

News-Record
November 19, 2015

SMARTEN UP
@ The South Orange-Maplewood Adult School

**GIVING THANKS To the ADULT SCHOOL
FOR AN 'INTENTIONAL FAMILY'**

It may be one of the most exclusive, all-inclusive social clubs you've never heard of, The Maplewood Dining Club.

Operating at unpredictable interludes -- and eager for your participation -- the Maplewood Dining club is the local reaction to a nation-wide phenomenon: professionals who work at home.

Liberated from 7 a.m. commutes and eight-hour confinements in an office elsewhere, our members are mostly journalists, book-writers, and other computer jockeys who rejoice in the freedom to work in our nightshirts, if we like, at whatever hour the Muse may strike.

But here's the rub. We work in isolation. Just us and that screen and a deadline hovering overhead like Joe Btfsplk's little black cloud (remember Al Capp?).

We saw it coming. Witness sci-fi legend Arthur C. Clark in the "Steve Jobs" biopic, telling a 1970s youngster that computers would soon let us work from anywhere in the world. In 1980 and "The Third Wave," futurist Alvin Toffler foresaw that after a long workday alone at home, we'd race out in droves to be among people in bars and restaurants

Or maybe we'd just invent The Maplewood Dining Club.

The back story centers around the South Orange-Maplewood Adult School and its annual meeting, held every May. As a gift to the community, the Adult School would offer a special event.

One wonderful year in the late 1990s, it was a mother-daughter cookbook-writing team, Linda West Eckhardt, just moved here from Ashland, OR, and Katherine DeFoyd, the

Daughter, whose family Linda moved to be near. Their book, "Entertaining 101," had walked off with a prestigious James Beard Award (now stacked up beside others like the Julia Child Award for "Bread in Half the Time," named "The Best Cookbook in America").

Their duet was as charming as it was informative. And Texas-born Linda's accent and idioms went straight to my Southern heart.

It was the spark of a nourishing friendship that would be forged in fire, literally, one bitter cold March when Linda's house caught on fire. The top floor burned to cinders, black and crunching underfoot when we went to rescue her. And -- surprise!-- her much beloved, very big dog.

Followed six months of rebuilding, six months of great meals -- Linda insisted on doing the cooking. What a deal! And what good times. Such as the night Linda's assignment from *Country Living* magazine had us testing "Kitchen Cosmetics," like mayonnaise hair oil and a carrots-and-cream face mask that turned us bright orange.

No laughter on Wednesday nights, however: Linda would be recording segments for her award-winning national radio show (with Jennifer English) on the Food and Wine Radio Network, soon nominated for a James Beard Prize.

It was almost a sad day when her house was declared habitable again. But shared fun and food have continued to take us to other remarkable tables -- a Contrada dinner before the Palio, the ancient horse race in Sienna, with candlelit tables that ran for blocks up the hill to the church (where the priest and racehorse sat at its head!)

We've mastered making mole in Puebla, Mexico, and we've test-tasted experimental tomatoes at the old Burpee farm in Pennsylvania.

Best of all, we launched the Maplewood Dining Club. If you can call it a *club*. There are no dues, no rules, no requirements beyond loving good food and good talk. It was Linda who really inspired the group. Testing recipes for another of her 20+ cookbooks, she needed tasters. We were quick to volunteer.

That "we" varies. Many nights, it's South Orange doyenne Jacqueline Herships. Often we're joined by Maplewoodians Barbara Sheridan, Dr. Jay Rosinger, orthodontist, and another famed cookbook writer Rick

Rodgers and his partner Patrick. Always, there's a seat at whichever table for whoever wants to come -- contributions optional.

We've also ranged beyond the dinner table. A New York City member, Joan Asher, once hauled sterling, crystal, and Champagne on a train to a Hudson River town park for a swell surprise birthday picnic. On the morning of the Royal Wedding (William to Kate), we gathered at 4 a.m. for a real English breakfast (sausage, eggs, tomatoes) -- in pj's and big hats (going home in broad daylight was amusing.)

Derby Day always means mint juleps in silver cups. And on Oscar Nights the clan convenes to watch with our mouths full.

But there's more to the Dining Club than pop-up dinner parties. Need a ride to a cataract operation? We'll take you. Jetting in from Italy? We'll pick you up. Planning a huge party for your own family? Let us do the flowers...or a fresh peach pie...delivery included.

"There are cracks in the world where artistic people gather. Maplewood and South Orange are such cracks. It's a nourishing place to live. Killer taxes! but worth it!" Linda says.

I say, "Thanksgiving is the right time to be grateful. For my own family, of course. But also for the spontaneous 'intentional family' we've created here.

"Now, who's hungry?"

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