



## How we let the restaurant come to us

Save on taxis and babysitting – hire your own chef and waitress. We tried it as a holiday treat; but it'll be a hard habit to break

Jon Stock



The excitement started on the A303, just past Stonehenge, when we were emailed a choice of menus. Would we like grilled tuna with tomato and coriander? Noisettes of lamb cooked with manzanilla, shallots and thyme? Or bouillabaisse with monkfish, gurnard, John Dory and lobster?

In a moment of madness, we had decided to kick off our holiday in Cornwall with a dinner cooked at our house by a private chef. We had been told that it would be as good as dining out at a fine restaurant, but without the arguments over who was going to drive. There would be no need to arrange a babysitter, either. Best of all, someone else would do the washing up – our private chef was coming with a private waitress. Together they would cook a slap-up dinner in our kitchen, see it and leave the kitchen spotless. What was not to like?

Hiring someone to cook dinner in your home might seem particularly

decadent, but it's not as expensive as you think, especially when you include the money saved on a babysitter. There are no overheads except your own, and you can drink your own wine, avoiding the regular 300 per cent markup of a restaurant. It's still a treat, of course, but we kept reassuring ourselves that we would be getting far better value for money than in a restaurant.

Our only concern, once we had unpacked and settled into Moonrakers, a self-catering family home in St Mawes, Cornwall, was whether there would be the same sense of occasion that accompanies a trip out to a restaurant. We needn't have worried.

"We tend to cook at someone's home when it's a special event, like a birthday or anniversary," William Marsden of Pencose Pantry, our chef for the night, told me as he set up shop in our kitchen (using our pots and pans). "We know how to put on a show. I've cooked for dinner parties, for couples, but not yet for one person on their own." In the winter, he cooks for Americans who come over to shoot on the Caethays estate, near St Austell. He previously worked at the renowned Walnut Tree in Abergavenny.

It's an odd feeling knocking about the house with a complete stranger

slaving away in the kitchen – a feeling we could all quite easily use to. The children, 15, 13, and 10, gathered curiously to watch William, a tall avuncular presence, wash scallops and chop vegetables. (We had settled on scallops served in shells with ginger and lemon grass; the lamb; and summer pudding with local berries, baby brown sugar meringues and clotted cream.) Nicola, our waitress, laid the table and polished glasses while my wife and I headed upstairs for a crafty prosecco on the balcony, before dressing for dinner.

"I got the idea for using a private chef to cook at home a few years ago, when I went out to have a meal at a smart hotel restaurant," Amanda Selby, owner of Moonrakers, recalls. "We were eating on the terrace and I heard two children shouting to their parents. I looked up to see them hanging out of a bedroom window! It suddenly dawned on me that, despite the fact that these parents were staying in a luxury hotel, they were unable to enjoy their dinner as they did not have any privacy or space

for their children to play in and be themselves. As a parent I knew just what these people must have been feeling, worrying about their kids' behaviour in front of other diners."

Amanda offers the service to guests staying with St Mawes Retreats, her collection of five self-catering family homes (four in St Mawes, one in Fowey), but there's no reason why

it should be a luxury limited to holidays. As we were summoned for canapés and drinks in the sitting room, we all agreed the idea would work equally well in your own home; perhaps because it's just one chef and a waitress, so it feels more personal than hiring a catering firm. The table had been beautifully laid, with linen

napkins folded like peacocks' plumes, and the children's manners improved miraculously in the formal setting. Our eldest doesn't like seafood, so he had buffalo mozzarella instead of our succulent scallops. The lamb was sweet and tender and the summer pudding was wolfed down by everyone. The food itself was only part of the pleasure. The change in mood in the

house – dressing up, being served at table – all made for a special evening. Perhaps we should have invited friends to share the experience. Instead, we enjoyed an intimate family evening that turned out to be one of the highlights of the holiday.

And the cost? William charges from £35 per head, including pre-dinner nibbles and homemade bread, excluding wine. In other words, on a par with a night out at a decent restaurant. (Our waitress cost £50 for the evening – admittedly, this was something of an extravagance for the two of us, but it would represent good value for a dinner party with more guests.) Amanda already has a dozen private dinners booked for guests this summer, an increase on last year.

For me, it's hard to put a price on sitting back afterwards, hearing someone else doing the washing-up and not feeling guilty. The only problem is that eating out at restaurants will never feel quite the same again.

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Your table is ready