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For everyone in the kitchen at parties
(and most especially for Ella)


SALT, FAT
Mastering the Elements

PARTIES

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August is quickly realizing that it's only a brunch in the absolute loosest definition of the word: there is brunch food, yes, and Isaiah introduces her to a Montreal queen hot off a touring gig with a fistful of cash and a Nalgene full of mimosas. But, mostly, it's a party.

One Last Stop, Casey McQuiston

There's an episode of *The Simpsons* I think about a lot – that perfect one where Kirk Van Houten stands pointing at a potato-shaped blob on a sheet of Pictionary paper shouting 'Dignity, it's dignity!' It starts with Marge and Homer in bed one night. Book in her lap, unsettled and rigid with anxiety, Marge asks Homer if this is how he imagined married life. He seems content, but she is questioning things – she pictured cocktail parties and candlelit dinners. She pictured napkins. And so she decides to host a party.

I get it. I spent my childhood picturing napkins and dinners and parties. Before school, around the breakfast table, I'd pull Mum's cookbooks from the shelf, and plan imaginary menus for the dinners I'd host once I was older. Perhaps something with aubergine and tahini and pomegranates from Claudia Roden's *Arabesque* to start, then one of Stephanie Alexander's lamb chop recipes, and Nigella Lawson's perfect clementine and almond cake to finish. Or maybe something low-key, like that peach, mint and prosciutto salad from one of Jamie Oliver's books, and then an ice cream I'd make myself in my shiny machine. For a fancy birthday I'd serve oysters (I didn't like them yet, but was convinced it was only a matter of time), Julia Child's bœuf bourguignon, and some buttery French tart from the

patisserie on the other side of Brisbane. People would bring wine and flowers and compliments. I'd light candles. I'd bring out the good linen serviettes, write place cards, and polish those crystal glasses I found in a market somewhere on holiday. I dreamed so longingly of being a grown-up that in many ways I wished away my teenage years, and the potential joys to be found therein.

It's a glorious relief that it appears I wasn't wrong to be eagerly anticipating this period of my life. I've reached the age I sort of always was in my head, old enough to finally fit inside my own skin. After a few years spent working for people in their houses, I now have a space of my own, one I can welcome my friends into. I have nice serviettes, and some crystal glasses that once belonged to my great grandad, and some plates I found in a market somewhere on holiday. I have my own collection of cookbooks, and I sit with them when dreaming up parties and events.

When I was planning this book, I had a long conversation with my friend Berta about that point at which 'coming round for dinner' morphs into a dinner party. Semantics matter when we talk. Berta spoke Spanish and Italian before she spoke English, and so she's not lazy or vague or euphemistic with language (unless she plans to be). She says what she means. We agreed that there is a distinction – that there's something about a party that feels different. But it was hard to name, to find the shape of it. Why is it, we wondered, that the brunch in *One Last Stop* is a party and not a brunch, and why do we know immediately what that implies?

Like the best man with scuffed note cards giving a speech, I'm afraid I'm going to tell you that the Collins English Dictionary defines a party as 'a social event, often in someone's home, at which people enjoy themselves doing things such as eating, drinking, dancing, talking, or playing games'. It's so vague. Like the dictionary definition of love, or family, trying to affix a definitive label fails on so many counts. It captures nothing of the energy of a party. It does nothing

to distinguish between brunch or dinner and a party – nothing to highlight that magical tipping point.

In the end, Berta and I landed on washing up: at a party, the host washes up once everyone has gone home. It's not quite that simple, I suppose; sometimes at a party my friends are pushy and pick up a sponge before I can talk them out of it. But a party is an event, an evening of note, even if you're welcoming close friends. What follows here, then, are fifty recipes for parties: for parties in the garden on long summer evenings, for house parties in crowded living rooms, for cosy dinner parties, for glamorous weddings, for quaint tea parties with dainty crockery (or a collection of mismatched mugs and a plate, if that's more your speed). For occasions and events worth celebrating.

You can celebrate on your own, of course, with one other person, or with just a handful. I know this intimately: I live alone and have spent much of these far-from-roaring twenties celebrating things – birthdays, publication dates, babies, friends falling in love, new jobs, promotions, Tuesdays – in all sorts of assorted groups. I've celebrated with one friend on the end of the telephone, and with groups of us outdoors on distanced picnic blankets. I'm not negating those more intimate guest lists, but most of the recipes here are for a few of you, or more. There are no recipes for one, though I have eaten plenty of these dishes alone – and then again the next day. Things can be scaled up, or down. But the general rule for all these dishes is that they're designed to be shared.

In one of his *Observer* columns (it was 2005, to place things in context), Nigel Slater claimed that the only people hosting dinner parties anymore were gay couples and antique dealers. I would have been devastated at seventeen – I didn't yet know I was gay and might be afforded a special dinner party pass. But, if Nigel Slater is as correct as he always is, then this book is for the gay couples and the antique dealers... and for everyone else who loves to have friends round. I do so hope you enjoy it.

NOTES ON RECIPES

Unless otherwise stated, when testing these recipes, all eggs were large, all butter was salted, and all milk was whole.

My oven is an electric oven. Unless I note otherwise, I use it without the fan. If your oven has a fan, then you will need to drop the stated oven temperature by between 15 and 20 degrees. In general, you know your oven best; keep an eye on things as the listed cooking time comes to an end.

I shop at my local market, butcher, fishmonger, greengrocer and supermarkets in Gloucestershire. Inevitably, though, I have less access to ingredients than I did when I lived in London. If hunting for a specific ingredient that my local shops don't stock, I will generally turn to online suppliers like SousChef or The Fish Society.




GARDEN
PARTIES





There's a touch of nineteenth-century England in every garden party. In England the skies are hardly ever clear, but when at last the balmy summer days do arrive, the lords and ladies hold these sorts of semiformal parties on their country estates.

'Aloeswood Incense' from *Love in a Fallen City*, Eileen Chang

There is something distinctly English about the garden parties I have in my head. Before I moved here, Australians would pull me aside to warn me about the rain, about the grey skies and clouds they'd seen on their trips, about the drizzly January days. It's a narrative that's impossible to escape when you're leaving the sun-soaked southern hemisphere for this somewhat less temperate isle. But I knew about England already – I'd spent a winter in London when I was at university, determined to prove to myself that I could hack it. Back then, I was pleased to be able to reassure everyone that I loved the cold and the rain, that I was an indoor winter girl, that England would suit me just fine. A decade and a bit on, I mostly stand by it.

But when the sun is out in England, as she so often is, when the sky is a pale cloudless blue, when the world smells like mown grass and elderflower and honey, it's incomparably lovely. It's Sebastian and Charles drinking Champagne on the lawn at Brideshead; it's Mary and Colin and Dickon in the secret garden once it has begun to bloom again, it's Austen's Dashwoods sitting in the grass with Willoughby, and Emma Woodhouse heading off with her friends to eat strawberries; it's the play-going guests in Woolf's *Between*

the Acts eating sandwiches and drinking lemonade; it's Winnie-the-Pooh and the inhabitants of the Hundred Acre Wood celebrating Eeyore's birthday; it's the hobbits gathered together for Bilbo's one-hundred-and-eleventh birthday. As Eileen Chang noted, there's a touch of nineteenth-century England, or at least the one I know from literature, about a garden party.

But there's a divide that exists here between those people who have the space to throw parties in their gardens, and those who quite simply don't. Natasha Brown's brilliant debut, *Assembly*, is about garden parties that are exclusive, that feel inaccessible, that speak of the sort of white, privileged England that benefits only a few (often including, to be clear, me). These parties hark back to country estates, to colonialism, and to staff who eased the way between the kitchen and the picnic blanket.

My experience of England is mostly of an England without gardens; the majority of my homes here have been flats with no outdoor space. Our outdoor culture is not as ingrained as it is in (say) Australia – there is no democratization of outdoor space, few publicly accessible barbecues, insufficient public toilets. I've been lucky to have generally had walking-distance access to good parks, spaces to lay out picnic rugs and bring out food. But there's a reason that garden parties here retain a sense of being slightly posher than I am – slightly out of reach. And so I want to advocate for reclaiming garden parties from the nineteenth century, for all of us this time, and even in the absence of a garden of your own. For setting up in a corner of your local park, for finding somewhere to light a disposable barbecue, for throwing the windows open, spreading a picnic rug on the floor in a patch of sun, and breathing in the summer.



There are fifteen different sandwich options served in Katherine Mansfield's *The Garden Party*, which should be enough to convince you of just how wonderfully appropriate they are for an outdoor party: they're portable, simple and adaptable. Plus, the mere act of slicing them into fingers is a veritable magic trick – one that turns sandwiches from soggy lunchbox fodder into a fancy little snack that can be served on a tray with a cup of tea or a glass of fizzy wine.

Mum used to make them in bulk for events, ordering bread sliced lengthways from the bakery so she lost less bulk from crust off-cuts. But for a little gathering in a garden, a supermarket loaf will suffice. There are endless options for what to put between your bread slices: crunchy rounds of cucumber with white vinegar, white pepper and cress; thinly sliced ham with hot English mustard; smoked salmon and cream cheese with black pepper and a spritz of lemon. But despite my love of the familiar, I'm always on the hunt for a new favourite. Happily, Mansfield delivers: she mentions an egg and tapenade filling. I've yet to come across an egg sandwich I don't like, but these are particularly special.

EGG AND TAPENADE FINGER SANDWICHES

Makes 6 rounds or 18 fingers (easy to scale up for a bigger event)

TAPENADE
120g (1¼ cups) pitted kalamata olives
5 anchovy fillets
1tbsp capers
1 garlic clove
2tsp red wine vinegar
2tbsp olive oil
Sea salt and black pepper

SANDWICHES
8 eggs at room temperature
4tbsp mayonnaise
12 slices white bread
Butter at easy spreading temperature

1. Make the tapenade first; you can do this up to a couple of days in advance if that's easier. With a stick blender or food processor, blitz

your olives with the anchovies, capers and garlic. Add the vinegar, and then the olive oil in a thin stream, until the tapenade comes together in a paste. Taste for seasoning – it's unlikely to need salt, but you may like to add a little extra vinegar, as well as some pepper. Scoop the tapenade into a pot and cover it with a layer of oil if you're planning to store it.

2. Bring a pot of water to the boil and, once simmering, lower the eggs into it. Set a timer for 8 minutes. When the timer pings, run the eggs under plenty of cold water until they're cool enough to comfortably hold. Peel the eggs and finely chop. Mix with the mayonnaise and season to taste.

3. To assemble, take two slices of bread, spreading one very thinly with butter, and the other with tapenade. Spoon some of the egg mix over the butter, and push it out to the edges. Put the tapenade slice over the top and then trim the crusts off. Slice the sandwich into equal thirds (or four long fingers – depending on how wide your loaf is).