

(food)

THE ART OF COOKING

THE DINNER PROJECT BLURS THE LINE BETWEEN VOYEUR AND NURTURER
MAEVE HALDANE

Reams have been written about the spiritual sustenance of physical food, the luminosity of a shrimp dumpling, the bewitchment of a berry pie. But there's a paradox: Food is banal. We all must eat to keep living, ascetic saints aside. For artist Iwona Majdan, food is all that, as well as a symbol of love and intimacy.

Iwona has gone beyond cooking for others to create art in *The Dinner Project*. Each Sunday night for a year she will go over to a stranger's house, bringing food and pots and pans, to make dinner. Since both host and cook bring a guest, the project slips four people into each other's private lives, a contrived ode to happenstance. The idea's kernel came to Iwona from walking by houses at night, peering into the window and wishing to invite herself in.

Iwona is not an innately gregarious person. For her to approach strangers and ask to go to their homes to feed them – simultaneously an unexpected act of kindness and an invasion of privacy – is hard. "Sometimes I don't want to leave my house and I have to go out to find someone," she admits. She gets about two rejections for every yes.

"An important aspect of my work is to deal with vulnerability," says Iwona, who for one work had herself placed in a public elevator, blindfolded and bound to a stool. In her most recent work, *The Love Project*, she held casting calls in Poland (her native country) for a husband.

In *The Dinner Project*, Iwona confronts intimacy-detering suspicion and fear in the hope of working through them, and provides space for others to do likewise.

She invited me along as her guest to a recent dinner. She was worried about cooking for me – how could anyone planning chocolate fondue for dessert feel insecure?

Our host, who is lean and clearly in need of a good feeding, was a little nervous when he greeted us at the door. He had trouble finding a guest, so he hoped his doggy would do. My own nervousness and shyness dissipate as I realize this is like so many other social interactions in Montreal. Amaretto Sours provided by the host helped put us at ease, as did his openness of spirit. I was both more guarded than I might usually be and also divulged personal secrets to reciprocate

profile



IWONA MAJDAN WANTS TO MAKE YOU DINNER

photo Maeve Haldane

and the host, also Polish, talked of their parallel experiences leaving their country. They spoke in Polish to the doggy, who understood every word.

Iwona's white bean and mint dip staved off our hunger while we prepared the meal.

She's one of those effortless cooks, and engages in simple preparation with fabulous results. Salmon chunks with butter on top, loosely covered with tinfoil and popped in the oven, were lovely, accompanied with quickly boiled asparagus and rosemary-rich baked potato fries.

The night lingered, then spun into silliness with the fondue. It was strange to leave our guest's house, not knowing if I'll see him again. As fond as Iwona may get of her hosts, she has no illusions about forging instant friendships. She just wants to achieve a greater sense of balance, human connectedness, and surmount her fears.

Few get rich from art, and Iwona is no exception. For this project she has a small grant from the Canada Council for the Arts, and restaurant Buona Notte supplies her with the ingredients for her meals. But she takes succour from her popular website that gets thousands of hits a day. "Maybe the project is tapping into something people need," she says. "It addresses the issue of human connection, and is doing it in an unusual way. People are looking for this – they're tired of superficiality." (→)

THE DINNER PROJECT

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