



How to Host a [Come One, Come All Potluck-Style] Grub Party

by Rachel Cole

Thanks, Rachel, for sharing your Grub party ideas, with a potluck twist. Read on for Rachel's How-To-Get-Your-Grub-On Suggestions...and if you're ever in Berkeley... look her up.

– Anna & Bryant

A. The Basics

Timing

Any night is a good night to get your Grub on, but with a little selective scheduling you can take a tired Tuesday dinner and turn it into a sprawling Sunday Supper. Sunday is a great Grub day, because your friends have time to shop, cook (even get out to a farm and pick some apples), you aren't competing with Saturday karaoke night, and they'll be tucked into bed – warm and satisfied – ready for Monday morning.

What time you start your Grub party depends on a few factors. Do you want to have a cocktail hour before people eat? Are your friends always late (i.e. you invite everyone at 7 fully knowing your doorbell won't ring until 8)? Are you grilling and want a little natural sunlight?

Unlike some festivities where people can arrive in a staggered fashion and graze on the party mix, I've found that Grub parties tend to work better if dinner starts at a specified time, this way everyone's dishes get equal opportunity and people can have a chance to tell everyone about what they made.

If you plan on waiting until most people have arrived to start eating, it's a good idea to have out a few things for people to munch on such as buttery herbed [stove-top popcorn](#), bread from the neighborhood bakery, local cheeses, seasonal crudités, and maybe a dish of warm [spiced nuts](#), too. And for safe measure, you may want to put these snacks on the other side of the room from the full Grub spread – out of reach of those nibbling fingers.

Nuts & Bolts

A few things to have around to make your Grub party go smoothly: extra serving utensils, trivets, a salt shaker and pepper grinder, a clear place for people's coats, a stocked music library with your favorite tunes (See Grub for suggested playlists), and extra chairs or floor cushions.

The Dessert Quota System

It's up to you if you want to leave your Grub a creative free-for-all or assign dishes (finger foods, main courses, salads and sides, etc.) However, I suggest you to consider asking a few people to sign up to bring dessert and capping it at that — I call this the dessert quota system. You see, there's no better way to gain accolades from your friends by being the person who brought the homemade apple pie or the dense and gooey chocolate brownies — made with local flour of course — ? However, what often happens is that you'll be ready to eat dinner and take one look down the Grub spread only to find a single casserole amidst dozens plates of cookies. While this sounds nice in theory, a better balance makes for better Grub

Timeline

One Month Before

- Send out a 'Save the Date' email and include any theme so your friends can start to plan what they want to cook. Keep it short and sweet, just enough to get wet their appetite.
- Start thinking about what you want to cook!

3-4 Days Before

- Send out a reminder email with the details of your party.
 - Make sure to include date, time, directions, and parking information.
 - It never hurts to offer up a packing list. By having everyone bring BYO plates, silverware, glass, and cloth napkin you'll cut way down on eco-unfriendly paper products, and as the host, you'll have a lot fewer dishes to wash when it's all done.
 - This is also a good place to list times and locations of any farmer's markets in your community and to include a list of what's in season where you live.
 - You may want to ask couples to bring two dishes, or a bottle of wine or hunk of cheese with their dish.
 - If some of your friends have nice gardens, you may want to see if they can bring a vase of flowers for the table.
 - If you have a musically inclined friend, delegate the soundtrack to them. A good photographer, can be assigned to capture the evenings glamour shots.
- Scrounge around for any extra furniture, servingware, or silverware you'll need.
- Start making your food. As the host, you want to give yourself as much time on the day of and night before your guests arrive to get ready, so it can be really helpful to choose a recipe that allows you to make all or part of it in advance.

The Day Before and Day Of

- Head to your farmer's market. Soak up what's in season and the hard working people who bring it to you.
- Make your dish.
- Call a friend to help and hang out while you get ready for the hungry masses to descend.
- Set the table area. You may want to have different stations for people's food, the snacks, drinks, and a place for plates, silverware, and napkins.
- Chill the drinks and fill those ice cube trays.

The After Party

- Send out a thank you email to everyone.
- Start planning the next Grub party!

B. Grub Guiding Principles

It's good if you identify what the most important Grub values are for your party. You need to be specific, so as to communicate why you're doing what you're doing, and not overwhelm or confuse your friends. Remember, people may have to choose between a local apple and an organic apple, so you want to share with your guests some guidelines for the event.

Another sometimes tricky aspect of communicating your Grub principles is taking issues that might be seen as square and making them the backdrop of a fun, hip party event. Make sure your invitation is just that – inviting – and doesn't inspire guilt in those who may not know much about the Grub principles or making homemade food. Remember, it's a party, it should be fun and make everyone feel welcome.

A short list of some guiding principles to consider, with useful links, is as follows.

- Organic Food
- SOLE Food (Sustainable, Organic, Local, Ethical)
- Food with Personal Meaning (Cultural Heritage, Family Traditions, etc.)
- Homemade Food – it's important here to emphasize that theirs room at the table for beginner and experienced cooks.
- Building Community and Feeling Connected
- Specific Dietary Approaches (Vegetarianism, Whole Foods, etc.)

Grub Party Specifics

The Grub Community

Food is an amazing equalizer. It can bring together people from the most disparate backgrounds. Young or old, experienced chef or microwave artist, red or blue—Grub parties are an opportunity to build a rich, diverse community. Everyone has something to bring to the table. Keep this in mind as you build your invite list — my motto has always been “If I know you, you're invited...and so are all your friends.”

Grub parties are also a great opportunity to learn more about your Grub guiding principles. Invite local farmers, university professors, chefs, activists, authors, or anyone else who might bring a little food for thought. You can invite them simply as guests, or ask them to give a brief talk or Q&A session.

Getting the Word Out

There are a number of different avenues for communicating with your Grub community. Here are just a few:

Method	Pros	Cons
<i>Email</i>	Easy. Your friends don't have to register. It probably won't get spammed.	You're inbox and address book can become overrun with Grub related business, so you might want to open a Grub email account, or set up a Rules Wizard and a special folder in your email program so all Grub-related emails get automatically sorted out. Also, people sometimes won't RSVP to an email, even if you ask for it.
<i>Evite</i>	These are festive and make RSVPs easy. There is also a way for people to sign up to bring wine, cheese, bread, etc. so you know you have reinforcements coming.	Evites can get caught in spam-land.
<i>Google, Yahoo or MSN Groups</i>	This is a great way to organize your Grub life. Here the community can easily communicate to each other, share recipes and photos, arrange to carpool, etc. Some of these groups also allow for a calendar where your event, as well as other local happenings.	This requires that people register. If you think your friends can't handle this, then don't go this route.
<i>MySpace and Facebook</i>	Similar to Yahoo Groups option, MySpace allows you to centrally organize a calendar, recipes, music, and your Grub community. Facebook is a great way to build and organize your community.	It takes a bit of work to set up and even though a lot of people are on MySpace and Facebook, those that aren't may not be incorporated as much into your online community.

Beyond the Table

Your Grub guiding principles can extend past the food. Here are some ideas:

- By asking your guests to bring their own plates, silverware, glass, and cloth napkin to cut down on the waste that just even one party can generate.
- Encourage people to bring plastic containers for leftovers, so food isn't wasted.
- Provide clear and easy ways to recycle and compost.
- If you're feeling charitable, it's also easy to turn a Grub gathering into a way to support a good cause. You can use the opportunity to host a food or clothing drive or get a petition filled with signatures.

- Okay this sounds dangerous, but it's a great idea and it works — if you have a local hazardous waste dump site, in addition to the dish each guest brings, they can each bring their toxic waste (dead batteries, empty paint cans, etc.) for one generous person to make a single eco-trip.

Remember When...

It's great to find a special way to record your Grub party memories, especially the menus and if it works, have your guests note any local sources that their ingredients came from. (i.e. Curried Deviled Eggs *from Farmer Peter's Egg Farm*)

- You can make a guest book where people leave messages and write down their contribution to the table.
- You can put up a big dry-erase board or sheet of butcher paper and have people describe what they've brought, then snap a picture of the menu board at the end of the night for the history books.
- You can take Polaroids of everyone with their dish when they arrive, then make an album.
- You can create a picture book and have everyone draw and label his or her dishes with crayons.
- Sites like Flickr.com are great for sharing photos if you aren't using a central online site to organize your Grub information.

Getting Creative

If you've hosted a few Grub parties and feel that people understand your guiding principles, you can play around with some fun themes:

Dip & Dipper. Divide people alphabetically by their names, and then assign half to bring a homemade dipper (i.e. meatballs, homemade crackers, pickled carrots, or biscotti) or dip (i.e. bean or yogurt dips galore, zaatar and infused olive oil, homemade crème anglaise). The fun is in adventure of seeing which dippers and dips match up. Don't worry about having an equal number of each, it always works out just fine. Just make sure you remind people not to double dip!

Breakfast for Dinner. [Think Mimosas.](#) [Dutchbabies.](#) [Frittatas.](#) [Grits Casserole.](#) [Granola Parfaits.](#) Pajamas.

Finger Foods & Fancy Frocks. Everyone has that special outfit they have nowhere to go in and fancy finger foods can be really fun to play with. Encourage everyone to get dolled up and make miniature bites. It's a good idea to keep extra toothpicks on hand.

International Eats. This is a fun way for people to take seasonal foods and use them to travel the gastronomic globe. Encourage people to bring music that goes along with their food.

Pizza Making. As the host, make a big batch of [pizza dough](#) and tomato sauce. Ask each person to bring one homemade pizza topping. Ask your non-cooking friends to bring a few good pizza cheeses or local salumi.

Music Swap. Okay, so the food is great, but what about party favors? For those who want to, ask them to bring a mix CD. Then take all the mix CDs and put them in hat, pillowcase, or stockpot, then each participant gets to pick one out and take home some new tunes.

Stone Soup. Everyone brings one soup ingredient, you as the host make a big vat of vegetable broth or bone broth, and together you make a delicious, melting pot of soup.

Sandwich Spread. Everyone brings one homemade ingredient for a sandwich and you, as the host, provide a range of breads, rolls, and buns. Then everyone can pick and choose to make his or her own sandwich concoction. You can award prizes for the sandwich that uses the most number of ingredients or the most creative combination.

The Alphabet Game. Pick one letter of the alphabet and ask everyone to bring a dish that starts with that letter.

Rainbow Grub. A-E bring red food. F-J bring orange. K-O bring yellow. P-T bring green. And U-Z bring blue and purple. Then, arrange the table accordingly.

Lucky Number. Have everyone make a dish that is comprised of a set number of ingredients, anywhere from three to ten works well.

Iron Chef. Pick one ingredient that everyone must use in his or her dish. Best to pick something versatile, like garlic, lemons – or even citrus in general.

I'm Stuffed. Cannoli. Calzones. Whoopie Pies. Tacos. Dumplings. Ravioli. Spring Rolls. Ants on a Log. Everyone brings something that is filled or stuffed.

Nostalgia Noshes. Here everyone brings a dish that brings back fond memories or a food, place, or time. Can you say cheeseball?

Comfort Food. No explanation needed, but you might be surprised by what some people find comforting...it's not always macaroni and cheese.

Sunday in the Park with Grub. Take your Grub party to a nearby park. Have everyone bring picnic themed food, play kickball, have an egg toss, maybe even a potato sack race.

Grub Goes Back to School. Kick off the school year with having everyone make something they have never made before. This'll level the playing field a bit for those let experienced chefs.