

# DESIGNSOUNDTRACK



## THE ELEMENT OF SURPRISE

BY IVY GRACIE

Somewhere back in time someone threw the very first dinner party. The intent was probably not much different than that of current times – invite the neighbors over for some prehistoric sushi and show off the cave’s latest hieroglyphic – but surely it resulted in the unwritten law that when invited to dinner, one must not only counter with a reciprocal invitation; one must also create an event more memorable than the last. The Paleolithic interpretation of hospitable one-upmanship might have included bagging a mammoth or, better yet, inventing fire. And while the fire thing probably trumps anything we face in terms of degree of difficulty, our modern day stress level has got to rival that of our ancestors.

“The ultimate goal is to do a better job than the couple at the last dinner party while attempting to make everyone jealous and sort of dislike you,” writes Christian Lander in his book, *Stuff White People Like*. And that means learning how to fold a napkin with origami-like precision, casually placing a leather-bound, autographed first edition of a classic novel on the cocktail table where all guests are sure to notice it (“Oh, that? I picked it up while I was wandering the backstreets of London ...”) or turning on the reliable *Four Seasons* by Vivaldi CD you’ve kept in the “Disc 5” position of your carousel for the last 10 years. The napkins and the novel are within reason, but playing it safe with the music is ... played. If you want to simultaneously impress and piss off your guests, chuck the classics and add an element of surprise.

At La Belle Vie, the Twin Cities’ hippest bastion of haute cuisine, it’s not Liszt coming through the speakers; it’s Led Zeppelin. “We play a couple of their tunes in the lounge and there’s one on the dining room soundtrack,” says partner Bill Summerville, who is also the restaurant’s managing director. Summerville takes fine dining seriously but doesn’t believe that it needs to be sedate. “We [the staff] are here eight hours a day or more, so we want to be energized,” he says. “Classical or opera would be stifling. It would make us seem so stiff and stodgy that our guests would want to kill themselves.” Summerville says an unusual playlist can stimulate diners’ interest. “It’s counterintuitive to what you’d expect to hear, so it gives the dining room a little bump of life.”

Corrine Nechal, a server at La Belle Vie, creates the soundtracks for both the dining room and lounge. “It’s sexy, it’s chill, it’s fluid, and it’s got a world feel to it,” she says. A self-professed audiophile, she’s one of those people who are always on the cutting edge of the cutting edge, discovering unique music long before it hits the mainstream. “I put on stuff that people haven’t necessarily heard,” she says. But she’s always aware of her patrons when she’s combining cuts. “A lot of our guests are celebrating something – birthdays, anniversaries or they haven’t



seen each other in a long time – they’re there for a big deal, so I want a bit of intensity to the music.”

Nechal says there really aren’t any rules to putting together a great dining soundtrack. “Anything that I think is a beautiful piece – I don’t see why it can’t fit in the dining room.” However, she offers some guidance. “I lean toward instrumental because it’s about being able to see and experience your food and it’s about being able to talk.” One more word of advice: “Don’t have a playlist that’s too short – it can drive not only you, but your guests nuts.”

So ditch the Dvorák, discover something different and spring the surprise on your unsuspecting guests. They’ll hate you for it. ☹️

### CORRINE NECHAL’S PLAYLIST FOR A LA BELLE VIE-STYLE DINNER PARTY

*Corrine says put these CDs on your carousel, press “Shuffle” and let it play.*

**Moon Safari** OR **Virgin Suicides** – by Air. A French band – sexy and musical with some lyrics, but not a lot. Very fluid, chill-out orchestral music.

**Lunático** – by Gotan Project. A Spanish band with accordion and great beats. Tango in a red dress to this CD.

**The Mirror Conspiracy** – by Thievery Corporation. Sophisticated world lounge music.

**Man With the Movie Camera** – by Cinematic Orchestra. An urbane life soundtrack; thoughtful, sultry and whimsical.

**Bande à Part** – by Nouvelle Vague. French band that transforms covers of 80s alternative classics like Billy Idol’s *Dancin’ with Myself* and U2’s *Pride* into breathy bossa novas. Cool, sexy, lounge-y French feel.