

## Dining Locally: The Dining Club

These are exciting times for people who love to cook and dine. We have a strong desire to know where the food on our plates comes from, how it is grown or raised, and are encouraged to meet and support farmers in our own neighborhoods. Sometimes we want to try new flavors and ingredients, and these farmers oblige. At other times, we're thankful that such dedicated growers aren't losing sight of the heritage breed or the antique fruit for the sake of the newest and latest tastes.

And eating locally isn't only limited to the trip between the home kitchen and the neighborhood CSA or farm stand. The local movement is afoot and thriving in our food communities at large as well. We can choose to dine a few minutes from home, at locally managed neighborhood spots; the chefs at many restaurants build relationships with farms and highlight that local farm's produce; many farms will partner with chefs or restaurants to serve you a meal in their fields when the weather is fine; and underground, word-of-mouth restaurants, those with home-operated and non-professional kitchens, have sprung up all over for people who want to eat together close to home.

And then there are my friends, Amy and Jonathan Sherwood, who have followed the path of local community dining in a different direction altogether. They belong to a dining club.

I sat down with these friends and neighbors on a warm and sticky evening at the close of summer. Our conversation about their dining club, EDABL (Eat Drink and Be Literary), had been a long time coming, with daily life and work and the local political events that introduced us to each other taking priority. The Sherwoods have, I had long felt, an interesting local food story to tell, so we kept revisiting the idea and the timing until, in their living room on that sultry summer night, I would finally sit them down to tell it.

Amy's involvement in EDABL began nine years ago in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, before she married Jonathan and just after she had returned to New England from New York. She walked into South Street and Vine, a local wine shop, where a homemade sign, the kind with the tear away telephone number strips, caught her eye. Do you like to eat? the sign read. Do you like to drink? Do you like to read?

The recent Culinary Institute of America grad did, indeed, enjoy all those things. Plus, having relocated, she also liked the idea of meeting people, forming a community with other locals who liked the things she did.

The club started meeting with just a handful of members, people who, like Amy, were intrigued enough by the sign to call and take a chance on making something special out of a fledgling club. As this original handful got married or partnered up or simply met other food and drink folks through work, more people were welcomed into the club. Today, a typical monthly dinner will embrace about 14 or 15 hungry, thirsty people.

Amy and Jonathan invited me to attend EDABL's holiday dinner at the beginning of December as their guest. It had been a long time since our loose conversation about the club and I was eager

to see the group in action. Members make a disparate group – truffle importers/spice purveyors, a chocolatier, a horticulturist, an events planner, a vegetarian – and yet these relationships had outlasted most straightforward book clubs, some friendships, and more than a few marriages. What, I really wanted to know, had brought them together? What had kept them dining together every month for the past nine years?

I talked about these things with several members during the hors d'oeuvres hour while eating Maine crab and deviled duck eggs from local birds, listened to several theories, and enjoyed the individual stories. No one gave me the same answer to my question. “It’s the food.” “It’s the mix of personalities.” “It’s the anticipation of the month’s theme.” “It’s the pleasure and the generosity.” From an outsider’s perspective, it was all those things. And it was more than that too.

Later, over dinner, as voices rose and fell in lively conversations, I sat back and listened some more. Everyone seemed so familiar with each other despite the fact that, as more than one person pointed out, they rarely socialize outside of club dinners. Of course, a good meal and several bottles of wine will break down those barriers pretty quickly.

Yes, it’s the food and the personalities and everything else the club members talked about, but ultimately people simply like to come together. We like to gather. That we choose to do so more and more these days in our homes or in local restaurants or in the homes of friends seems to say we crave these local connections because they make the world seem smaller, less rushed, and less overwhelming. At least during dinner.

If you want to start your own local dining club, here are some things Amy and Jonathan recommend:

**Set guidelines so there is no confusion.**

Guidelines such as: members pick a month to host, and as host, provide the place, place settings, main course, and theme; dinner day is the same day of the month, every month, set in stone. Those sorts of guidelines. A group needs clear ground rules so there is never any question about who does what and when.

**Set a theme at the start.**

Because EDABL’s focus is on food and literature, the host chooses something to read and guests bring a dish that in some way reflects what they’ve read. For example, smoked trout featured prominently when the group was assigned Hemingway’s “Big Two-Hearted River.” You may choose a local farm or seasonal theme, or anything you think will sustain interest and inspire creativity.

**Don’t be afraid to advertise for people to join you.**

Sometimes a group of friends won’t last but a group of strangers will. A friend may often know he or she can beg off from a gathering because of the friendship, where a more casual

acquaintance is likely to keep the commitment. Use the old sign in the wine shop (or gourmet shop, or grocery store), but also give Twitter and other social media a try. Twitter in particular can connect you to people with similar interests very quickly.

### **Know what you want out of a group.**

People gather for many reasons – friendship, camaraderie, discussion, support, business. Make sure your reasons are clear from the start.

### **But stay open minded.**

You may want to always discuss food, but another potential member is more into the ritual of gathering and food is secondary. That doesn't mean you can't find common ground and get what you both need from the club.

### **Surrender control.**

You can't be the kind of person who gets upset that you're left with a houseful of dirty dishes after midnight. Or who wants to micromanage the menu. If you want control, throw a party, don't start a club.

### **Get out of your food comfort zone.**

Try everything. A vegetarian might occasionally try meat, and non-vegetarians will often sample the tofu dish. One member may not like seafood, but will elect to give it a chance at a club dinner.

### **Be creative.**

The idea is to inspire and sustain. You want to come to me in 9 years and be able to tell me, as Jonathan and Amy have with justified pride, that you have met almost 108 times. Almost 108 fun, exciting, knock their socks off times. Bounce ideas off other club members. Discussion often breeds flights of creativity.

### **Be realistic.**

The group may not click, even after all the care that has gone into the planning and execution. Don't be afraid to say it isn't working. If you feel it, chances are others feel it too.

### **Persevere.**

If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. Seriously. Amy has dined her way through EDABL's spectacular success and also through a few failures of groups that didn't jell. There is that right combination out there for you, she is certain of it.

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