

Jess Dang:

Hi there, you're listening to episode number 26 of the Cook Smarts Podcast. I'm Jess Dang, the founder of Cook Smarts and I'm here to help you become a more confident and organized cook in the kitchen.

Jess Dang:

One of the things that makes me super happy are dinner parties. I love throwing them and I love seeing members of the Cook Smarts community throw dinner parties as well. Our lives are so busy these days and so often lived virtually and we've lost this beautiful tradition of gathering friends around the dinner table.

Jess Dang:

And you know, it's rare that anyone ever regrets spending time with friends over a meal in someone's home, and I truly believe that we would all feel so much more connected if we made this a regular practice. I know that sounds daunting like, I can barely cook dinner for myself and my family and Jess, now you're telling me to invite more people to cook for?

Jess Dang:

I know, I am pretty demanding, but I think with the right tips and of course planning, it's something that doesn't have to be a lot of extra work. And to help me revive this practice, I've invited Anna Watson Carl, an expert dinner party thrower onto our podcast today. And as a cook, and writer, and the author of *The Yellow Table: A Celebration of Everyday Gatherings*, her writing has appeared in *Food and Wine*, *Travel and Leisure* and *Tasting Table* just to name a few.

Jess Dang:

A former private chef, she's cooked for countless dinner parties around the U.S. and also in France. Today, she lives in Nashville with her husband and two young kids. We had such a great conversation and I was sad to have it end. And Anna lived closer to me, we would totally become dinner party hosting partners.

Jess Dang:

So before I take you to our conversation today though, just a little Cook Smarts business, we just kicked off our spring sale. I don't know about you, but I love spring in the kitchen. We're coming out of the dreary winter weather, longer days are ahead, and when I'm thinking about meals, I feel like there's just so much more possibility with spring produce.

Jess Dang:

And here in California, it's usually even warm enough to start grilling, which always puts me in a happy place. So if you're stuck in a dinner rut, don't have a great meal planning routine in place, come and freshen up your dinner routine with us. Just head to cooksmarts.com and use the code, FRESHENUP20 for 20% off your meal plans subscription and enjoy your most delicious spring yet.

Jess Dang:

And now, introducing Ms. Anna Watson Carl.

Jess Dang:

Anna, I'm so excited to have you on the podcast and have you share your dinner party tips and tricks with our community. So first of all, welcome.

Anna Watson Carl:

Thank you so much. I'm so excited to be on, on air with you.

Jess Dang:

Oh, great. But first I want you to tell us how you started in the world of food and how it led you to write your cookbook, The Yellow Table.

Anna Watson Carl:

Well, it's kind of a meandering path as we all probably have. I was interested in food from a really young age. I definitely experimented in the kitchen with my mom as a kid, but probably it was when I studied abroad in Paris during college that I just became really passionate about the ingredients, and the flavors, and the markets and really decided that this is something I wanted to pursue professionally.

Anna Watson Carl:

So that married with just my childhood growing up actually around the yellow table, that's something of note, this is a real table, which is why I named my blog and my book that. We spent so much time eating meals together as a family, so sort of that combo of the France experience and then growing up eating all of our meals together just made me want to pursue that as a career.

Anna Watson Carl:

And so first steps were I looked into going to culinary school right after college and was advised by many people try out working at restaurants before you invest the money in culinary school. So I worked in some restaurants in Pittsburgh, which is near my college and moved back to Nashville and ended up working as a private chef for a while, and ended up going to culinary school in France eventually, but it was several years after just having a lot of experiences, just sort of self-taught working in restaurants and doing private dinner parties.

Anna Watson Carl:

So I went to La Varenne, which is in Burgundy, was an incredible experience. I was there for several months, did sort of a work study program and then did a stodge in Paris at a restaurant there, and then moved to New York in 2007. And that's when I started working with food magazines, testing recipes, doing some food styling and then started doing a lot of food writing for various magazines and websites.

Anna Watson Carl:

And then eventually started my blog in 2011, The Yellow Table and just created a lot of recipes for my blog. And then also started just chronicling the dinner parties that I was throwing in my Manhattan apartment, which was up six flights of stairs, a tiny little-

Jess Dang:

Oh gosh.

Anna Watson Carl:

... place with a tiny little kitchen, but at that point I was married and my husband and I threw lots of dinner parties and we were just in New York space is always of concern, but we didn't let that stop us. And it was so fun to have my childhood table, the yellow table in this New York apartment throwing dinner parties, and that led to me eventually writing my book.

Jess Dang:

That's so great. And I have your book in front of me and I want to let you know that your dedication to your husband, and your parents, and the whole like introduction acknowledgements is like one of the favorites-

Anna Watson Carl:

Oh.

Jess Dang:

... I've ever read. It's just so sincere and clearly you just love food and how your parents have brought you into this world.

Anna Watson Carl:

Ooh, well, thank you. I'm glad that it comes across like that because it's very sincere. My parents and my husband had both just had such a profound obviously impact on me and have supported my dreams along the way, so that's meant a lot.

Jess Dang:

So your cookbook, The Yellow Table, it's focused on recipes for gathering. So why did you focus more on the dinner party side of things, the entertaining side of things versus just like your everyday recipes?

Anna Watson Carl:

I think it's really because my sort of view on food was really shaped by the way I grew up around the table. It was never... My mom, I thought she was a great cook growing up. I loved her food, but the food was less important than the fact that we were around the table and we'd have neighbors over and family members over.

Anna Watson Carl:

She would say that today, she's like, "I don't even like to cook that much." But really what was important to her was keeping us connected, and talking, and sharing food together. So given that that was so sort of bred into me as a child, when I went into the food industry professionally, the food was important to me, but maybe even more so it's just using food as a vehicle to connect people around the table, and to build community, and to have conversation.

Anna Watson Carl:

And what I found from talking to people again and again was like, "Oh, I'm so intimidated by this. It's one thing to cook a meal for my family, but the thought of like having people in my home." People just felt really overwhelmed by the idea of hosting a dinner party, so I thought that could be a unique focus of my blog.

Anna Watson Carl:

It's like to demystify it and make it approachable, and make it not into such a big thing. It could just be like a Tuesday night, make a pot of soup and invite over a couple of friends and neighbors. And so I'm a big believer of just like invite people, I want to say invite people to the mess, but I'll be honest, I get stressed.

Anna Watson Carl:

I don't want my house messy when people come over, but just so to speak, invite people into your home, and into your world, and it does not need to be perfect. In fact, that should definitely not be the goal. So be warm and approachable.

Jess Dang:

Yeah I really love that. And flipping through all the recipes in the book, these are recipes that you could easily make on a weeknight at your house, but they are really... they can also translate to something fancier if they're plated well or they at least scale easily for company. So I just love how there is no sort of like these are entertaining recipes and these are recipes you cook for your family on a weeknight, and there's no separation of that.

Jess Dang:

And I think sometimes people want to entertain more, they want to connect with people, but you're right, they feel intimidated by like, "Oh it has to be if I'm inviting company over it has to be something special." But when in fact it really is more people are just so excited to be invited over these days because it's just something that doesn't happen as often as it used to.

Jess Dang:

We're busy but also because a lot of people just don't really feel confident in the kitchen, but I think that if you can just get over that, I think that's the first key to entertaining more.

Anna Watson Carl:

Absolutely.

Jess Dang:

So when writing your cookbook, did you have to throw a ton of dinner parties as you were testing your recipes and such?

Anna Watson Carl:

I did throw a lot of dinner parties, but I would say not necessarily that many more than I normally would. Again, this was back before I had kids and I feel like that's definitely has changed things a bit in my world. I've got a two year old and a four year old, but at the time without kids, we would have people over several times a week easily.

Anna Watson Carl:

But for sure, we let friends try it and part of the way I actually tested the recipes was I got blog readers involved and I posted a post saying, "Hey, if you want to test the recipes let me know." And I had

probably like 50 or more blog readers volunteer to test recipes and then they all got a copy of the book when it came out.

Anna Watson Carl:

I got a lot of feedback is what I'm trying to say, so yes, I threw dinner parties. Another interesting feature of the book and dinner parties was that I did a Kickstarter campaign because initially I self published this book and then later I'm Sterling Epicure, a publisher in New York later picked it up, and so now they have the book.

Anna Watson Carl:

But in order to fund the Kickstarter I did a cross country road trip where I visited eight cities and threw eight dinner parties with other bloggers, which was so fun using recipes from the cookbook. And so that was a great way to connect with people around the country and get the word out.

Jess Dang:

That's such a smart way to put it all together and get it out there.

Anna Watson Carl:

Yeah, it's fun.

Jess Dang:

So I'm sure over the course of throwing hundreds of dinner parties over your life, you've learned so much about how to execute a stress-free, fun and delicious evening for you and your guests. So can you walk us through like when you are... maybe whether with kids or before kids, what are the main step that one should take as they're deciding on how to execute a dinner party?

Anna Watson Carl:

I think such a big part of it is planning ahead, especially when you have kids involved in you're working on their schedules. But just in general, to take the stress out I try and you want to plan your menu a couple of days in advance so that you can then think, okay, what are the items I can cook ahead?

Anna Watson Carl:

I always think, plan the menu first and then do your grocery shopping, and then try... and also, even when you're planning your menu, you're going to think like a dessert. For example, I always want to do a dessert, I can make the day ahead. So that's done. Maybe do a main course that you can make ahead, like some sort of braised dish, or stew, or something that can simmer that's already ready, and then all you have to do is maybe throw together a salad or an appetizer.

Anna Watson Carl:

So definitely think of... if you're doing four parts to your menu, think of at least two of them that you can do completely in advance and that'll make your life easier. I always try and set the table earlier in the day just so that it's done, so I'm not rushing around. I just try and make my goal just throwing it out there.

Anna Watson Carl:

I don't always succeed in following my own rules, but the goal is when guests arrive, I want to be able to be present and to welcome them and make them feel like I'm so happy they're there, not that I'm running around like a crazy person and then they feel like they're intruding or something. So whatever you can do an advance do it.

Anna Watson Carl:

And also I'm a big fan of doing family style stuff rather than having to plate each course. There's definitely been dinner parties where it's a really like special occasion. I love being a food stylist, I love making the plates look really pretty, but then there's also gatherings where it's just going to be easier to serve family style. So be aware of what the occasion is, and what the crowd is, and family style can be just as great.

Anna Watson Carl:

Also, I say, don't try and do it all yourself. There are times where I'm going to pick up a dessert or when friends are coming and they say, "Hey, what can I bring?" It's easy for them to bring a bottle of wine, but maybe if you know a friend is a really good baker or they love cheese, ask them to bring a cheese, or bring a dessert or let them contribute in some way and it takes some pressure off of you.

Anna Watson Carl:

You don't need to be a superhero when you're throwing a dinner party. Just make sure you're having fun as well as your guests.

Jess Dang:

Totally. I guess, you're already providing like the venue for that and I feel like people are just so happy to have the venue to go to that they're of course happy to contribute something.

Anna Watson Carl:

Yes. Yeah, totally.

Jess Dang:

You mentioned four parts to the menu, can you elaborate a little more like what those typical four parts usually are?

Anna Watson Carl:

I think in terms of when they arrive, I always have something to munch on, some sort of little hors d'oeuvre, not something at the table. Sort of the general flow of a dinner party at my house is they come in, you pour a drink or a glass of wine and I usually have something out on the counter that people can graze on, whether that's like cheese or a little bit of like charcuterie, or some sort of like crackers, and a spread on it, or olives, or just something like snacky because people arrive, they're usually hungry.

Anna Watson Carl:

And I may be putting the finishing touches on the dinner, but I have an open format kitchen, so that allows people to sit at the counter, have a snack, have a drink, talk to me. I'm finishing whatever I'm finishing, and then we move to the table. And then generally, I'll have like a starter, like some sort of

salad or it doesn't have to be a salad, I just happen to like salads, or a soup or something. And then do the main course and then the dessert.

Anna Watson Carl:

So those would be the four parts. And within, that for the main course that could be a protein and like a couple of veggies or that could be like a braise, or a stew, or something, or pizza or whatever. But I think of it in terms of four components, the appetizer, then the starter course like a salad and then a main course, and then a dessert.

Anna Watson Carl:

And also I've lived in France quite a bit and that's probably also influenced my idea that there's four parts because they always start with an aperitif, which could be just some nuts and a drink usually in the living room. And then they moved to the table and they have their three courses at the table. So that's generally how I do it.

Anna Watson Carl:

I guess I'd never put that together, but yes, I think that's very French.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. So can you share maybe like one of your favorite dinner party menus that follows the four parts that you just mentioned?

Anna Watson Carl:

Yes, absolutely. I love planning my menus seasonally, and so given that it's spring, I would love to do sort of classic French bistro menu with a spring salad with some fava beans, and some fresh peas, and some radishes, something really pretty on the plate. I'm sort of obsessed with fava beans and peas, they have such a short season.

Anna Watson Carl:

And then for a main course, something just easy and comforting, roasted chicken with lemon thyme and shallots, just I cut them into pieces instead of doing the whole chicken, it just sort of saves some time, and then they're nice and crispy, and I can have it all marinating in advance and just throw it in the oven like 45 minutes or so before people arrive with some roasted fingerling potatoes.

Anna Watson Carl:

And then for dessert, I would probably do some strawberry-rhubarb crumbles because that's again very spring with some vanilla bean ice cream. Oh, and I forgot to mention, for a starter, I would do like when people arrive just some mixed roasted nuts with rosemary and little cayenne pepper and some maple syrup. It's just something easy for them to snack on. Maybe a couple of cheeses. So that would be my menu.

Jess Dang:

Oh, I love that. That sounds so delicious. So we're all about like execution, efficiency here at Cook Smarts. I was wondering if... can you walk us through what you would do with that menu in terms of like

what can be prepared the day before, and how does the evening go in terms of when your guests arrive?

Jess Dang:

When do you get people seated and when do you dress the salad and get the chicken out of the oven? Like all of that.

Anna Watson Carl:

Totally. Great question. First of all, the roasted nuts can be made like days in advance, so I would go ahead and get that done like a couple of days in advance and I'm not even thinking... at least one day in advance I'd have that done. Then the fava beans and the peas have to be... they're a little bit of a pain because they have to be blanched and the fava beans skins have to come off. And then the peas, you also have to shell them and then blanch them. All of that would be done the day before.

Anna Watson Carl:

So I would do salad prep the day before, I would do the dessert the day before. Also the strawberry-rhubarb crumbles can be made, not baked, but put in the fridge the day before, and then the appetizer made the day before. And then the day of, I would say in the morning I'd go ahead and set the table.

Anna Watson Carl:

I would get the chicken at least a few hours before I would just get it ready with the lemon and the thyme, shallots and all that and just have it ready in the roasting pan, and that can already start absorbing some of those flavors. I would pull that out about 30 minutes before I was planning on roasting it just because so it can come to room temp.

Anna Watson Carl:

And then the potatoes, I would have that on a sheet pan. So let's say that the guests are coming at 7:00, I would say at 6:00, the chicken is out on the counter, just sitting there coming to room temperature. The salad elements, I would just have like at that point the radishes, I would have thinly slice and have in ice water, and just have all the salad elements where all I have to do is dress them.

Anna Watson Carl:

Once the guests are there, I would go ahead and pull it out, get the drinks out. I would get the little nuts out on the counter. The table's already set at that point, and then it's 6:45, I'd light the candles, make sure there's some music playing, and then people come at 7:00, they can have their drink, they can have their little nuts or cheese or whatever I have sitting out on the counter.

Anna Watson Carl:

And at that point I would have put the chicken in around 6:15, and so that's cooking. Or even if I put it in at 6:30, it can still be in the oven. It's like it doesn't have to all be like a drill sergeant. I'm not super strict on timing. So let's say we put it in at 6:30, it comes out at like 7:15, no big deal. Then that will rest on the counter.

Anna Watson Carl:

That point I would dress the salad and we can by 7:30-ish, 7:15, 7:30 sit at the table and eat the salad, and then the chicken is hot and the potatoes I would have put in the oven at that point too. Sorry, I should have like marked this down. I'm just talking about this as I would actually do it, so I hope it's coming across somewhat clear.

Anna Watson Carl:

And then I'd put the rhubarb, strawberry crumbles in as everyone has finished up their chicken because you're not rushing people through. The whole point of having people at a dinner table is that there's conversation, there's storytelling. It's not unusual for me to have a dinner party that lasts at least three hours because people just... I like to have conversation topics sometimes that I've thought ahead about and I have everyone answer like a certain question.

Anna Watson Carl:

I don't know, it just ends up sort of leading to other conversations and stories. And so all that to say is like people can finish their chicken, and then I put the crumbles in the oven and they bake for like 15 minutes. And then I put the ice cream on, but no one's looking at their clock like, "Oh, I'm sitting here." It's just leisurely.

Jess Dang:

Yes, that's perfect. So if you thought ahead and like been strategic about your menu, which you clearly have, salad is something that's really easy to put together after guests arrive, that you just really have to dress it. So that's something that is not going to take you out of play for like 30 minutes while your guests are just lingering.

Anna Watson Carl:

No.

Jess Dang:

So that's something that's great. And the roast chicken I love because who doesn't love coming into a house that smells like roast chicken, and then it can come-

Anna Watson Carl:

Yes, and potatoes.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. And I think a lot of people think like everything has to be done before people come, but it's really great to be able to pull out a nice hot meal and have the timing just right, and it's like if people enjoy appetizers, the first course and enjoying the conversation, they're not going to be upset if like food is moving a little more slowly than it should be.

Anna Watson Carl:

Yeah. And honestly, but even with the roast chicken, the fact that you can have all the elements prepped to where you can just stick the pan in the oven. And this is what I like about this meal, it's like the salad elements, as long as you prep them in advance, you just have them out, you dress it and then you stick the chicken and the potatoes in the oven. That's so easy.

Anna Watson Carl:

And then you can have your ramekins of your dessert already on the pan and you stick that in. So it's like everything is just ready to go in the oven, but you're still getting the benefit of like a hot, fresh, every course is coming right out of the oven, but it's already done in advance. That's what makes it so easy. Yeah,

Jess Dang:

Yeah, exactly. Are there certain meals that you tell people to steer clear of for dinner parties because you don't really have those kind of elements, those make ahead elements or has to be done at a certain time where it would take you out of play for a little bit?

Anna Watson Carl:

It depends on how many people you're serving, but I think any things where you have to cook like a lot of individual things, for example I happen to love crepes for dessert, but if you're going to do a dinner party for 12 people or 10 people and you're standing and cooking 12 individual crepes, well, they're all be waiting for a really long time. Not to mention that the ones you cook first are getting cold.

Anna Watson Carl:

So I feel like anything that has to do a lot of like standing over the stove cooking one thing at a time, don't do for a big dinner party. Unless it's a crepe party and everyone's sort of hanging out and you're making the crepes and passing them out, which I've done that before and that's really fun, but you just have to think about the context.

Anna Watson Carl:

And also... I don't know. Like if I'm having dinner for four, that'd be fine to like sear your steaks or do like individual things. But again, if I'm doing 12 I'm probably not going to be standing and searing individual pieces of meat. I would probably try and figure out something I could put on a sheet tray and cook it in the oven.

Anna Watson Carl:

Or if it's in the summer, we could grill, but I just don't like where I'm going to be standing at the stove all night. I like things that I can just put it in the oven or like a stew or something that could do in a Le Creuset and it's already made.

Jess Dang:

I'm totally with you. On the appetizer side, I typically always do a salad or a pureed soup because that's just like... that can sit, that can simmer forever you're not worried like, oh, are things getting soggy, are things falling apart more than you want them to?

Anna Watson Carl:

Yes.

Jess Dang:

So that's kind of my go-to for my appetizer or my first course, and then the main course, anything in an oven is great because you can pull it out and it feels fresh. I do a lot of fish. Fish scales well. You can be like a whole huge thing of salmon or something and it feels a little bit-

Anna Watson Carl:

Yes.

Jess Dang:

... more special and roasted veggies. That's kind of like always my go to.

Anna Watson Carl:

Oh yeah, totally. In fact, one of my favorite dinner party recipes is a salmon recipe that's in my book that's a honey Dijon salmon with lemon and like lemons slices and thyme on top. And it's so easy because again, you can have the whole pan ready with all the stuff on top of the salmon. You just put it in and I'll serve it with like couscous and like a salad or roasted veggies, and it could not be any easier.

Anna Watson Carl:

Literally could not be easier and people are like, "Oh my gosh, this is so good and that's so pretty." So I don't know, I guess one of the main things I was trying to communicate in my book and in my blog and anything I do is that creating a meal that's really delicious and really special doesn't have to break the bank. It does not have to take you days, and days, and days.

Anna Watson Carl:

There are ways to create really simple meals that can be beautiful and can taste great, and don't have to take such a long time. And so anyway, I'm trying to make it approachable, I guess is my point.

Jess Dang:

Exactly. And it doesn't even have to be meat always, sometimes-

Anna Watson Carl:

No.

Jess Dang:

... especially if you're on a budget, doing like a really great veggie chili and that being the theme of the evening, and having it just be super casual, and having like beers and chili. That's also like a great, especially for a cooler weather dinner party menu.

Anna Watson Carl:

Yeah. And actually, what I'm really into lately, especially with having young kids is doing a pizza night with friends where I'll make the dough in advance and have all the toppings ready and we'll invite one or two other families over with the kids and they go crazy over this because the kids can roll out their dough, they top it.

Anna Watson Carl:

And we just sort of have a rotating trays of pizzas coming in and out of the oven, and then everyone... Usually we'll feed the kids first and then let them go watch a movie, and then the adults will go sit around the table so we can actually enjoy our food and talk. But that's been something really fun. It's like, yeah, we're now having dinners at like 5:00, 5:30 with kids, but it's still doable.

Jess Dang:

Yes. That's the best way to use screen time when you're like-

Anna Watson Carl:

Yes.

Jess Dang:

... having company over and want some adult time, and that is just great to set the kids in front of a movie. So speaking of these-

Anna Watson Carl:

Oh yeah.

Jess Dang:

... like pizza bar ideas, I find that that's such a great thing to do for food allergies too. So how do you account for food allergies when you're planning a menu and you couldn't ask the guests beforehand and then using that as sort of input into the dinner party menu?

Anna Watson Carl:

I love a challenge, so if I have a food allergies, I'm never irked by that because I think it's usually pretty fun. First of all, I tend to do a lot of dishes that are gluten or dairy-free, just in general that's how I cook, i.e. lots of vegetables, olive oil, garlic, like a lot of flavor without having to add in a lot of bread and dairy.

Anna Watson Carl:

Of course there are some things like lasagna or pasta that do have gluten or dairy, but if I know someone's coming over that's gluten-free or multiple people are dairy-free, I will plan the menu with that in mind. Or if I'm really wanting to do something that has gluten or dairy, I'll just try and make sure there's at least enough component to the meal that they can eat.

Anna Watson Carl:

For example, I'm having a dinner party in a couple of weeks and there's a girl coming that's vegetarian, and so I won't necessarily make an entirely vegetarian menu. I'll just make sure that there are enough elements in the meal that she'll be fine with and I'll just maybe take the meat or fish off. Anyway, so I think it's actually pretty easy to do if you're already including a lot of veggie-centric type foods, I guess is what I've found.

Jess Dang:

Yeah, I agree. Nowadays, all of our dinner entertaining or any sort of meal entertaining involves lots of kids and with kids, there's always, it's not so much allergies but just general preferences or-

Anna Watson Carl:

Yes, or kids. Oh yeah.

Jess Dang:

... dislikes, so we do a lot of the bars. We do like noodle bars, taco bars, like you said the pizza bars. The noodle bars I like that there's so many different kinds of noodles these days, so we'll do completely like paleo noodles and regular noodles. And so there's usually something for everybody's, whatever sort of diet preference are on these days.

Anna Watson Carl:

That's a great idea. What do you put on your noodles at your noodle bar?

Jess Dang:

I will do some sort of peanut dressing and nobody has a peanut allergy or even like-

Anna Watson Carl:

Okay.

Jess Dang:

... a soy ginger dressing. And then on top of that, I'll just have different veggies, whether it's roasted veggies or quickly I'll stir fry some broccoli and have different kinds of proteins. So there's like tofu, and chicken or beans. That's to me, it can hit everything. It can be gluten-free-

Anna Watson Carl:

Yes.

Jess Dang:

... and it can be paleo. I have lots of friends that are paleo or low-carb and they can be vegetarian. And if it's noodles, most of the time it's vegan because there's no dairy usually, so yeah.

Anna Watson Carl:

That's a great idea.

Jess Dang:

That's something more on the casual side, we just do that more for like a lunch, but I do find that I'm throwing more lunch things than I am dinner things these days.

Anna Watson Carl:

Okay.

Jess Dang:

Since we're talking about kids, I'm sure... So you now have two kids, you said two and four, so I'm sure dinner parties look a little bit different now. You mentioned like they're a little bit earlier, and then kids

get ushered into the movie room or living room for movies and such. So it sounds like you're still throwing a lot of dinner parties. Do you take a different approach now?

Anna Watson Carl:

Well, it depends on... we'll do the ones that we sometimes will have families over like we just discussed where there are kids present. But I still try and do some dinners that don't involve the kids because it's nice to be able to like still cook the kind of food that I enjoy eating and set the table. It doesn't happen as often for sure because for me the biggest challenge is like if a dinner party starting at let's say 7:30, it's like those two hours before that dinner are crazy.

Jess Dang:

Yes.

Anna Watson Carl:

And in fact, I have a funny story that happened recently, like after all my years of entertaining, I'm like, "How did this happen to me? I thought I had mastered all this." But it was just one of those days where everything was sort of going wrong with the kids and they were just needing me a lot.

Anna Watson Carl:

And I had planned to make a lamb tagine because I thought, great that cooks for two and a half hours on the stove top, but my plan was to start it in the morning, and then it's already ready, and I just reheat it and do the salad and appetizer, and like easy peasy, so I thought. But all day it kept getting put off and put off.

Anna Watson Carl:

I was cleaning the house I think and taking care of the kids, and suddenly I'm like, get the kids ready for bed and I'm feeding them. And my husband was around and he was helping, but just the dinner part hadn't gotten prepped yet. And so our friends arrived at 7:00. I like broke all of my rules. They arrived, I'm like just browning the lamb. I'm like, "This is a disaster."

Anna Watson Carl:

Luckily the appetizer and the wine was out, I was like, "Here, you guys enjoy that. We're pulling out the instant pot," which I had never at that point used. We were using it for the first time-

Jess Dang:

Wow.

Anna Watson Carl:

... we threw the tagine in and amazingly it was done in like 40, 45 minutes, which was fine. They were so like... they have four kids, they were like, "Whatever, we're just happy to be out of the house." But all that to say is like, it all worked out fine, but you're still going to have nights where things don't go as planned and I was grateful the for the instant pot.

Anna Watson Carl:

But all that to say is dinner parties these days are just more challenging because you have little people that need you leading up to the moment where you're having people over, so it's not that sort of like calm preparation time that I used to be able to do. But my parents live in Nashville, which is where we live, and I'm so grateful because if I have a big dinner party like for 10 people or something, which every once in a while I'll do, the kids will go spend the night there.

Anna Watson Carl:

That's my secret weapon these days.

Jess Dang:

That's great. Just find a way to get the kids out of your house.

Anna Watson Carl:

Yeah. It can't always happen, but that's only if I'm doing like a really special event where I want the house to look nice and stuff, but in general, we've just sort of lowered our standards to where we'll either do the casual kid dinners with a pot of soup, or chili, or pizza bar, or that sort of thing. Or just have over friends that also have kids and totally get it if there's toys out or everything's not looking like a magazine when they get there, they get it. They're just happy to be out of the house too.

Anna Watson Carl:

So it's a work in progress, but it's interesting just to see how I think I'm evolving as a cook just because I am. I do have more of a focus on simple, but simple to me doesn't mean like cutting back on flavor, it's just trying to really think how can I maximize my time in the kitchen, and can I do this while holding a toddler on my hip because that's also... Can I do this one handed. It's taking new things into account.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. We talk about evolution and the kids, they go through stages so fast. So now your two and four year old in few years hopefully will be able to help you out in the kitchen and participate-

Anna Watson Carl:

Oh yeah.

Jess Dang:

... in dinner conversation and all of that, so it is just going to be changing really quickly. And I think for folks, it's totally okay to take that time off from entertaining if it's something that you feel like that stress is too much, but also it can just be different and I think to keep that practice in your life.

Jess Dang:

You talked about evolution, so I'd love to hear about maybe like your first dinner party and the things you've learned over the years and now that I'm sure throwing a dinner party, it doesn't stress you out too much. Clearly like you know the kid factor can throw a wrench into things, but how do others get to this point from like maybe never having entertained to someone who feels like really comfortable doing it?

Anna Watson Carl:

That's a great question. One of my first dinner parties that I ever threw was in college... oh no, it was right after college. I had graduated and I was living in my apartment in Pittsburgh with a friend, and I was working a day job at a restaurant actually and decided to... I planned out this very, very, very elaborate menu.

Anna Watson Carl:

I think there was like homemade gnocchi on it and I think there was like a very elaborate cheesecake with like multiple layers to it and flavors to it. And there was like... I don't even... Actually, it was spinach gnocchi. I remember this, you've got a wilt all the spinach down, you'll get the potatoes, and you have to shape it all.

Jess Dang:

Gosh.

Anna Watson Carl:

And then like a very elaborate sauce, and then the cheesecake, and all this. I knew I had to start making a lot of this stuff the day before because I had to work all day and then come home, but I was up until like 3:00 AM the day before. And then got up and went to work all day and then came home and was trying to put the finishing touches on the dinner party.

Anna Watson Carl:

And I remember being so tired that I could barely stay awake at the table. So I sort of learned my lesson like don't plan a menu that is that elaborate, that it's going to take hours of prep to where you're up till 3:00 AM the night before. Just don't do that to yourself. So now-

Jess Dang:

Even if you don't have kids, I feel like that's-

Anna Watson Carl:

Oh yeah.

Jess Dang:

... not ideal the way to spend your time.

Anna Watson Carl:

No, it wasn't, but I think that to me, dinner parties used to mean that I needed to pull out all the stops, like I got to like, wow, wow my guests with the food. And now I heard a quote recently that I think is so good, which is mood over food, and I love that because the more elaborated version of that is, think first about how you want your guests to feel when they're in your home having a meal.

Anna Watson Carl:

So don't go to such great lengths that the food has to be like a restaurant or something. They're not there for the food, they're there to enjoy your company and to just sense that warmth that can only

really be found in a home and with hospitality. And so if the dish that you're making doesn't turn out exactly how you wanted it to, it's not the end of the day.

Anna Watson Carl:

Worst case scenario, you order a pizza and have another glass of wine, you laugh about it, but that's something I've really tried to adopt as I've gotten older is like you don't... the food of course is so important to me and I love cooking, but don't kill yourself over that because people are, again, that's not the first reason they're there. They're there to spend time with you.

Jess Dang:

I love that you've thought a little bit about conversation topics. So what are other things like that can help create the mood over food? What are the other things like some other additional touches you can do that are really easy to make your dinner party feel special and keeping the food simple?

Anna Watson Carl:

I'm a huge fan of like candles can cover a multitude of... well, if not scents, dust or clutter... Just set the mood with like a lot of candles. I love that, that's easy. I'm a big fan of flowers. I don't mean like an elaborate bouquet, but even at Trader Joe's is getting like fresh tulips or whatever flowers in season.

Anna Watson Carl:

I think that makes a table look really pretty, and I think taking the time to set it in advance really sets the mood like this is going to be a really special evening. Those things are a few. And also I love jazz music so, so much and most of the time if you come to my dinner there will be jazz playing.

Anna Watson Carl:

If I walk in somewhere and there's like a fire lit, and candles lit, and jazz playing, and a little like appetizer on the counter and a glass of wine, it's like, oh my gosh, this is the best. I love it. So I enjoy that, so I try and create that same ambiance and hopefully my guests feel the same way.

Jess Dang:

Do you have a particular like jazz radio station or you have a playlist that you go to? So you don't have to think about it even?

Anna Watson Carl:

Yeah, I have a playlist that I've just created. I mean I have actually multiple dinner party playlists on Spotify, but I have a specific jazz one that I go to. I should probably update it because I've listened to it so much. But it's got like some classic stuff like some John Coltrane and some Miles Davis, and I love Diana Krall. So it's just a fun mix.

Anna Watson Carl:

But I mean I will say too of the conversation topics, I feel like it takes a dinner party to a whole nother level. And I don't want to be controlling about it, but I will say I've been to so many dinner parties where everyone just sort of chitchats and it's like the conversation can just stay surfacey, but if you throw out even something as simple.

Anna Watson Carl:

I went to a dinner recently and one of the guests was like, "Hey, I want to ask everyone a question." It was like in the beginning of the year and she said, "What's the thing you're most excited about right now? And what are you struggling with?" And just those high-low questions.

Anna Watson Carl:

There was a group of six women, I knew half of the people there, the other half I didn't know, and by the end of the night, we were all really connected. There was literally like tears at the table, and laughter at the table, and we were there for like three hours just talking about life and I don't know. I think it's cool when it takes it from just a meal to an experience.

Jess Dang:

Oh, I'm totally going to use that because I'm about to host a dinner party or like some sort of meal party for a bunch of women that I do not know.

Anna Watson Carl:

Oh wow.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. So I'm really excited about that, and I think just having-

Anna Watson Carl:

That's cool.

Jess Dang:

... that central... It's like it's an ice breaker when people don't know each other, I think having an icebreaker planned out is a really important.

Anna Watson Carl:

And it can also be light. I did one one time, it's like, "What's the worst job you've ever had?" And oh my gosh, the responses were so funny. Could have been something like working in a hot dog stand in high school, but just stuff you wouldn't know about people normally. So yes, it's really fun to have a question planned.

Jess Dang:

Oh, that's a fun question. Especially, for people that know each other, I guess that's probably something that you've maybe not had shared. So the dinner party philosophy that you have, I love it. It's just very approachable. Do you include this philosophy or process in your weekday cooking?

Jess Dang:

I would love to know what meal planning and dinner looks like at your house on like a normal day.

Anna Watson Carl:

Like total chaos. I do cook most nights of the week, but actually something I'm doing right now, which if people really care to see what it is at my house, they can watch it on Instagram in my stories. Once a week, I share a video of me preparing dinner, usually with my kids, if not like my youngest, my two year old always wanting me to hold him around that time of day.

Anna Watson Carl:

So I either have him on my hip or I have a little cooking stand and sometimes both of them will be standing there helping me do something. But they do really love to get involved. But I'm like this week for example, I'm a big fan of doing like two for one meals i.e. I make a meal with at least one element or two elements that can be transferred to another meal the next day.

Anna Watson Carl:

So this week I made skirt steak tacos with chimichurri, and knowing that the chimichurri could then be used in a meal the next day, which was like a quinoa bowl with roasted cauliflower and sweet potatoes with arugula, and then there's chimichurri stirred in. It was so good and it was nice to be able to use some of the common ingredients.

Anna Watson Carl:

I did like a dinner pasta two nights ago and like brussels sprouts and lemon, and it was like a brussels sprout carbonara pasta. Super easy, took me like 20 minutes. So I do a lot of... I try and include veggies because my kids can be picky, but I'll always have at least a couple of veggies in each meal and I'll try and do meals that take about 20 to 30 minutes because that's the time that I have and I feel like it's absolutely possible to make a really good homemade meal in that amount of time.

Jess Dang:

Well, the meals that you just mentioned, all of those could be served at a dinner party. They sound-

Anna Watson Carl:

Oh yeah.

Jess Dang:

... really... All of it is like... Overall in life, I think we want to make tasty food and I think it doesn't... if you start cooking and really getting into it, I think you start to realize that tasty food doesn't have to be complicated and it doesn't have to take-

Anna Watson Carl:

No.

Jess Dang:

... a lot of ingredients. Like a simple sauce like a chimichurri, always scale up on the chimichurri first of all because it's no additional work to blend more herbs.

Anna Watson Carl:

No.

Jess Dang:

Something like that just like a drizzle of a sauce like that on some vegetables like you said, with the skirt steak and then on the quinoa the next day like that makes a huge difference in flavor.

Anna Watson Carl:

Totally.

Jess Dang:

That's something that I think people think like, wow, that seems like fancy that I can only get this at a restaurant, but if you've got a food processor or a blender, you can make that at home.

Anna Watson Carl:

And literally my kids did help me make it. They were having fun picking the herbs off the stems, and so I'll give them little tasks and they got so excited. And because they were helping, they were more inclined to eat it. Well, not my daughter's, she's turned her nose up. My son was eating about a spoonful. He loved it and he's two, so you got to introduce them to stuff and try it.

Anna Watson Carl:

But yes, making a flavorful sauce can be game changing. That's why I never, never, never buy bottled salad dressings, I make my own vinaigrettes because it can be as easy as lemon and olive oil. That's so easy and delicious. And so, I don't know, that's one of my tips that people are like, what's something really simple I can do to make a meal taste so much better or more special?

Anna Watson Carl:

It's like make your own salad vinaigrettes. Whether that's... I love white balsamic vinegar and olive oil. I'll do sometimes like a mustardy red wine vinaigrette. You can do Asian style vinaigrettes, the lemon... Just it's endless, and so cheap, and so delicious.

Jess Dang:

Yes, the Cook Smarts community, we are big fan of making our own vinaigrettes. And I think one of the things that... my favorite thing to hear after people have been using our meal plans for a while, it's like I didn't realize how easy it is to make your own vinaigrette at home.

Anna Watson Carl:

Yes.

Jess Dang:

Most people already have the whole pantry, like their pantry is filled with vinegars. They don't realize like, oh, ... like the base of vinaigrettes... most vinaigrettes are just vinegars. Other-

Anna Watson Carl:

Yes.

Jess Dang:

... things like lemons and limes and that kind of acid, but still you already have all the ingredients in your pantry, so

Anna Watson Carl:

Yes.

Jess Dang:

... it's not a lot of extra work for folks.

Anna Watson Carl:

No, no it's not. And you had mentioned this earlier, that you feel like it's more rare that you get people to have people in their home, and I agree. When I moved to Nashville from New York almost two years ago, I thought, well, people have more time here, they have more space here. We'll probably be in and out of people's homes all the time, and I don't find that to be true.

Anna Watson Carl:

And just knowing that that's the case, that this makes me all the more passionate to equip people, and encourage people, and inspire people to have people over and cook dinners for friends because I really do feel like it's the best way to deepen relationships and to create communities around the table. I feel so passionately about that. Sets great examples for our kids too.

Jess Dang:

Oh, totally. I think like the fact that they're just growing up around like mom and dad have people over, they have friends, they have a life outside of me. I think that's so important. And my kids love when we have people over and they're always asking like, "Why..." We probably entertain once a week and it's nothing formal anymore.

Jess Dang:

You said like you're planning maybe like a... It sounds like you're planning for a dinner party that you're having in like two weeks. We're like the day of these days these day because we always... we basically cook every single night and I always cook for leftovers. And so for me it's sometimes just like instead of having leftovers we'll have people over, so I'll have another plan for lunch the next day, which is fine, but it's so important to me to have that.

Jess Dang:

So it might be like 3:00, I will text a friend being like, "Hey, I haven't seen you in a while. Do you want to come over for dinner tonight?" And most time it's yes because people are just excited to get out of the house, or take their kids somewhere, or not have to think... A lot of my friends have not thought about dinner at 3:00-

Anna Watson Carl:

Yes.

Jess Dang:

... so it's great. So that's how entertaining looks like for us these days. It's like we're going to be cooking anyways, so let's just have a friend over.

Anna Watson Carl:

Yeah, come over.

Jess Dang:

Yes. All right. Anna, was so great to have all of your dinner party tips. Before we let you go, we have a rapid fire round of questions-

Anna Watson Carl:

Okay.

Jess Dang:

... that I was hoping you would indulge us in.

Anna Watson Carl:

Okay.

Jess Dang:

Okay. So your most important kitchen tool.

Anna Watson Carl:

Well beyond my knife, my chef's knife, it would be a lemon squeezer. I use that thing constantly. Love it. It keeps the seeds in and the lemon comes out.

Jess Dang:

Oh, we've never gotten that.

Anna Watson Carl:

That's one of my favorites.

Jess Dang:

Your go-to breakfast.

Anna Watson Carl:

Cinnamon raisin toast, butter and yogurt. I have that almost every day.

Jess Dang:

You have 15 minutes to make a meal, what is it?

Anna Watson Carl:

It's going to be a combination of what's in my fridge probably. Some sort of salad sort of my go-to. I usually have some roast chicken in there. It'd probably be arugula, roast chicken, avocados, some citrus. Just a simple salad probably.

Jess Dang:

What's one meal you never get sick of?

Anna Watson Carl:

Pizza. Love pizza always and forever. So good.

Jess Dang:

What ingredient you always have in your pantry?

Anna Watson Carl:

Dark chocolate always.

Jess Dang:

A guilty pleasure food or not?

Anna Watson Carl:

Nutella is definitely a guilty pleasure. I love that, I put that on everything. So good.

Jess Dang:

Your favorite life optimization or organization app.

Anna Watson Carl:

Oh, app, oh man. Maybe the fact that I can't think of one shows how disorganized I am. What is it? I would say, I don't know if this totally counts, but Overcast, which is actually a podcast app. I use that because I listen to podcasts while I'm doing tasks at home that I don't enjoy like doing dishes or laundry. And I don't know if that counts optimization, but I feel like I'm learning things while I'm doing mindless tasks.

Jess Dang:

Overcast is probably my most used app as well. That's how I listen-

Anna Watson Carl:

Really?

Jess Dang:

... to the podcasts. Yes.

Anna Watson Carl:

I love it.

Jess Dang:

I don't really spend a lot of time on like social media on my phone, so like really I'm just on my podcasts all the time.

Anna Watson Carl:

Same.

Jess Dang:

The hardest thing you've done?

Anna Watson Carl:

Oh, ever in my whole life, definitely having my two kids. That was hard, but worth it.

Jess Dang:

We get that a lot. Proudest thing you've done.

Anna Watson Carl:

It would also be my kids, but I would say beyond that would be my cookbook, writing it and self publishing it, all that went into it. It was this incredible process, so fun and I was very proud of it.

Jess Dang:

The last book you loved?

Anna Watson Carl:

Oh, I read *The Water Dancer*. It was amazing, by, what was it? Ta-Nehisi Coates?

Jess Dang:

Ta-Nehisi Coates, yeah.

Anna Watson Carl:

Yes. Have you read that? It's so incredible.

Jess Dang:

No, it's on my list. Okay. I need to get to that, I'm excited. I'm looking for a new novel to read so I will put that one.

Anna Watson Carl:

Yeah. I couldn't put it down, it was incredible. That and *Educated* was my other one. Oh man, that was so good too.

Jess Dang:

Oh, I could not put down *Educated*. That was like... It kind of read like a thriller to me. I was like, "Oh my God, what's going to-

Anna Watson Carl:

It did.

Jess Dang:

... happen to this girl?"

Anna Watson Carl:

Yeah. I had a grimace on my face the whole book like, "No."

Jess Dang:

Yeah. The last TV show you loved.

Anna Watson Carl:

Oh man, it is Silicon Valley. It's kind of embarrassing to say that, but it's hilarious, and yeah, that was good.

Jess Dang:

Well, I live in Silicon Valley and I love that show because it like just pokes fun of where I live and it's so much I'm like, "Yeah, that happens here. Yeah, yeah that's true."

Anna Watson Carl:

I know. My husband works in tech so he got me into it and I was like, "I actually really like that show."

Jess Dang:

That's great. This one's not one I normally ask, but since you mentioned podcasts, what are the top three podcasts you listen to or love? That you're always so excited when a new episode releases?

Anna Watson Carl:

Oprah is my favorite, so her Super Soul Sunday - love. That's always very inspiring. I really like Deliciously Ella. She is a cookbook author and healthy food guru in London. And I really enjoy. She doesn't just cover food, she does a lot of mental health and wellness, and just really interesting interviews. So love her podcast, and then Goop. I think they have some really great stuff. So enjoy their interviews too. That'd probably be the three that come to mind.

Jess Dang:

I don't have any of those on my list.

Anna Watson Carl:

Really?

Jess Dang:

Yeah.

Anna Watson Carl:

Oh, I need to get your list then, you have to send me your favorite.

Jess Dang:

Yeah. Okay. Before we sign off, please, I'd love for you to tell everyone where they can get your book, The Yellow Table and continue to follow you for all your dinner and dinner party tips.

Anna Watson Carl:

Oh, thank you. Well, the book is on Amazon or your local booksellers, but for sure you can get it on Amazon. And then they can follow me on... I'm not blogging as much anymore, so I'd say the best way to keep in touch with me is over Instagram at which is just @annawatsoncarl. And I do my weekly easy weeknight dinners and hopefully there'll be a future sequel to Yellow Table cookbook. That's sort of in the works very unofficially, so that's my hope.

Jess Dang:

Well, thanks, Anna. Was so great to have you on. I think everyone is inspired to reach out to someone and invite them over for dinner.

Anna Watson Carl:

Oh, I hope so too. Thank you so much Jess for having me on. This was really fun.

Jess Dang:

So like I just said, go and invite a friend or two over tonight Gathering people at your dinner table doesn't have to be a huge event. And if you're already in the mode of cooking, adding a few guests every so often is totally possible. Like Anna said, mood over food. You don't have to change your dinner plans but dress up the evening with some music, a set table and some candles and you've got a party that I want to be at.

Jess Dang:

And I'd like you to know that I did follow my own advice after taping this interview, I texted a friend I hadn't seen in two months and she came over and enjoyed the pizzas I was already planning on making with me and the kids. There were no candles, but I set the table a bit nicer and broke out a bottle of wine.

Jess Dang:

It was actually a bottle she had given to me for my birthday back in October, so it was fitting that she got to enjoy it with me. So I challenge you to throw a gathering brunch or dinner within the next month. You can check out Anna's book, The Yellow Table for menu inspiration, or if you're a meal plan member, we have over a thousand recipes that you can choose from. There's even a special occasion and feeds a crowd tag to help you filter through the library.

Jess Dang:

And if you're not a member, remember that you can use code FRESHENUP20 for 20% off through Wednesday, March 25th. After you throw your dinner party, please let me know how it went on

Instagram. Just DM me at @CookSmarts or @JessDangCS, I want to hear everything from your menu, to your guest, to what you all talked about. Make me feel like I was sharing a meal with you. We'll also be doing a fun giveaway on Instagram with Anna, so make sure you're following @cooksmarts to get all the details.

Jess Dang:

Okay, so before we say chow today, I want to share emooore86's Apple podcast review. "My sister introduced me to Cook Smarts when my second child was a baby and has transformed our meal planning routine. I've been a member for over two years now and I love listening to the podcast and getting even more ideas for my kitchen.

Jess Dang:

From healthy strategies for feeding kids to freezer meals, to creative ways to use leftover herbs, Jess is full of great ideas. I'm expecting baby number three next month and I'm thankful to already be in a routine with Cook Smarts so that we'll continue to have healthy meals for our family without the extra mental load of meal planning."

Jess Dang:

Oh, thank you Emily, and congrats on baby number three. Three kids is chaos, but in the most beautiful way. I just love it and I hope you do too. Emily is the winner of a Cook Smarts tote bag. Just reach out to us at hello@cooksmarts.com. If you haven't left a review on Apple podcast, please, please do.

Jess Dang:

It's such a great way to support the show, and selfishly, it just makes me happy to read your reviews. So if you have a few minutes, head to your Apple podcast app and send us some love and stars.

Jess Dang:

If you have any additional questions about entertaining and dinner parties, you know where to reach me on Instagram, or you can also shoot me a text at (650) 386-0290. We'll be back with a new episode in two weeks, but until then, thank you for letting us join you in your kitchen or wherever you're listening to this podcast.

Jess Dang:

And until next time, happy cooking from your kitchen cheerleader.