUPPER CLUB

Dinners With Friends, For Friends, By Friends

BY DANA SHAVIN

About a year ago, my husband and I took stock of our social life. We were childless, self-employed and not active members of any religious or sports group. While it was a recipe that had kept us satisfied for the entirety of our adult lives, it had also made community-building difficult. Now, at midlife, we wanted to change that.

We thought about the things we liked to do — eat out with friends, cook, talk and entertain — and decided to start a supper club. We reached out to five other couples, some of whom we knew well and others we knew less well, and asked them to join us.

It wouldn't be easy. We'd have to navigate the waters of our various eating rules, quirks and conundrums. One of us was vaguely kosher (me). One was allergic to fish (my husband). Two were vegetarian. And there were food intolerances (no heavy spice!), dietary preferences (no white flour) and, of course, plain old dislikes (cold pasta salads; things reminiscent of meatloaf; cilantro).

Nevertheless, we forged forward. We had just four simple guidelines: We'd meet monthly at rotating houses; the hosts would set the theme with the main dish; each couple would

contribute a homemade dish that fit with the theme; and every dish would be vegetarian. So it was that 12 of us — writers, composers, artists, an animal shelter volunteer, a nurse practitioner, a counselor, a community coach, a pediatrician and a former Peace Corps volunteer — agreed to come together to engage in the most basic of human activities: to feed and be fed.

A year of supper clubs later, I can attest that supper clubs are a great way to build community, try new recipes (or learn to cook!), and bond with old and new friends alike. But don't just take my word for it. Read on to learn about other area supper clubs and how they function, and to get some ideas for starting your own.

SUNDAY FUNDAY

As a single mom with three boys, Jennifer Ley Crutchfield found it difficult to go out and socialize. But she wanted her children to grow up with strong adult influences. So she started a tradition called Sunday Funday. That was 10 years ago, and it's still going strong.

"In our North Chattanooga neighborhood, I was surrounded by a beautiful tribe of people who became our family," she says.

A few Sundays a month, Crutchfield cooks a main dish and invites neighbors to bring sides, bread and dessert. Who is invited depends on "who's new to the area, who should know the people in our tribe, and who is just cool and hungry."

In addition to satisfying her need for socializing and her boys' needs for adult influences, cooking for people she loves feeds Crutchfield emotionally and spiritually.

Over the years there have been some very funny, and very poignant, moments. One evening, Bob Dorough, of "Schoolhouse Rock" fame, and Dennis Palmer, neighbor/friend/Shaking Ray Levi Society founder, came to supper. They played music and regaled the group with stories about jazz notables Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk. When dinner was called, Crutchfield's youngest son ran down the stairs and straight into someone carrying an enormous bowl of marinated Asian cabbage, sending it airborne — and back down on everyone.

Not long after that get-together, Palmer died.

Recently, Crutchfield's oldest son remarked that he always felt like he had a big family because there were always so many people eating and visiting. An important mission, accomplished.



BOB DOROUGH, THE LATE DENNIS PALMER AND BOB STAGNER AT CRUTCHFIELD'S SUNDAY FUNDAY.



GUYS' NIGHT BBQ

GUYS' NIGHT GOURMETS

Ken Price, head chef of Guys' Night Gourmets, says his group was started by two men who had been meeting for dinner weekly for eight years. They thought that perhaps if they stayed in, cooked and made their own drinks, they could recruit others to join them and save money at the same time.

Their group is now made up of 12 men ranging in age from 22 to 76. They meet every Wednesday at Price's East Ridge home, where he has an outdoor covered cooking and dining area and where, in all but the coldest weather, they prepare and eat their meals. They enjoy lively conversation and the

camaraderie that comes with meeting regularly for many years. There's only one rule: no politics.

Price plans the menu, buys the food and cooks. One person acts as sous chef. Price's son bartends. Everyone chips in to cover the cost of the food and drinks, and everyone helps with cleanup. Menu favorites have included rack of pork on the rotisserie, cedar-planked salmon and prime rib. One night, Price set up a grilled cheese bar. Brie-stuffed burgers with caramelized onions, homemade potato chips and grilled corn have also been stars of the show.

FOR SOME CULINARY INSPIRATION, VISIT GUYS' NIGHT GOURMETS ON FACEBOOK.

CHATTANOOGA CONNECTED

Chattanooga Connected formed in 2013 specifically for the purpose of building interracial friendships. While organizers Franklin and Tresa McCallie don't consider it a supper club per se, the group bonds over meals. Around 30 people — evenly split between black and white — have been meeting three or four times a year for three years, in a different home each time.

The group started out as a potluck but has grown into a catered affair with everyone pitching in \$10. One person may end up bringing an appetizer or dessert, but the group has discovered that eating together in a home



CHATTANOOGA CONNECTED

without the stress of cooking allows for them to focus on their primary goal: friendship building.

VISIT THE CHATTANOOGA CONNECTED FACEBOOK PAGE TO SEE THE GROUP IN ACTION.



MEDITERRANEAN APPETIZER PLATTER

SATURDAY NIGHT SUPPER CLUB

For pharmacist and former musician Jeff Perry, Saturday Night Supper Club is a way to show hospitality to people “who may not otherwise get that in their lives.” There are no criteria to get on the invite list. An aspiring chef, Perry enjoys nothing more than getting people out of their comfort zones and introducing them to foods they may never have tried.

“It basically boils down to a love of people and a love of food,” he says.

Perry began by cooking once a week for five to seven people while he and his wife were living in Oxford, Mississippi. In Chattanooga, however, the crowds have grown

so large — at times as many as 60 people have showed up — that he has switched to a monthly format.

Perry and his wife purchase, cook and serve the food at their Lake Resort-area home. They discourage people from chipping in money because they “don’t want to alienate anyone who doesn’t have or bring money.” (It is, however, BYOB.)

“I try to include food that some people have never had a chance to try. What better way to understand a culture different from your own than to eat what they eat?” he says.

WANT AN INVITATION TO DINNER?
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ASK TO JOIN THEM.

NO-COOK CLUB

Frank White, Daryl Thetford, George Hovanec and Lawrence Mathis have met, in varying combinations, for supper every Wednesday night for 20 years. To keep things fresh, they rotate among the many downtown restaurants. And while they don’t officially call themselves a supper club, the concept is the same: friends coming together over a shared meal on a regular basis, to build and maintain friendship and community.

HUNGRY FOR MORE?

HOW TO START A SUPPER CLUB:

1. Decide how many people you want to include. Eight to 10 is a good number for intimate conversation, and most dining room tables will seat this number comfortably.
2. Decide how often will you meet, and where. Will you rotate houses, meet at one home every time, or meet at a restaurant?
3. Decide on a food style that suits everyone (vegetarian, vegan, Southern, etc.), or agree to rotate among themes and styles.
4. Decide how food preparation will be handled. Will it be potluck or will you cook together? Will you have it catered or will one person cook everything? Who will plan the menus?
5. Sometimes it’s fun to have a theme night. Some ideas from existing supper clubs include “Japanese,” “Turkish,” “Hippie Night” and “Rosh Hashanah.” Dressing the part and playing appropriate music is educational and ups the authentic feel of the dinner.
6. Sometimes it’s fun to let conversation meander and other times it’s good to have a planned topic. One night our hosts, whose 40th wedding anniversary fell on a Supper Club night, posed the following for all to answer: “What one question do you wish you’d asked your spouse before you married?”

ON THE MENU

HERE ARE SOME SIMPLE RECIPES TO HELP GET YOU STARTED.



KNAFEH BULBUL NESTS

WHAT YOU NEED:

- 1 pound knafeh filaments
- 1 ½ cup unsalted butter, melted
- Nuts (such as cashews or pistachio)
- 1 ½ cup thick simple syrup
- Cherries

WHAT YOU DO:

1. Preheat oven to at 180 F. Gently pull a small bunch of knafeh and cover the rest so it will not get dry.
2. Brush with melted butter, then roll around one, two or three fingers depending on desired size.
3. Fill nests with nuts. Bake for 20-25 minutes, until golden brown, then drizzle while hot with syrup.
4. Scatter cherries on top.

THEME IT: GREAT FOR SYRIAN NIGHT.

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VENISON LARB

(Photo and recipe courtesy of Jeff Perry)

WHAT YOU NEED:

- 3 tablespoons uncooked sticky rice
- 1 pound ground venison
- 6 fresh minced Thai bird chilies
- 1/2 teaspoon brown sugar
- 1 tablespoon fish sauce
- Juice from 2 limes
- 4 Thai shallots, peeled and thinly sliced
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 3 leaves culantro (not cilantro), chopped
- 5 green onions, chopped
- 10 fresh mint leaves, chopped
- 10 fresh Thai basil leaves, chopped

WHAT YOU DO:

1. Toast the uncooked rice over medium-low heat, shaking constantly, until browned and fragrant, about 15 minutes.
2. Cool and transfer rice to a spice grinder. Grind into a fine powder, then set aside.
3. Heat a sauté pan to medium-high and brown the venison. (You may need added oil depending on how lean your venison is.) When cooked through, remove from heat.
4. Working fast, stir the rice powder into the meat, mixing completely.

5. Add fish sauce, brown sugar and lime juice, mixing completely.
6. Add chilies, shallots, garlic, culantro, green onions, mint and basil and mix completely.
7. Taste and adjust. Use fish sauce to adjust salt, brown sugar for sweetness, lime juice for acidity, Thai chilies for heat.

THEME IT: GREAT FOR THAI NIGHT.



POMEGRANATE COCKTAIL

WHAT YOU NEED:

- Vodka
- La Croix
- Simple syrup
- Pomegranate syrup
- Ice

WHAT YOU DO:

1. Mix 1 part vodka, 2 parts La Croix, 1/2 part simple syrup and 1/2 part pomegranate syrup and pour over ice.
2. Drop pomegranate seeds on top and top with a sliver of lemon rind.

THEME IT: GREAT FOR TURKISH NIGHT. CM

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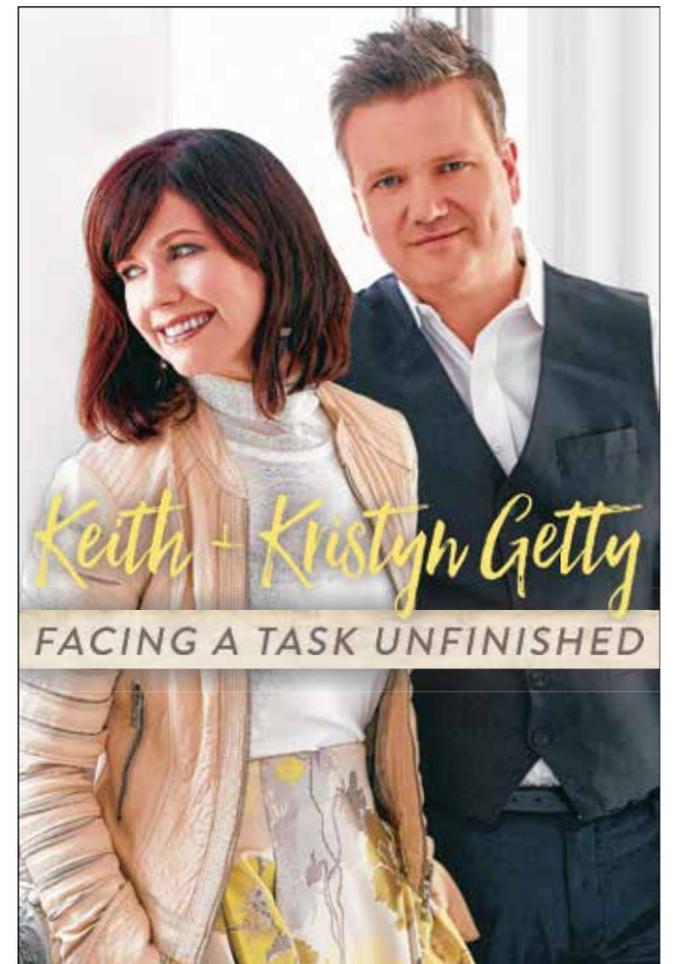
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