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## Dinner parties are so last year

Yes, having friends round for supper is so passé. The hippest way to meet and mingle is now at cook school. Or, for the environmentally minded, blitzing an urban patch with a troop of guerrilla gardeners

COOK SCHOOL PUPIL



Gill is now a huge fan of 'cooking up a conversation'

**Gill Orbell**  
FIFTYSOMETHING Gill Orbell lives in Lingfield, Surrey, with her husband, Alan, and son Alex, 16. She works as a school secretary, and has recently acquired a taste for foodie evenings out with a difference...

I've always loved food, cooking, and getting together with friends, and over the years have thrown countless dinner parties. But, for some reason or other, they seem to have been on the wane. So I was intrigued when I saw an advertisement in a local magazine for an evening with chef Simon Boyle. His company, Beyond Boyle Cook School, runs programmes based around the idea of "cooking up a conversation". It's a straightforward concept. A group of people gets together to learn how to cook a selection of sophisticated dishes and to talk and eat.

"I told some friends about it and one evening 16 of us headed off to Simon's place – a converted chicken shed near Lingfield, Surrey, close to where I live. It was a warm evening, so we started off in the garden with a glass of champagne. Once back in the school, Simon talked us through the events.

"He can tailor evenings around all kinds of food styles – Italian, Indian, French. We opted for a Thai-themed menu in the end, for the simple reason that the dishes weren't the kind we'd attempt at home. It was interesting to learn about the processes from Simon's commentary, and it was also entertaining –

he's clearly passionate about what he does. The whole experience was almost like taking part in a TV cookery programme.

"Then Simon cooked, and we all joined in, trying the dishes as we went along. It was fascinating. Although our group knew each other already, I could see that an evening like this would be a great icebreaker – everyone's so involved in the activities and so busy talking about them that there's no effort required to keep the conversation going.

"We had around 10 courses in all, and every one was excellent. We learnt a lot too (some of us more than others!), and the framework for the evening out worked really well. The end result was an experience that felt somewhere between going to a restaurant and having a dinner party. It didn't feel like a lecture at all; in fact, it was very convivial. We had quite a lot to

**YOUR LIVES**

Simon is always on hand to supervise and share his knowledge and expertise

Good knife skills are an essential part of the programme

With a love of food – and the evening's menu – in common, guests quickly relax and chat

Food and cooking are Simon's passions

Success on a plate. Let the eating commence!

Working together breaks down boundaries and builds team spirit

Gill with Simon Boyle, founder of Beyond Boyle Cook School

**YOUR LIVES**

**GREEN GUERRILLA**

**Clara Goldsmith**  
CLARA GOLDSMITH, 28, is a guerrilla gardener who goes out at night to beautify neglected patches of urban London. During the daytime, she works as an artists' manager in the music business

Working most often under cover of night, guerrilla gardeners set out to give overlooked areas a makeover

Strewed with rubbish and full of weeds, 'dig' needs attention

A troop of guerrilla gardeners arrives and gets to work

Once blitzed, the raised bed becomes a pleasant place to sit

Having grown up in London, I've never been into gardening. Even now I live in a block of flats with a small Japanese-style garden that I don't touch. So when I went round to dinner at a friend's flat, it came as a surprise to hear him say, "Why don't we go down to the roundabout and do some planting?" It turned out he is into guerrilla gardening, and the way he described it, it sounded kind of fun. So after dinner, at about 11.30pm, off we went to get rid of rubbish, dig, and plant seeds on an urban roundabout. Cars and lorries were whizzing by, and surprisingly I had a great time. "That was about a year and a half ago. Since then I've been guerrilla gardening lots of times. I find it a real pleasure to take on a neglected urban space and make it look good. It probably sounds a bit hippy-ish, but a spot of open-air gardening gets you closer to the earth. You don't often have the opportunity for that in London. Most importantly, it has a positive effect on the environment. It's wonderful to see the immediate transformation. And when you return a few days later and see the place in daylight, with a few flowers blooming, it's really satisfying. "Guerrilla gardening works like this: a "dig" is nominated in a certain place on a certain evening, and the details are broadcast on the internet. Then, people turn up with tools, seeds and plants. We never know how many people are going to come. Sometimes it's 30; sometimes it's just me and a couple of others. Since guerrilla gardening got a bit of publicity, thousands have become involved. My personal preference is gardening in quite a small group, but I wouldn't do it on my own. However many people attend, it's always very sociable. We tend to garden for about half an hour, then go for a drink. I'm always amazed at how different the other gardeners are: from retired folk to teenagers. People wonder if passers-by are insulting, but in fact most are very encouraging.

"The point is to make overlooked places come to life once more. That's why we tend to go to traffic roundabouts and neglected sites in built-up areas rather than gardening in beautiful tree-lined crescents.

"You have to be careful about what you put in, as the plants need to be quite hardy. We tend to go for inexpensive ones, like geraniums, to keep costs down. Lavender is good, as it looks great and is very tough. Plus, it makes the area smell nice. We've even done a guerrilla Christmas tree!

"Some people are quite political about guerrilla gardening. For me, it's only political in the sense that this work is something that should be done by the local council or the person responsible for that piece of land. We gardened in one place where the council objected to our presence, and the man whose job it was to administer the site said, "You're not supposed to be doing that". But the locals were behind us and I think the public recognises it's all about improving really quite nasty bits of land."

HB's legal expert says that although guerrilla gardening is technically trespassing, charges are unlikely to be pressed if you only use unwanted or unused land, leave it in better condition, and don't get caught(!) For more on guerrilla gardening, go to guerrillagardening.org.

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