

**eating out** is all about a sense of occasion and drama. A good meal is a smooth-running spectacle to delight the senses, all brought together in a bravura performance by the chef. And when you invite guests into your own home the performance arena is your own kitchen. Are you ready to take centre stage?

The set and props you work with will be key to any dinner party, so give yourself the best possible preparation with these tips, ideas and secrets from kitchen experts and international chefs. With the right equipment to hand, decorating ideas and a plan of action you will find that your moment in the spotlight is pure pleasure — for you and your guests.

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# Welcome to your kitchen stage

Putting on a successful event at home is just like putting on a successful performance. You need the right elements around you in order to perform well and create the right setting. If you've ever been to a restaurant with a kitchen open to the dining room you'll know what a theatrical experience watching chefs in progress can be. Indeed the chef's table — a single table set up within the kitchen itself — is a much prized position in many top restaurants. Whether your kitchen is part of your dining room or a separate space, it provides the setting for your very own three-act drama. The way you plan your kitchen stage will be key to how you perform.

## Moving around your stage

A stage and a kitchen are both very functional places. As well as looking good to people on the outside, they need to be carefully arranged for ease of movement and safety. Just as a set designer wouldn't create a set that kept the actors hemmed into one corner, the design of your kitchen should let you move around freely, and spread the key tasks through the space.

A classic kitchen designer's trick is to take the three key areas of the kitchen — the cooking zone of oven and hob, the prepping zone with work space and sink, and the storing

zone with cupboards and fridge — and place them on three points of a triangle. This ensures each task and associated props are kept together and each zone is easily reached from another.

## The art of concealment

Every star has learnt how to show off their best assets, and how to hide their flaws and the hard work goes on back stage. Spectacular costume changes, last minute rehearsals, vocal warm-ups are all concealed from the audience in the wings, so that the magical effects on stage are not compromised. When planning your kitchen stage remember to factor in some places that guests can't easily see, and some places to quickly tidy things away to.

If your kitchen-diner is open-plan choose an island or peninsula unit with a raised profile or raised bar area — both are perfect for concealing what has just been prepared on the worktop below when you sit down to eat. Invest in a dishwasher that's quiet enough to have it running while you eat, and with an interior system of racks and baskets that is flexible enough to accommodate the large pots and pans that entertaining involves. Don't forget, you can use a dishwasher to hideaway dirty dishes too!

## director's notes

### Shhhh!

If your dining space is in the kitchen, choose quiet appliances:

- ¥ Refrigerators — under 45dB
- ¥ Dishwashers — under 45dB
- ¥ Washing machines — under 49dB

## director's notes

### Clean up

Open-plan kitchen-diners mean a chaotic kitchen is all too obvious to your guests. Look for appliances with easy-clean features so tidying is quick and simple. ¥ Pyrolytic ovens let you soak up the rave reviews of your guests at the end of the evening instead of worrying about cleaning the oven. Simply set the oven to the cleaning programme and it will incinerate all grease at a high temperature.

- ¥ For ovens and hobs look for touch controls that won't stick out and attract dirt.
- ¥ Hobs with a low edge profile are easy to wipe clean, and an induction hob is so clever it stops spills burning onto the surface.
- ¥ For a gas hob look out for pan supports that fit easily into a dishwasher for quick cleaning.

## chef's secrets

Selecting your kitchen appliances is key. Both at home and in my restaurant kitchen I rely on an intelligent oven. Whether I do traditional or experimental cooking, it delivers great result. Chef **Christian Mittermeier**, Germany.

A third of people say that when they entertain their guests, they end up hanging out in the kitchen.

Source: The Electrolux Kitchen Theatre Report 2007





## The art of stage management

If you are planning a kitchen from scratch, or investing in new appliances, take time to really consider what will work hard for you and where to position it — the right tools will take away those performance nerves from novice and experienced chefs alike.

### Setting your sightlines

The cook is not just in charge in the kitchen, it will also be your job to check waiting diners have drinks and are enjoying themselves. If your kitchen and dining space are linked you'll probably want to chat while you work. To stay on top of these different roles think about making everything as easy for you to see and assess as possible. Place ovens where possible at eye level so you can easily look in without bending. Pick a built-in single or double oven for this. Or if you prefer a freestanding cooker, choose a model with good internal lighting and the largest possible glass panel in the door.

To make life even easier you can choose an intelligent oven that takes all the guesswork out, telling you the correct shelf to use, cook time and temperature according to the weight and type of produce you're preparing. The Electrolux Inspiro, for example,

automatically calculates how to cook anything from a soufflé to a roast of lamb allowing you to be more adventurous in the kitchen while at the same time spending more time with your guests. Or look for recipe ovens where all you need to do is follow your preferred recipe and the oven will ensure your food is cooked to perfection.

If you're planning a new kitchen layout think about placing the hob where you can cook and keep an eye on the dining space — an island or peninsula unit. As the trend for Japanese teppan yaki restaurants, where chefs toss and flame ingredients in the centre of your table shows, people love to watch their food being prepared in front of them, and it will help conversation keep flowing even while you're still working. Even your dishwasher can help let you know when it's finished working for you. Put your dinner service in while you get on with other tasks and most good dishwashers will indicate visually or audibly when the wash is completed.

### Choosing your props

A theatrical set designer's job is to make everything on stage work together and to use colour, texture and shape to give a coherent style to the set. When choosing appliances for your kitchen try to bear the same principal in mind, an oven, hob and fridge from the same range will give your kitchen a more coordinated and professional appearance, with the same sleek finishes, lighting and control details throughout.

Stage sets need dramatic flourishes to create real impact with the audience, so when choosing appliances think about an impressive centrepiece. This might be a hob

## director's notes

### Small stage, big impact

Planning your kitchen stage effectively needn't mean having lots of space. In a small kitchen efficient use of space and clever layout tricks to make the most of it are even more essential to achieving a professional performance. Electrolux's cleverly designed range of compact appliances ensures that you can get the same great performance from a smaller space. Only 38cm high the appliances offer the same smart cooking technology as larger models, including combination or multi-function ovens with steam or microwave option, and a refreshment centre for drinks — and a coffee machine.

you're proud to cook on in front of guests with the latest additional features, or a side by side fridge freezer from which guests can help themselves to cold drinks and ice. And don't forget, you want your show to finish as strongly as it started, so consider adding a final flourish before the curtain falls on your evening with a built-in coffee machine.

## chef's secrets

At home I work a lot with a really fast blender which is great for soups. I also rely on my favourite set of knives and I love my steam oven which is great for slow-cooking meats and vegetables.

— Internationally renowned chef and twice Gold Champion at the Culinary Olympics Chef **Gert Klötzke**.

4 in 10 people say that they like to chat with the guests while they prepare food.

Source: The Electrolux Kitchen Theatre Report 2007

# Dining your theatre

## Low-key events

Not every performance is in the Royal Opera House or the Palladium, to an audience of hundreds or thousands. Actors often say that as long as the audience outnumber the performance, it's a show. Well not every time you cook for other people has to be a grand event. There is as much pleasure to be derived from cooking an informal weekend brunch for a few friends, or lunch for a family occasion.

On these days you may not want the setting to be as formal as you would for a large dinner party. So when you plan your kitchen layout, or want to adapt or add to it, consider planning in some relaxed seating space in or around the kitchen area. The more informal the occasion the more your guests may tend to feel comfortable enough to stand around while you cook, and even try to steal the odd taste before you plate up. Give them a space to sit at and enjoy a drink or an appetizer and you'll have more free space to get on with putting on your own show.

## chef's secrets

I know how to cook for restaurants but the cooking style I am known for is the kind of cooking you'd do at home. Simple and quick. I love to invite people to my home to cook for them. It's like playing. The table will already be set and I explain to my guests what they need to do to help with the recipe. I like people to be cooking with me. I'm happy to have them in the kitchen. There are no secrets!  
— TV chef **Pascal Brodnicki**, Poland

In really small kitchen spaces you may have to be inventive. A drop-leaf table which takes up no space when closed, but can open up to seat four might be a simple, economical solution. Kitchen designers have even designed in tables that fold out from the wall, or pull out from unit fronts.

## Crowd control

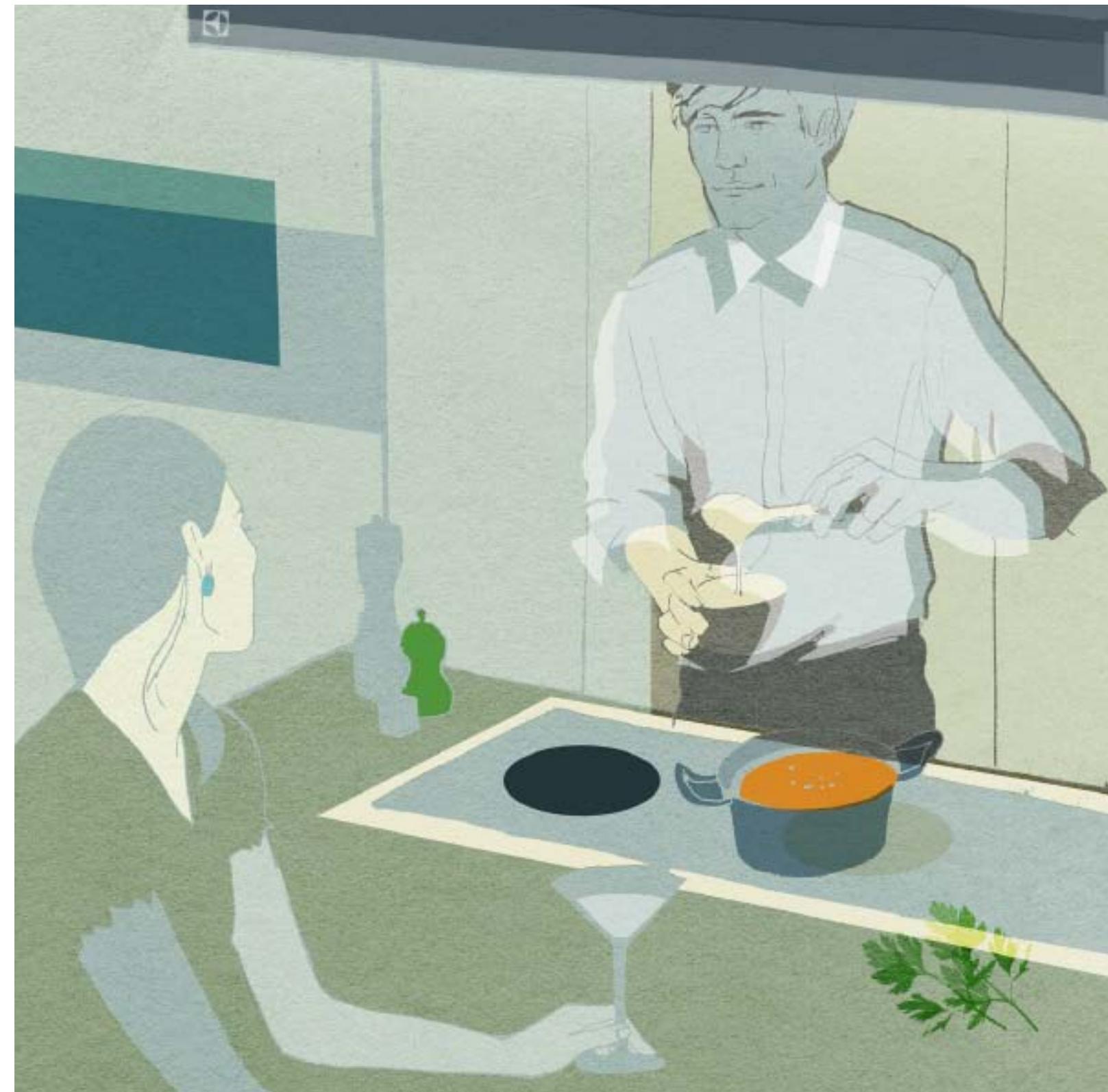
If your kitchen is a bit more spacious, or open-plan to another room, why not look at making the island or peninsular unit an area where guests can sit and watch the show, while being kept at a safe distance. If you're thinking about this, there are lots of design tricks that can designate an area of the unit as an eating area. A raised area of worktop, with guests sitting on stools at the right height, is a good way of demarcating which is work space and dining space. Using a different material for a portion of the worktop — a warm, touchable texture like wood next to stone or steel for example — has a similar effect. Both of these let your guests get close enough to see what's going on while they wait to be served, but also creates a theatrical fourth wall that defines them as audience rather than kitchen assistant.

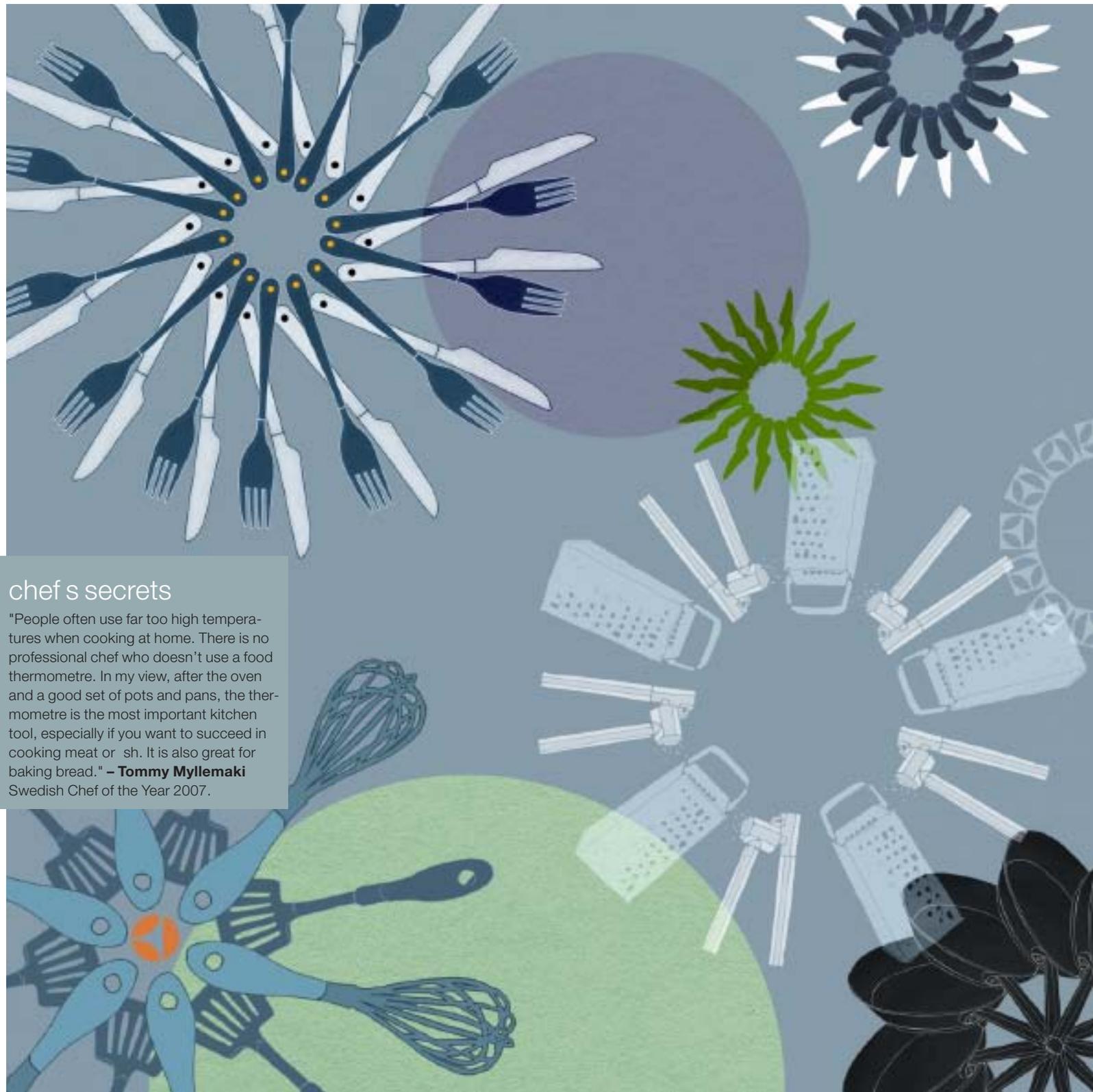
However, if you don't mind your guests around you as you work you might want to think about giving them tasks to do to keep them occupied — preparing a salad or stirring the soup. You'll find your stage invaders become a help rather than a distraction. It's a good way to start the evening off informally and to lessen the pressure on the chef.

## From stage to table

For more formal occasions you will of course want a suitable dining table, whether in a separate room or, as is the current trend, in the dining space open to the kitchen. Open-plan living is much more in tune with the more relaxed way we live now, but it can present problems for a host trying to stage an event with some magic and mystery. Elsewhere we look at how lighting is essential to altering the mood and pace of the evening, and can be used to close down the kitchen once you are ready to eat. An island or peninsula unit is also useful for creating a visual divide between kitchen stage and the space for your guests. It can also be enormously useful for the kitchen star as a half-way space between the two areas. A raised breakfast bar makes a perfect plating up zone, somewhere to add finishing touches before presenting your work to your guests.

If you are determined to keep your guests firmly planted at the table while you work it's best to show them to the dining area as they arrive. Give them a place to sit or consider putting out place name cards on the table settings if you really want no confusion, and make sure everyone has a drink and some nibbles before you go back to your preparations.





### chef's secrets

"People often use far too high temperatures when cooking at home. There is no professional chef who doesn't use a food thermometer. In my view, after the oven and a good set of pots and pans, the thermometer is the most important kitchen tool, especially if you want to succeed in cooking meat or fish. It is also great for baking bread." – **Tommy Myllemaki** Swedish Chef of the Year 2007.

## Assembling a star-quality tool kit

Behind the scenes in every theatre are artists working with tired and tested kit — make-up people, seamstresses, lighting riggers, stage hands. Every artist, theatrical or culinary, has a set of simple tools that work for them. Not flashy, fancy or necessarily expensive. More important is that you find kitchen tools you can work with, trust, and which produce results every time you use them. A good set of knives and a good set of pans are essential kit for any kitchen star in the making.

### Types of pan

Every kitchen star needs a good set of basics. Don't be tempted into buying loads of different pans and attachments but choose a few versatile items of good quality. This means some good saucepans in different sizes and a couple of frying pans — one small and light for small amounts, one large for things that need more room and slower cooking. If stir-frying is part of your kitchen routine then invest in a good wok. Here the opposite of the saucepan rule applies — wok cooking is all about heat and speed, so look for a thin, light steel wok that you can lift and shake around easily.

### chef's secrets

Chef **Viv Pidgeon** of the internationally renowned school for both professional and amateur chefs, Leith's School of Food and Wine and author of Leith's Simple Cookery Bible, reveals her kitchen must-haves. I personally couldn't do without a garlic crusher, potato ricer, pineapple corer, microplane grater, a mixer and a hand-held blender. The gadgets I have that are collecting dust are a fish kettle, pasta machine, slow cooker, coffee maker and grinder and an ice cream machine.

Another useful addition is a griddle pan. Made of heavy cast iron this is great for getting a slightly smoky flavour for meat, fish or vegetables. The food sits on the raised griddles rather than in the fat, making it a healthier cooking option. Lastly, don't forget the ever-useful roasting tin. Choose the size according to the sort of dish you cook most often — if you want to roast large sides of meat complete with potatoes go for something big! Thin tins will warp in the heat so go for solidity and weight, and look for ovenproof handles on larger tins for easy manoeuvrability.

### Choosing your saucepans

It's worth investing in the best pans that you can afford, as good quality should last a lifetime. Things to look for when shopping for your pans include a heavy bottom that won't dent or warp. Imperfections in the base mean food will cook unevenly and burn. Choose the right material for you. Non-stick coatings can be useful but require careful treatment (no metal spoons or scourers) to preserve the coating. Induction hobs require specific pans (see below). Also look for a sturdy handle firmly attached to the pan, and for dishes that transfer from hob to oven an ovenproof handle will save on the washing up. As with choosing dishwasher-safe pans.

### Matching hobs and pans

Your hob and your pans need to work well together for you to get the best, most reliable results. If you cook on a gas hob look for strong, sturdy pan supports that let you put your pan down anywhere without fear of it tipping over. Induction technology is the latest thing for hobs, but this type of

### director's notes

#### Checklist

Before you start cooking work out exactly what equipment is required and make sure you have it all to hand. Nothing is more stress-inducing than the dawning realisation that you don't have or can't find a tool essential to the dish you are cooking. Many recipes will have a list of specialist equipment at the top, but here is a quick checklist of basics.

- ✓ Pans
- ✓ Colanders or strainers
- ✓ Weighing scales and measuring jug
- ✓ Mixing bowls
- ✓ A selection of wooden spoons for stirring, metal spoons for measuring and a spatula
- ✓ A vegetable peeler
- ✓ A garlic crusher and a small grater
- ✓ A corkscrew
- ✓ A can opener
- ✓ Salt and pepper mills
- ✓ Tongs for moving meat, fish or vegetables between pans and plates gently
- ✓ Trivets for hot pans

appliance does restrict the pans you choose. Induction provides safe, quick, efficient heat, with lots of flexibility for outside pans. Electrolux's In-nit Induction Hob is a perfect example — just place a pan of any size on the cross marked on the surface, for guaranteed perfect heat distribution. As induction technology works by creating a magnetic field you'll need to make sure your pans are the right sort. Steel, enameled steel and cast iron pans all work with induction. To check if your existing pans will work see if they stick to a household magnet.

### Choosing your knives

Your most important purchase will be a well-balanced stainless steel-blade knife. Place the knife-handle joint in the palm of your hand and the handle should fall lightly into your palm. Choose a blade that doesn't bend and look for knives where the blade is riveted into the full length of the handle for extra longevity and stability.

# Creating the scene

Away from the kitchen, the way you set your table for guests is one of the major ingredients of an event to remember. You're creating the set on which your hard work will be played out, and detail is everything. The table setting also goes some way to indicating to guests what is to come. A table laid with heavy cutlery, a candelabra and place settings, for example, will put your guests in the mood for a dramatic evening of formal courses and fine dining, but equally effective is the pile of white bowls, simple table linen and a vase of just-picked-from-the-garden flowers, indicating a fun, informal get together. The way you set your stage sends subtle signals out about what to expect for your guests and will always add to the sense of theatre, whatever the scale, so give it some thought before the big day. Inspiration for colour and pattern can come from current trends for home decor, a restaurant you've visited recently, the food you plan to serve or the flowers in your garden. For some extra advice we asked some experts in the field for their views, and what they do in their own homes.

## Choosing tableware

As sales director for international tableware brand Villeroy & Boch, Stuart Cullen gives us his tips and trend ideas for what to choose and what to leave on the shelf. The major trend is for simplification of the table. Today we eat simpler food and fewer courses than thirty years ago. Restaurant eating has greatly influenced what we do at home, and chefs can't be bothered to have lots of hardware on the table. They're focused on having the right crockery for the right food. Undecorated or simple tableware makes the food the hero. White — a trend originally

from restaurants — is still huge, but you can soften it by choosing white plates in off-round or rectangular shapes.

¥ If you like decoration on plates then use it as an accent. Use decorated plates for minor courses or appetizers, to highlight them.

¥ Decorative trends for crockery include geometric, Pop Art style prints or feminine floral decoration.

¥ Don't worry about fussy bits of crockery — choose what's useful to the way you eat. We eat more pasta and salad than ever, so look for sets of useful serving bowls.

¥ Oven-to-tableware is much more popular. If you entertain regularly or are often pushed for time look for elegant dishes that can go from oven to table to dishwasher.

## The informal occasion

Don't be afraid to opt for table dressing that suits the occasion. Not every dinner party table has to be presented as an opulent banquet. Simplicity lets the food you've slaved over speak for itself and can aid the creation of a fun and relaxed atmosphere. We asked tableware designer Emma Bridgewater for her ideas on setting the scene for informal dining occasions.

Personally I think there are NO rules! I rely heavily on candles and flowers to make the table look lovely for a party. I might choose a dominant colour scheme too, in the flowers and the linen. We are all more aware of colour trends than we used to be — for example for this summer I'll be keeping an eye out for vases and linen in fresh green. I grew up in a big, friendly house where the fun was much more important than everything matching. I don't worry if the crockery doesn't match but I often stick to a colour theme

and, if I run out before all the plates are laid, I add some from a pile of plain cream earthenware. I like earthenware better than porcelain or bone china as it's warmer and friendlier. Most important though — relax. If you enjoy it, so will everyone else.

## director's notes

### Last-minute linen

With table linen the only rule is to choose what you like. A basic, heavy tablecloth in white or cream is a good place to start, over which you can add smaller cloths or perhaps a slim runner down the centre to draw out the colours of the food, flowers or tableware. Getting it out of the cupboard, washed and ironed in time for your guests' arrival is the sort of job that can slip down the list, but here your appliances can help you manage your preparation time better. The Electrolux Time Manager washing machines, for example, lets you choose the wash time rather than have the machine decide for you. This is ideal if you need something washed in a hurry because you have guests arriving soon! Also perfect for the busy host might be Electrolux's Iron Aid tumble drier, which uses steam technology to cut average ironing times in half. Even better, you can use its Refresh programme to freshen up linen that's been in the airing cupboard for a while, crease free and smelling just-washed.



## florist's secrets

### The power of flowers

Celebrity florist **Jamie Aston** — whose clients include Gordon Ramsey at The Connaught Hotel, Joan Collins and Victoria Beckham — gives us the inside story on floral trends and how he sets the scene for his own dinner guests.

¥ Dinner parties for me are usually very relaxed and informal. I like to dress the table in a simple, welcoming way. At the moment my favourite look is tulips lined up on the table in individual vases.

¥ Try to tie the flowers in with the occasion and the season. I recently decorated the cake with flowers for a friend's birthday. Flowers don't have to be in a vase!

¥ Floristry is moving away from the more formal, forced look. I like loose, natural elements — retro garden roses in hand-made ceramics, or a soft, natural palette of blues, greens and lilacs in vessels inspired by natural, organic shapes.

## Light up the room

The right lighting can have a magical, transforming effect — ask any actress. Stage lighting doesn't just add atmosphere and contribute to dramatic effects it also highlights the parts of the stage you want the audience to focus on, and conceals the bits you'd rather they didn't see. Planning a lighting scheme for your kitchen and dining room can achieve similar results, and thinking of an evening's entertaining like a theatrical performance will help you to see the different kinds of lighting you will need.

### Rehearsal lighting

While you are preparing the food you will want good functional task lighting to illuminate the whole space. If you plan to cook in front of people you will also want to highlight the hob area.

¥ Standard lighting recessed into the ceiling, often in the form of spotlights, gives a good overall light to work by.

¥ You will also want more specific low-voltage task lighting to highlight specific areas of the worktop. Task lighting fixed to the underside of overhead units is perfect as it lights just the worktop and the positioning means it can't be obstructed by you as you work.

¥ Choose a cooker hood with good task lighting. It will help you see clearly what you're cooking, and if your hob is positioned to let guests watch you stir-frying, you can dim the rest of the lights and let your wok-work take centre stage.

### The chef's the star

If your hob is placed on an island unit or a peninsula facing guests, your extractor hood above will also be prominent in the room. Choose a hood that is sculptural and sleek to give the whole cook zone real impact, and provide stools so your guests can crowd round as you cook. For maximum impact a downlighter set into the ceiling just in front of the hood will send a beam of light down the stainless steel front, acting as a spotlight for your skills.

### Dim the house lights

Once the cooking is over and it's time to eat you may wish to draw a curtain over the kitchen area so you and your guests can better focus on the food. Like the dimming of house lights in the theatre, a lighting scheme that can denote the transition from one part of the evening to another is an invaluable tool for a kitchen star.

Rather than just switching off the kitchen lights, think about installing some mood lighting that will subtly light the kitchen area once you've left it. There are many ways of highlighting attractive areas while disguising the busy bits that may not be so tidy. Lighting on the kickplate of your lower kitchen units, for example, will wash the floor in light, an effect which you could team with internal lighting in glass-fronted wall cupboards for a very soft, diffused light to create atmosphere.

To highlight objects within the kitchen look at areas of shelving or alcoves. Strips of low-voltage track light along the side profiles of shelves will pick out vases and ornaments to give the room a less functional feel, downplaying the kitchen units themselves. Similarly, lighting running along the top of the wall units illuminates the area between units and ceiling, opening up the space while drawing attention away from the work areas. The Electrolux Built-in range has its own sophisticated lighting designed into the appliance fronts, which when left as the sole light in a kitchen will create minimal, sophisticated lines of soft light sparkling off the stainless steel without throwing the spotlight on the pans in the sink and serving spoons on the worktop.

### designer's thoughts

In the theatre powerful combinations of light and shade, tone and colour are used to create the mood for each set and direct our focus towards important characters or objects around the stage. There is no reason why domestic lighting should not create the same powerful effects.

—**Sally Storey**, Design Director,  
John Cullen Lighting, from *Lighting Recipes and Ideas*.

57% of people say they like to set the right scene for guests at home.

Source: The Electrolux Kitchen Theatre Report 2007

### Put your food in the spotlight

Your guests of course need to see what they're eating, so as the kitchen lights dim concentrate on illuminating the dinner table. Standard overhead lighting will feel too harsh, as it is designed to light every corner of the room. For evening you want something more intimate, so that the whole focus is on the meal you've prepared and the people you are sharing it with. A simple arrangement of a pendant light or lights, softened with simple shades, directly over the dining table will cocoon you all in gentle light, helping the rest of the room fall away.

Don't forget that after the meal your guests will want to move away from the table and enjoy the closing act of the evening over coffee. A variety of table lights and standing lights in the rest of the room will help you create a gently glowing relaxed lighting scheme for easy conversation, as you clear away.

### Special effects

All of the above is about lighting you'll need to build into your home, but if you are planning a one-off event it can be fun to totally go for broke and transform your home with some temporary lighting effects.

Lighting your house differently from the front door right through to the dining room is a great way to change the whole atmosphere of the house, and can be done simply with clusters of candles on side tables in the hall way, on the edge of each step of the stairs, on a balcony or window ledge, on a mantelpiece or hearth — anywhere you can think of which is safe. Candlelight produces a very warm, intimate feel and candles grouped together can generate a surprising amount of light — try it in the centre of the

dining table around or instead of a floral arrangement. You can also get strings of indoor or outdoor lights to wrap around banisters, swath across one wall or coil around a mirror. Many lighting stores also sell battery-powered strands or bunches of small LED lights which can be used to light the centrepiece of the table for the evening or highlight flowers, vases or other small features within the room.

For a more spectacular event though you may even want to think about hiring some lighting for the evening. Many lighting companies hire to domestic clients and can advise on how to theatrically light your space. If your dining room looks out onto a garden for example, temporarily lighting shrubs, planters or even trees outside can give your room a wonderful scenic backdrop. Small uplights can be brought in to wash coloured light up walls or columns, whole-wall lighting webs can be used to give a twinkly feature backdrop to the table and even small spotlights could be installed to bathe the table in light as your guests arrive. The power of lighting is such that without any sort of redecorating your home could be made to look like an entirely different place for an evening that your guests will remember long into the future.

## director's notes

### The lighting expert

Sally Storey of John Cullen Lighting has written extensively on lighting for the home. Here she makes suggestions for lighting the dining space.

We can learn from the drama of stage lighting. By controlling the different effects one can create mood changes similar to what we see on stage. The brightly lit kitchen setting can be dramatically transformed in to the intimate dining setting. The key is to create soft layers of light throughout the room. Install a couple of lights over the dining table for a soft, atmospheric glow in its centre, or to highlight a centerpiece like flowers. Decide what your focal point is and light it — it may simply be your curtains which you should light with low voltage downlights or an alcove or replace.

Over a third of people say that when they are cooking an untried recipe for guests they will sometimes hold a dress rehearsal.

Source: The Electrolux Kitchen Theatre Report 2007



# Rehearsal and preparation

Actors don't just talk about rehearsals, they talk about the rehearsal process. It's the time when they can safely make mistakes, perfect their scenes and get familiar enough with what they're doing to add the final, killer details that make for a really memorable production. It's the absolutely essential part of preparing any theatrical event, but a part people often miss out on when preparing a kitchen performance. Planning your menu well in advance and working out what it requires is the best start any culinary event you stage can have.

## The week before – a dry run

You've planned the menu, worked out the ingredients you need, thought about dressing the table and which wine to serve. What else do you need to do? Well, a rehearsal will help you smooth out all the unforeseen problems, the bits where the recipe suddenly requires something unexpected, where you need some utensil you don't have or an ingredient you haven't defrosted.

You don't have to cook the meal right through to get a rehearsal, simply write lists and thoroughly read each recipe. But if you have the time there's nothing wrong with testing a dish out before the big night. If you're cooking a dish for the first time it lets you find out the bits that work, and the bits that don't, while your kitchen is free of guests and it doesn't matter if you make a mistake or three.

## The night before – get ahead

Get as much done as you can the night before taking heat off the big day. One of the simplest things to do in advance, but which often gets left to the last minute, is

laying the table. Rather than thrusting a handful of cutlery into the hands of your first guests the scene will be set before everyone arrives.

Professional kitchens prepare lots of food in advance without compromising quality. It's more a question of designing a menu that will work with the time you have. If you know that you only have a few hours then choose a cold starter, dessert, or both. Mousses, terrines, sorbets and jams, as well as sushi or tapas dishes can all be prepared the evening before and left to chill in the fridge. Simple chilled starters of smoked salmon, potato or a chilled soup need minimal preparation on the day and can be taken straight from the fridge to your waiting guests in just a few minutes. They are also light enough to compliment a more substantial main course. For dessert opt for chilled puddings like chocolate mousse which can be made and served in individual portions so you can take them from fridge to table without the hassle of plating up in an already well-used kitchen area.

For the main course you might want to choose a slow-cooking stew dish or something that needs to be left to marinate, staples that can be left to cook without much interference from the cook. Stir-frying and other hob-based cooking may take less time but requires more concentration from the chef, tying you to the hob. Vegetables can often be prepared in advance, with washing and chopping the night before and even par-cooking well before your guests arrive, to be reheated in a microwave or boiling water just before plating up. Don't be tempted to serve endless vegetable dishes — stick to a couple done well.

## director's notes

### Prep check

- It's much easier to be organised if your kitchen is set up to help you.
- ¥ Look for a fridge-freezer large enough to let you pre-prepare and store cold dishes and vegetables.
- ¥ Look for fridges that help you see easily everything inside, glass shelving and transparent vegetable boxes, with special storage for chilling drinks, keeping them well away from any prepared food.
- ¥ An intelligent oven keeps cooking new dishes stress-free by telling which shelf to use, what function to select, which temperature to choose and how long to cook it for, according to the weight and food information you input.
- ¥ A good microwave helps the professional chef reheat and defrost food when needed, ensuring everything arrives at the table piping hot and perfectly done on time.
- ¥ A warming drawer, usually fitted below your oven, is invaluable for quickly warming plates and for keeping cooked food warm at around 80 degrees.

## On the day – the final countdown

Whether you've got the whole day to prepare or just a few hours, do what the professional chefs do, formulate a plan of action and stick to it. Write out a timetable if you want to. The act of writing down what you need to do and when, like a script, will help you organise tasks to be most time efficient and also to remember what needs doing next when the heat is on. If it helps, stick a note on things in the fridge about when they need to come out to make sure they're served at the right temperature. Even the most experienced kitchen performer needs to keep track of what's going on when they cook something new, so make as many notes as you need and start cooking with confidence.

# Welcoming your guests

You've got your menu planned, your food preparation sorted and the table plan is ready for the moment your guests arrive and you raise the curtain on your evening to remember. But first, give some thought to the drinks you'll be serving. As soon as your guests arrive you want to make them feel at home and whet their appetites for the evening ahead, and the time-honoured way of doing this is presenting them with a drink. All the chefs we spoke to had similar advice about hosting a really great event, don't worry if the cooking takes longer than planned, or something goes wrong, bring out another bottle of wine and much will be happily forgiven.

## Stock check

As well as the wine, plus spirits for pre or post dinner drinks, make sure you've got in plenty of juice or mixers as well as a non-alcoholic choice for non-drinkers. But have you remembered the water? Still and sparkling? And what about having some ice to hand? And some coffee to finish with?

## bartender's quote

"No one wants their cocktail lukewarm. Ice, ice, lots of ice, that is the key to success. Buy ice cubes or make them yourself in the freezer, but make sure that the ice cubes are a clean, even size. There is a big difference between good and bad ice.

**Åsa Nevestveit**, Bartender of the Year 2002, London

There's a lot to remember and a lot to find space for in the refrigerator, and that's without guests arriving with bottles of their own which need chilling. There are, however, a number of handy solutions on the market which are designed to help you have whatever drink your guests desire on hand, and at just the right temperature, when they want them.

## The wine

Most of us, even if we consider ourselves wine lovers, aren't lucky enough to have space for a wine cellar. The modern alternative though, requiring far less in the way of space, is a wine storage appliance. They can be built-in or freestanding and the best models are designed to store both red and white wine at the appropriate temperatures within the same appliance, often with room for outside bottles and bottled water too. Electrolux's Integrated Wine Cellar is a perfect example, with temperature dividers that create temperature-specific zones for up to 52 bottles of red, white and rose wine. Electronic controls and displays let you monitor temperature levels, a pull-out drawer can accommodate larger bottles and there is a child-safety device to keep out the under-age.

## director's notes

### Easy ice

An essential ingredient for all sorts of cocktails and for keeping other drinks chilled, ice at home has always been a bit fiddly, involving the freezer compartment and the less-than-glamorous business of pushing ice cubes out of trays or freezer bags. A busy host might expect a more sophisticated solution, and even one where guests can help themselves to an ice top up whenever they want one, without fuss. A low-tech but effective solution is to invest in a couple of ice buckets which will keep the ice frozen while out of the fridge for guests to help themselves to, or even a bowl inside the fridge gives easier access to ice for the host.

Appliances offer two solutions here. One is a freezer with an in-built ice maker, which will keep making ice cubes so you don't need to worry about running out, no matter how long your evening goes on for. Electrolux's Glacier freezer dispenses ice cubes through the door, making it easy for everyone to help themselves. It can produce up to 100 ice cubes in 24 hours too, so you know what you're serving is the freshest possible.

Investing in a new fridge-freezer isn't the only solution though. Growing in popularity are built-in drinks dispensers. These machines are built in to your kitchen units, as a built-in coffee machine would be, and plumbed into the mains water so you never need to worry about filling up water tanks. Look for a machine which produces ice as well as still and sparkling filtered water, and one which allows for both ambient and chilled water — even the wine lovers of the group will be helping themselves to glasses of cool fresh water all night.



### Last minute chills

Maybe one of your guests has arrived brandishing a bottle of champagne, or perhaps you've just realised, with minutes to go, that you've forgotten to put the white wine to chill. The usual solution is to stick the bottles in the freezer for a few minutes, but it's all too easy to forget about them once you've shut the door, often with disastrously explosive consequences. Electrolux has come up with a solution that is not only safer but faster. The Drinks Express incorporates a chilling unit with room for up to eight cans or two bottles of wine. It chills drinks six times faster than in the fridge and a third faster than they'll chill in the freezer, and the compact design still leaves a capacious fridge cavity for all the other food storage.

### Push for water

Restaurant eating and more awareness of healthy living have pushed the market for bottled water ever upwards in recent years, and any good host will have stocked up on bottled water for guests. Storage of outsize water bottles can be an issue though, and appliance manufacturers have reacted with alternative solutions for the home. The Electrolux Brita fridge is a perfect example, with a Brita water filter fitted inside dispensing chilled, filtered water through the front of the door, offering a saving on space but also a big saving in cost over bottled water. The water comes from a four-litre reusable tank and the fridge has an indicator telling you when to change the filter cartridge.

Lovers of sparkling water are also catered for, in a different fridge, the Source, which dispenses chilled still and sparkling water through the door from a main source at the touch of a button.

### Finishing touch

Don't forget the coffee! Coffee at the end of the meal draws a line under the meal and finally gives the chef a chance to sit down and relax with their guests, with the satisfaction of an enjoyable evening complete and all the hard work over.

For easy results every time, and the professional touches you'd get in a coffee shop or restaurant you can't beat a coffee maker, whether it's a simple, convenient countertop model or a built-in machine that helps keep the kitchen worktop free of excess clutter. If you love lattes and cappuccinos look out for a milk frothing function. Genuine coffee lovers should choose machines which allow you to grind your own coffee beans — the taste from just-ground beans is unbeatably fresh.



# Your cooking on show

Why do people go to the theatre, as opposed to just settling for the cinema or the TV? The answer is that theatre as an art form engages all the senses, and also live performance carries an element of risk. You are watching something real unfold before your eyes, something that can never be exactly the same as the previous night.

These are the same reasons why watching a meal being prepared for you, whether at home or in a restaurant is such a compelling experience. When you are cooking for an event at home this theatricality is what will make for a memorable and enjoyable evening. This is why creating an island unit in the heart of the kitchen and dining area has become ever more popular in kitchen design.

If you've ever had a dish of sizzling chicken brought to your table or watched a magnificent lamb being prepared you'll know that the heat, light, noise and smell all add up to add that extra bit of spectacle and excitement to what you're eating. And if you

## chef's secrets

Cooking on the hob, and especially on high powered burners, is the fastest cooking there is, so timing is important. If you're not used to using high levels of heat have a practice first. Chef **Tommy Myllemaki** gives us his advice: 'I have done demonstration cooking and cooking on TV and as long as you know what you're doing it's not a problem. My best tip is to keep your kitchen very clean and organised. Also read the recipe before you start and break it down step by step in your mind. Lastly, don't overdo it — and you won't if you keep looking at what's in your pan. If it looks like it's burning, take it off the heat!'

don't get it exactly right first time — well your guests know they are seeing a live performance. Just keep calm and start over — it all adds to the sense of drama.

## Choose your arena

If you like to cook in front of your guests, especially if you love cooking and serving a lot of Asian dishes that require swift cooking over a strong heat, you need the right tools. Wok burners are specially designed for stir fry cooking, giving much more power than standard hob gas rings so the food can be flash cooked at high temperature, keeping it crisp and the flavours fresh. Many modern hobs include four standard rings plus a central wok-burner so you don't have to compromise on space or versatility. For the best power look for a triple ring burner, which ensures the heat is strong enough and easily controllable, no matter how many you're cooking for.

Other options which work well mounted on an island unit include individual hobs with griddles or wok burners, or the latest desirable appliance, the Teppan Yaki. Used for Asian cooking, this flat disk of metal heats up to form an intensely hot surface for cooking in — it's great for stir fries and as a talking point in itself.

However, cooking in front of your guests doesn't have to mean ingredients tossed high over leaping flames. There can be something just as stimulating and enjoyable in watching your host slowly prepare something on the hob that takes its time. The scent of stews, curries and soups cooking slowly while friends gather round in anticipation makes a warm, welcoming start to the evening. If this sounds more like your style then a simple, beautiful hob pos-

## chef's secrets

Whenever I teach cookery workshops I say that if you're not used to cooking every day for guests, always write down a list, step by step, of what you need to do. Before you start cooking anything make sure you have all the ingredients you need, and all your pans, knives etc. It's always good to spend a bit of time going through the whole process of what you're cooking in your mind.

—Chef **Gert Klötzke**.

tioned so the host can see guests and chat while cooking is a wonderful kitchen centrepiece. Gas hobs are robust and very responsive, but an induction hob is easy to control, tends to be less obtrusive with a better profile, and has no residual heat once the pan is removed, making it a very safe option for cooking on an island unit.

## Smelling sweet

The smell of food and spices mixing over flames can be the best teaser for the meal ahead, engaging the senses and whetting your guests' appetites for the coming meal. But if you like to cook stir fries, sizzle steaks or lamb dishes while your guests watch, make sure you have your extraction sorted out so the smell doesn't linger in your dining space over dessert.

Extractors can be placed above the hob, with different models for island units or hobs next to a wall. But the more high-powered your hob, and the more frying or strong smelling food you cook the more important the performance of your hood. Make sure the hood is at least as wide as the hob and operate quietly so noise doesn't dominate your evening.



## All in the presentation

A good host knows that while the hustle and bustle of cooking a meal at home can be a theatrical experience, eating food can be just as much of an occasion. It is, after all, what your assembled guests have been waiting for. Food is not just about taste — when you're cooking for an audience it is also about visual spectacle. After all that hard work you want your final flourish to be met with oohs and ahhs from an audience impressed with their eyes, then their palates.

Take time at the earliest stages of planning your meal to picture how you will serve it up. When the cooking is all complete and your guests are happily settled with drinks and nibbles, take a few minutes to clear some space, set out all the plates and serve up something that looks as good as it tastes. Why not steal some ideas from professional kitchens for adding that extra edge to your plates.

### Plates please

Take time to choose the right plates, but don't be afraid to go for classic white. A simple, unpatterned plate will put the emphasis on to what you are serving, giving a clean professional look. Equally important

### chef's secrets

Chef **Tommy Myllemaki** explains how he plans the look of his dishes. When I'm cooking I like to start with ideas for vegetables to get a lot of colour into the dish. I use big plates with not too much on them so the food is spread out and not cluttered. I try to limit myself to three flavours on the plate, and I think about how to present each element individually. Hopefully they will add up to make something new each time.

is the size of plate. Try to anticipate the portion size of each course and choose the plates you use accordingly. A delicate starter on too large a plate will look lost, or worse, like you didn't have quite enough food to go round. Plates too small will cram the food together, diluting the impact of each element of the dish, as well as making it difficult for you guests to eat with ease.

### Precision arrangement

Everything's ready to go on the plates? Take a quick breather, a second to calm down, grab some clean utensils and make sure you do a good, steady-handed job of plating up. Arrange the food so that it is highest in the middle of the plate, rather than all laid flat. Like careful composition of a picture, this level of detail will help your food look more professional and appetising. Using an uneven number of something often looks better on a plate than an even number, whether it's fillets of fish or potatoes. Try to group foods and colours together. You're not after symmetry, rather a spread in which each item compliments the item next to it. When serving meat or fish make sure you serve it best side uppermost — this is usually the side that has gone on to the pan or the griddle first.

### Decorating tips

Now it's just time to add the final notes. Always do the finishing touches at the very last minute — dress the salad just before it gets to the table so it stays fresh and crisp, not limp. Keep some fresh herbs in the fridge, or growing in pots somewhere in the kitchen to use as a fresh garnish. Use a herb that's also present in the dish to avoid taste clashes. If your dish has a sauce or

### chef's secrets

Chef **Gert Klötzke** tells us his presentation principals. I usually work with different looking plates for each course, mixing different shapes and colours. It keeps things looking different and interesting. I tend not to use fancy tricks, instead concentrating on having a good mix of natural colour in each dish. You don't want all the food on the plate to be brown — when your guests see the dish it should look so good they can't wait to eat it.

just suited to it, add this right at the end as an accent colour. Put it into a squeeze sauce bottle or icing bag and pipe it on to the plate for a neater, splash-free pool of colour on the plate. It also lets you create stripes or swirls for a more dynamic look, chocolate sauce or raspberry puree drawn in a circle round a desert, balsamic vinegar zigzagged across a simple tricolour salad.

Deserts are perhaps the best part of the meal to really have fun with the presentation. If you are preparing a cold dish consider putting a spin on how you would normally present it by making them as individually portioned deserts, arriving ready-made in dainty dishes. Instead of the herb garnishes for the main courses decorate with twists of lemon or orange peel, grated chocolate, nutmeg or a few fresh berries.

All that remains now is to enjoy your own slice of culinary theatre. Take the expert tips and decorating ideas as inspiration but don't be afraid to add your own ideas. The real secret to put on a memorable show is to cook with confidence. It's your own one-off performance — enjoy it.



*Thinking of you*  
**Electrolux**