

A Chef in the KITCHEN

DINNER PARTIES ARE A DELIGHTFUL WAY TO SPEND AN EVENING, BUT HOW TO FIND THE TIME? LA BELLE ASSIETTE IS THE ANSWER. GISELLE WHITEAKER BOOKS A PRIVATE CHEF

My six dinner-party guests are due to start trickling in within half an hour, but instead of racing around the kitchen, cheeks flushed, trying not to burn anything, I'm applying the final touches to my makeup. Delicious aromas are permeating my apartment and the table is set for a three-course feast. It looks like I'm the most efficient host ever, but the reality is, I have help.

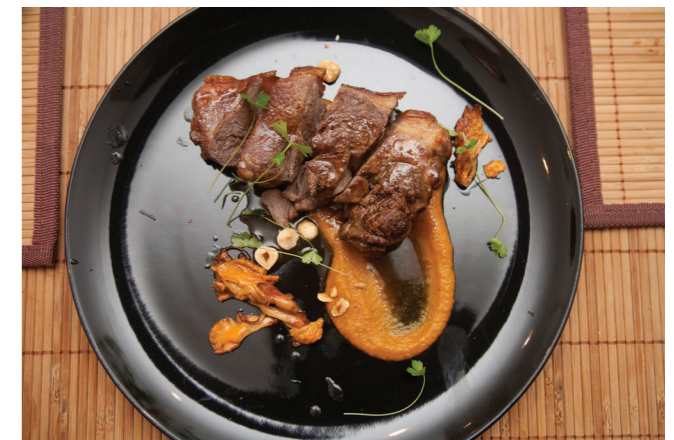
Chef Cesar Fernandez is making magic in my kitchen. He's done all of the hard yards of preparation, too, from preparing the menu to purchasing the ingredients and assembling them into what promise to be fabulous dishes. He called me yesterday and we went over the menu, confirming each dish, along with a meat-free option for my vegetarian guest. I couldn't have done it without him.

Chef Cesar is one of a new brand of chefs, who are gaining experience in the restaurant trade and then branching out into other things. And these chefs all have one thing in common: they are on the books of La Belle Assiette. La Belle Assiette, which literally translates to 'the



LEFT:
Chef Cesar Fernandez from La Belle Assiette

BELOW:
La Belle Assiette's chefs dish up food of the highest quality



ABOVE LEFT:
Private chefs make dinner parties light work

ABOVE RIGHT:
Chef Cesar mid-preparation

ABOVE:
Cesar's validation dish of lamb rump with carrot and cummin puree, wild mushrooms, hazelnuts and a light wine jus

beautiful plate', is a private chef service company with 250 carefully selected chefs on the register. Each of the chefs is required to prepare a validation dinner before they can join the ranks, to ensure their service level, menus and dishes pass the taste test before a gourmet panel. Once verified, they can be booked for home dinner parties – at a surprisingly reasonable price.

Some of the chefs will be familiar. Many have graduated from the best cooking schools and have worked in top restaurants around the world. A number have appeared on *Masterchef*. Chef Cesar hails from Spain, but he trained as a chef at Leiths cooking school and gained experience in restaurants like The Glasshouse and Arbutus Straight. He was the head chef at Divertimenti in Marylebone and worked for a catering company that cooked for the Queen at the Jubilee. Currently, he divides his time between working as a private chef and doing cookery demonstrations and recipe development.

Right now, Cesar is capably whizzing around my kitchen, leaving me free to open a bottle of wine and greet my guests, two of whom are running late. "It's no problem," Cesar says, completely unfazed. "Just let me know when you're ready and I'll dish up."

When my directionally challenged stragglers arrive, we take a seat at the table and Chef Cesar delivers our starter, grilled asparagus and girolles with wild garlic and truffle oil on sourdough toast. The vibrant green of the asparagus is interspersed with the honey-coloured mushrooms and both pack a flavour punch, the truffle oil elevating the dish from delicious to sublime.

The main course is equally as impressive. Slices of delicately pink duck breast are framed by thinly sliced fennel, bacon and roasted carrot, with a generous dollop of carrot puree. Our vegetarian is delighted with her golden caramelised onion tart, served with mounded cubes of roasted vegetables and the same puree. The conversation stops with the first bite, each guest consumed with the act of eating.

The grand finale is a chocolate and cherry ganache, served with pistachio crumbs and macerated cherries. The smooth ganache slides down easily, the perfect dénouement for the meal.

"There are leftovers in the fridge," says Cesar, when I step into the kitchen for the first time all night. The room is sparkling, the dishwasher packed, benches wiped and floor mopped. All that's left for me to do is to add our wine glasses to the dishwasher and press start.

A private chef no longer seems like an indulgence. Rather, it is the path to the perfect dinner party, freeing the host to enjoy the evening. With hundreds of chefs, and even more menus, to choose from at La Belle Assiette, it can also turn an everyday dinner into a culinary adventure. The only question will be who to book next?

For more information on La Belle Assiette, or to book a private chef, see www.labelleassiette.co.uk.

