

The Guardian



Lectures in your living room: how to host a salon

Make like the Bloomsbury set and gather friends at home for enlightening talks, lively debate - and sausage rolls

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Once a month, on a Monday night, 30 friends squeeze into my flat to listen to three short talks about odd things. Subjects have been as diverse and peculiar as container shipping, drag culture, phantom limb syndrome, the Silvertown explosion, outdoor swimming, Napoleon's wife and armadillos. I began Odd Mondays because I was fed up with boring conversations. I dread "So what do you do?" and listening to people repeat the same anecdotes, boring themselves as well as everyone else. It's such a waste of time, when talking can be so stimulating, intriguing, lively and fun.

I wanted a way to inspire people to reveal their inner passions and quirky interests, to stimulate conversation and debate. So I decided to start a discussion salon. I began by inviting any friends who I thought might be interested. Many replied with enthusiastic emails filled with exclamation marks, but others remained silent - made anxious, I later discovered, by the first rule ...

1 The basics

The first rule of Odd Mondays is that all guests must at some point give a talk – although you will have plenty of notice, and the opportunity to postpone. If everyone takes part, there’s an atmosphere of collaboration rather than criticism – it’s much harder to heckle if you know you’re up next.

The second rule is that your talk can’t be about what you do for a living. So we’ve had an architect speaking about fakes (a false meteorite, synthetic eggs, imitation works of art, and his own mockney accent), a writer explaining game theory, and someone in finance discussing Croatian klapa music. It is fascinating to learn something new about the topic – and also about the friend.

This means that at Odd Mondays we are all amateurs. No one expects you to be an expert so you needn’t worry about being able to answer questions. Occasionally, an expert on a particular topic happens to be in the audience – after a film director talked about dissociative identity disorder in reference to *Fight Club*, a doctor at the salon answered questions afterwards.

I’m pretty militant about enforcing the rules. I won’t let people dodge their talk forever, and a speaker is blacklisted if they drop out at the last minute, unless they have a really good excuse. The shyer Odd Monday members might dread my tap on the shoulder and nagging emails, but I try to make up for it with a tipple of whisky to those in need, and people are always pleased to have done it.

2 The talk

We have three talks at each salon, lasting around 10-15 minutes: time enough to develop an idea, brief enough to keep the evening fast-paced. Guests squeeze on to the sofa, three to an armchair, and scatter cross-legged across the floor – while I man the projector and slides, and chair a short Q&A at the end of the talk. The Q&A leads on to the more informal discussion and debate that springs up as we mingle, refilling glasses, in the 20 minute gap between talks.

3 Make everything else easy

I don’t distract myself from the enjoyment of Odd Mondays by worrying about tidying the flat, or preparing fancy food. I’ll shove mess under the sofa, and serve sandwiches and sausage rolls which are quick to prepare. Everyone brings a bottle, so I just put out glasses and sometimes make a jug of gin and tonic. All the Odd Monday members feel part of the salon, so they’re happy to lend a hand – moving the furniture, taking the sausages out of the oven or pouring a drink.

4 Let the conversation flow

Odd Mondays has been going for two and half years and in that time I’ve learned so many peculiar facts. I now know that parasitic horsehair worms make crickets drown themselves, that men on St Kilda developed prehensile toes to climb cliffs for gannet eggs and that jerusalem artichokes are so called because their flowers resemble sunflowers (the Italian for sunflower is girasole). I started Odd Mondays in pursuit of better conversations, and I’ve found that ideas from the salon resurface during chats over lunch or coffee, during a party or a walk in the park. With so much else to talk about, the dreaded “So what do you do?” is finally out of commission.

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