

Date Night Dinners

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Date Night Dinners

Cooking for one other person, at home. The staying-in half of [Date Night](#), written out as dishes rather than links.

Eighteen of them, sorted by the only question that decides the evening — do you want to cook **for** them, **with** them, or put on a four-minute show? Nothing here leaves you facing the stove while they sit alone on the couch, which is the failure mode every one of these is chosen to avoid.

For the underlying skills see [Cooking](#) · [ways to cook](#) · [cooking techniques](#) · [easiest ways to cook](#).

It Cooks Itself

The oven works, the place fills with the smell of it, and you are already sitting down when they arrive. This is the right answer more often than people think. Sibling pages: [Crock Pot and slow cooker Recipes](#) · [soup](#).

- **Roast chicken, potatoes underneath** — 15 min hands-on. Salt the bird all over the night before and leave it uncovered in the fridge; that one step is most of the distance between good and restaurant. Halved potatoes in the pan, chicken on top so everything cooks in the drippings. 425°F until the thigh reads 165°F. *The one thing*: wet skin steams instead of browning — pat it bone dry.

- **Short ribs braised in red wine** — 30 min hands-on, three hours in the oven, and genuinely better made a day ahead. Sear hard, then leave it in wine and stock at 300°F until a spoon goes through. Chill overnight, lift the fat cap off, reheat while you pour the first drink. *The one thing*: skipping the sear to save time — that crust is the whole flavour.
- **Sheet-pan salmon, tomatoes and olives** — 10 min hands-on. Cherry tomatoes, olives, capers, lemon and oil roasted ten minutes; salmon nestled in for twelve more. The tomatoes burst and become the sauce. One pan to wash. See [Fish and Seafood](#). *The one thing*: twelve minutes is a ceiling, not a target.
- **Chicken thighs with forty cloves of garlic** — 20 min hands-on. Brown skin-down, add an absurd quantity of unpeeled cloves, white wine and thyme, lid on for forty minutes. The garlic goes sweet and spreadable. About eight dollars, tastes like a small French restaurant. *The one thing*: do not peel the garlic — the skins stop the cloves dissolving.

Cook Together

Here the food is a pretext for two hours at the counter with your hands busy and the conversation loose. Pick these when you want the evening to be *doing* something, not just eating.

- **Pizza, one each** — 30 min hands-on, dough made yesterday. Cold-ferment it in the fridge overnight; that is where the flavour comes from and it leaves tonight as only stretching and topping. No pizza oven needed — hot cast iron on the stove, then straight under the broiler. Compare [Deep-Dish Pizza](#). *The one thing*: an overloaded pizza never crisps.
- **Dumplings, folded at the table** — 60 min hands-on, and that is the point. Buy the wrappers. Pork, cabbage, ginger, scallion, sesame oil. The folding takes an hour with both of you sitting down, which makes it the closest thing to a date built into a recipe. *The one thing*: overfilled dumplings split — a rounded teaspoon each.
- **Fresh tagliatelle** — 45 min hands-on. Two eggs, 200 g [flour](#), and a rolling pin if you have no machine. Dress it with nothing more ambitious than butter, parmesan and a spoon of the pasta water. See [Italian Cuisine](#). *The one thing*: under-kneaded dough tears — ten full minutes, until it is smooth as an earlobe.
- **Hot pot** — 15 min hands-on and no cooking at all. Broth on a portable burner, plates of thin-sliced meat, mushrooms, greens, noodles. You cook one bite at a time across three hours, seated throughout. No technique and no way to get it wrong, which makes it the safest ambitious-looking dinner here. *The one thing*: thin dipping sauce ruins it — sesame paste, soy, garlic, chilli, and more of it than you think.
- **Cheese fondue** — 20 min hands-on. Rub the pot with garlic, melt gruyère and emmental into dry white wine with a spoon of cornstarch, finish with kirsch. Bread, apples, cornichons, boiled potatoes. Engineered around sitting close and taking turns. See [cheese](#) · [bread](#). *The one thing*: boiling breaks it — keep it at a bare shiver.

Ten Minutes of Drama

Short, loud, restaurant-grade, and over before the conversation cools. All of them are unforgiving of a missing ingredient, so everything is chopped, measured and within arm's reach before the pan gets hot. Nearby: [5 minute meals](#) · [Cookware](#) · [cooking oils](#).

- **Steak au poivre** — 20 min hands-on. Crushed peppercorns pressed into two steaks, a fierce sear, then cognac, cream and mustard in the pan while the meat rests. Six minutes of cooking and one of the great sauces. *The one thing*: a crowded or merely warm pan gives you grey steak.
- **Scallops in brown butter** — 10 min hands-on. Ninety seconds a side in a very hot pan, then butter

cooked to hazelnut with lemon and parsley poured over. They cost real money and they look it. *The one thing*: wet scallops steam and never brown — paper towels first, salt at the last second.

- **Moules marinière** — 15 min hands-on. Shallots and garlic in butter, a glass of white wine, mussels in, lid on four minutes. A pound of mussels costs a few dollars and arrives looking extravagant; the bread going into the broth afterwards is the best part. See [Countries with Cheapest Seafood](#). *The one thing*: any mussel that will not close before cooking, or will not open after, goes in the bin.
- **Cacio e pepe** — 15 min hands-on. Pasta, pecorino, black pepper, water. Four ingredients and pure technique; the cheese has to emulsify with starchy water off the heat rather than seize into strings. The most impressive cheap dinner there is when it lands. *The one thing*: heat is the enemy — pan off the burner, cheese in, toss hard.
- **Duck breast** — 20 min hands-on. Score the fat, start it in a *cold* dry pan skin-down, render over low heat ten to twelve minutes until the skin is glass. Two minutes on the flesh side, five resting, sliced on a bias. Reads as far harder than it is. *The one thing*: starting it hot. Cold pan, low heat, patience.

Dessert

Nothing here is made after the main course. Standing at the stove at half past nine while they wait at the table is how a good evening quietly ends. Make it in the morning, or make it in thirty seconds. See [No Bake Desserts](#) · [Baked goods](#) · [Chocolates](#).

- **Chocolate pot de crème** — made this morning. Warm cream over good chopped chocolate and yolks, into two small cups, set in the fridge all day. Flaky salt on top before it goes out. *The one thing*: cream too hot scrambles the yolks — warm, not boiling, poured in slowly.
- **Basque burnt cheesecake** — made yesterday. Everything in a blender, into a parchment-lined tin, baked hot and fast until the top is genuinely scorched. Designed to be overbaked outside and barely set in the middle, which makes it the hardest dessert on earth to ruin. Better on day two. *The one thing*: pulling it early because the top looks burnt — that is the dish.
- **Affogato** — 30 seconds. Good vanilla ice cream, a shot of hot espresso poured over it at the table. Never fails, and the pouring is a small piece of theatre. See [coffee](#). *The one thing*: cheap ice cream — with two ingredients there is nowhere to hide.
- **Strawberries, mascarpone, black pepper** — 5 minutes. Halved strawberries with a spoon of sugar and a few drops of balsamic, left to sit while you eat, over mascarpone loosened with cream. *The one thing*: out-of-season strawberries — in February use roasted pears or citrus.

The Run-Up

The cooking is about a fifth of this. The rest is what makes the cooking look easy on the night, and it runs in order.

1. **The night before** — salt the protein; make the dough, the braise, or anything that improves overnight. Every hour moved earlier is an hour bought back later. See [Garden Meal Prepping](#) · [meal prep equipment](#).
2. **That morning** — shop, and make dessert if it is a custard. Wine and anything sparkling into the fridge now; nothing kills a first drink like a warm bottle.
3. **Three hours out** — clean the kitchen and the bathroom, take the trash out. No recipe mentions this and it matters more than the food does.

4. **Forty-five minutes out** — mise en place. Everything chopped, measured and in bowls on the counter. Table set, lights down, music on, braise back in the oven.
5. **Ten minutes out** — shower, change, pour yourself a drink. Nothing on the stove yet; you want to open the door unhurried.
6. **They arrive** — under twenty minutes of active cooking from here. If the plan needs more than that, it was the wrong plan.

Six Rules

- **Cook it once before.** Tonight is not a first attempt. A dish you have made twice beats a better dish you have made never.
- **One pan of active work, maximum.** Two things wanting attention at once is how the evening turns into you apologising over a stove.
- **Everything prepped before they arrive.** The cooking should look effortless, and the only way to look effortless is to have already done the effort.
- **Dessert is finished before dinner starts.** No exceptions on this one.
- **Clean as you go.** A sink stacked with pans at ten o'clock ends the night faster than a bad sauce ever will. See [kitchen equipment](#).
- **Salt earlier and taste more often than feels necessary.** Almost everything that comes out flat was seasoned once, at the end. See [Flavor Chemistry](#).

What Not to Cook

- **Anything deep-fried** — a small place smells like a fryer for two days, including the bedroom. Save it for [outdoor cooking](#).
- **A whole fish** — bones and conversation do not mix, and neither of you wants to be concentrating.
- **Soufflés, or anything with a hard timing window** — the food should wait for you, not the reverse.
- **More than three courses** — ambition past that point stops being generous and starts being a performance.
- **A recipe you found this afternoon** — see rule one.

Cheap Versions

Staying home costs the groceries and nothing else, which is most of why [Date Night](#) starts there. The mussels, the cacio e pepe, the forty-clove chicken and the dumplings are all under fifteen dollars for two.

- [cheapest meats](#) · [Cheapest Protein and Dry Protein](#)
- [Macaroni and Cheese](#) · [Grilled Cheese Sandwiches](#) — the version you can still call at six o'clock
- [home recipes](#) · [my recipes](#)

Nearby

- [Date Night](#) — the full evening, including the versions that leave the house
- [Meals](#) — the food map
- [Recipes](#) · [Cooking](#) · [Cuisines](#)
- [Cooking Appliances](#) · [Cookware](#) · [knives](#) — the kit

- [Ohio Wine](#) — something local to open
- [Valentine's Day](#) — the dated version, when restaurants are at their worst and this page is at its most useful