



Dinner dates

When members of these five supper clubs meet, they celebrate family, friendship and most of all, good food (even gourmet nachos). Here, they serve up culinary hits and misses and a few tips to get you started on your own dining group. Bon appétit!



Hostess Harriet Dopkin says the meals created by the families that gather regularly to cook and eat together are "some of the best food I've ever eaten in life." The group's most recent creation was a Mexican feast.

BY LAURA WEXLER
PHOTOGRAPHED BY VINCE LUPO



{ a family affair }



Harriet Dopkin is a professionally trained chef who has eaten at some of the finest restaurants in the world. But, she says, when her family gathers with three others to cook and eat together, the group creates some of the best meals she's ever eaten. "I think it's because there's so much joy involved," says Dopkin, an owner of The Classic Catering People. "It's about the freedom to create and try dishes we wouldn't just make for ourselves."

MISSION: To create and eat a meal together. "A lot of the themes we pick—Middle Eastern, Vietnamese, Mexican—cry out for many hands working together," says Dopkin.

M.O.: After the group generates ideas, Dopkin and Martha Lucius, the owner of Boheme Café, consult their cookbook libraries for inspiration, choose recipes and shop for ingredi-

ents. When the families arrive about 5 p.m., everything is laid out on the counters and people pair off to make one dish or another. "There are no assignments," says Dopkin. "There's a spontaneity that happens, an element of surprise. This is a group of wonderful improvisers."

GOLDEN RULE: Everyone is welcome to cook, regardless of their age or skill level—or not. "Sometimes the kids participate fully, and sometimes they go watch a movie or play outside," says Dopkin.

HIGHLIGHTS: Grilled Pizza Night, which is the only theme the group has repeated. "Everyone brought something from the farmers market or their garden to top the pizzas," says Dopkin. "All night long, the pizzas were being created like paintings then grilled, and each one was more amazing

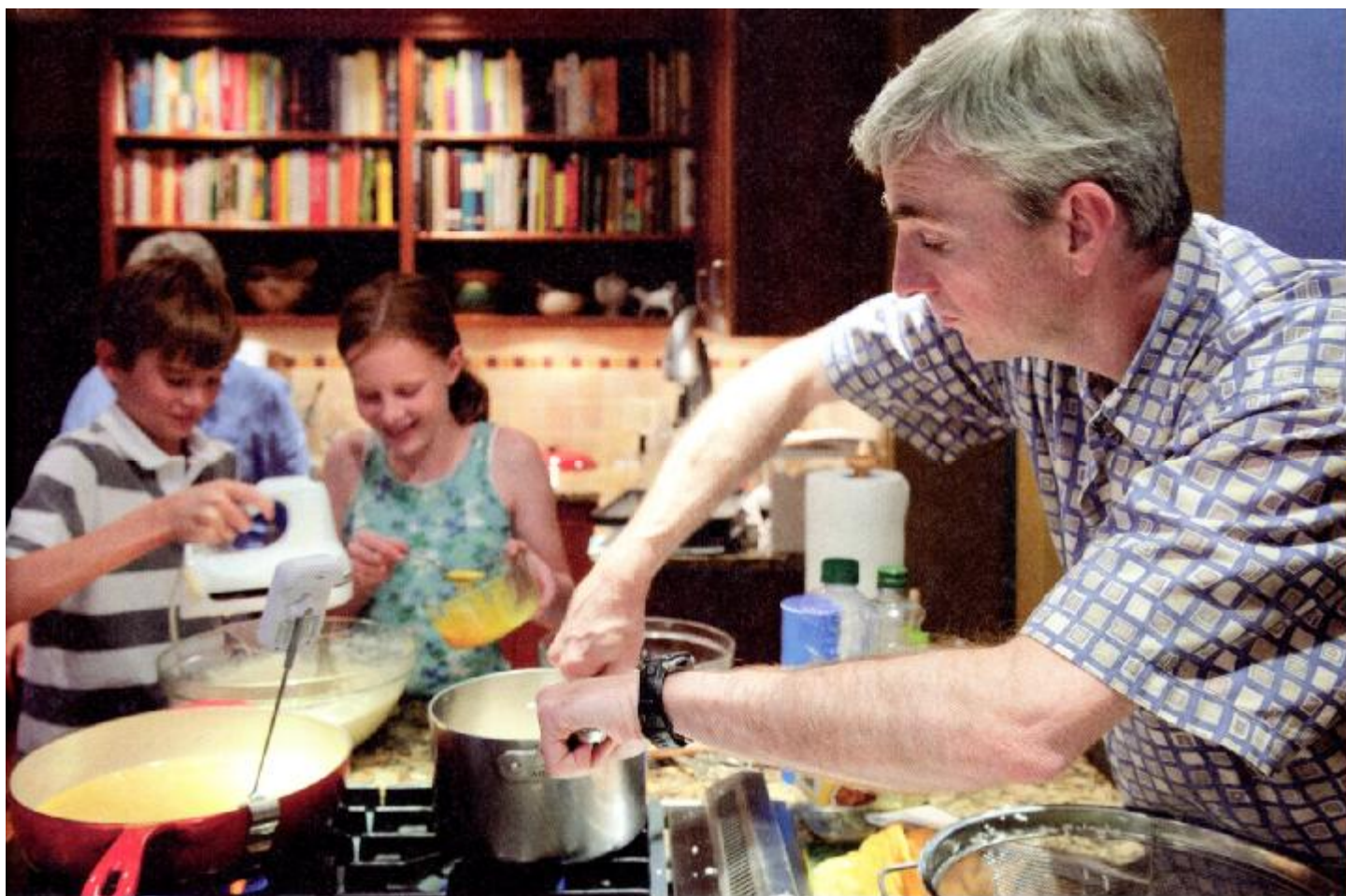
than the next. We had some leftover dough and someone suggested we make dessert pizzas." For the Mexican meal, the group made its own tortillas, churros, Mexican popsicles and an elaborate stuffed peppers dish.

UH-OH: The plan is to sit down at the table by 7:30 p.m., but sometimes it's a lot later by the time all the dishes get finished. "It's a joyful chaos," says Dopkin.

TIPS: "Have one or two people in the group take primary responsibility for getting groceries and ingredients and doing some simple planning beforehand," says Dopkin. "Start with simpler themes—you don't have to be overly ambitious in order to reap the pleasure principle." And one more thing: "If you follow what brings you joy, it will be successful."



Hostess Harriet Dopkin (pictured bottom far right, with guest Julie Salsbery) says, "What's so beautiful about this group is they are wonderful improvisers."



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