Once upon a time (when our grandparents were young and foolish), supper clubs were destinations—nightclubs, really—for people who wanted to dress up, relax, enjoy an elegant meal (often in a setting where they could order bathtub gin) and spend time with friends. Long, sexy cigarette holders, black tie, and draping pearls were all mainstays of a glamorous night out where people sipped martinis and listened to live orchestra or club music. (Desi Arnaz and Frank Sinatra come to mind.) As dressed up and interesting as the people were, the menus were not. The fare was straightforward: Surf and Turf, mashed potatoes...nothing complicated or French.

Today, supper clubs are a different affair altogether. They aren’t just a setting; they are an entity. The guests, not the venue, are the club. But the purpose is the same: to spend time with friends over food and drink. The modern supper club is held in a home for a limited group, which is the most exclusive aspect of today’s supper clubs, and the same people show up every time. Best of all for guests, the host and hostess of the month usually spend days hunting down exotic ingredients and preparing dishes that are as intriguing as they are complex.

But it’s about more than food. “We’re trying to recapture an era when people made time for each other,” says Debi Shawcross, author of Friends at the Table, the Ultimate Supper Club Cookbook and the authoritative word on how to do it right and best. Also a teaching-chef, Shawcross knows how to pull off the perfect dinner party that is the template for entertaining in the new millennium. Her goal is to make every event as jolting as “I think of it as a splurge for my friends,” she says. One of the benefits of the modern supper club is reciprocity. “They do the same for me.”

In Friends at the Table, Shawcross cherry-picks the elements of the vintage supper club and transforms them into home entertaining. There is music (via iPod), cocktails (served by the host or hostess, not by a waitress in a provocative get-up) and fine dining (prepared meticulously, not en masse, in a home kitchen). The best deviation from the original? There is no tab at the end of the night.

According to Shawcross, when forming a supper club, you first must figure out what you want to accomplish. Do you want to cultivate friends with children the same ages as yours? Are you trying to network for professional reasons? Are you looking for other couples to share your enthusiasm for...
For most of us, when fate intervenes (or the babysitter cancels), good friends forgive someone who opts out of a get-together at the last minute. But with supper club, there are no excuses short of death or an extreme act of nature. “For a supper club to work, you need to commit to a schedule, whether it’s monthly, bi-monthly or quarterly, and stick to it,” Shawcross firmly states. Adds Moss, “It forces us to get together and make it happen.” The bailiwick of a supper club is designed to build relationships on a deep, ongoing level,” says Shawcross in her book. Indeed, for Shawcross’ clubbers, adding that children at home were the primary commonality. The group decided to include one non-member “mystery couple” at their events. I was the crasher at their holiday supper club. “Usually, I try someone I don’t know well,” says Moss, “someone I think would be an interesting conversationalist, but who blends in.”

For those who think the old rules for entertaining are passé, they are not. “Guidelines for supper club aren’t that different than those for the elegant dinner party that you make yourself give once a year. In addition to the right mix of people, ambient lighting and a smooth segue from cocktails to table without announcing “lawn time” are important.” Nevertheless, there are some new issues that Debi and Lucy never foresaw: How do you accommodate vegans? Shawcross says go the distance, even if it means making a whole separate meal, which she did for one of her guests at this gathering. And, even though your guests can be as close as family, graciously signaling a close to the evening’s festivities always requires a delicate touch. “I usually ask what people are doing the next day,” says Shawcross. Although in Shawcross’ club, each host couple is responsible for an entire evening, some clubs divvy the courses among members for each event. “In other words,” she says, “job-share to create the ultimate dinner party.” Another suggestion is for the men to handle the cooking and cleanup. At the Moss home, Susan engages her husband as sous chef. “Charlie will do everything, from chopping to grilling to serving food to doing dishes at the end,” she says. Whatever the arrangement, be prepared to go above and beyond what you normally do for a dinner party. When preparing for this holiday supper club, Shawcross spent hours in grocery stores. Rarely does she find everything she needs in one store—blood orange juice for the cocktails was the elusor this time. While some of us might fudge with a substitute like cranberry sauce, Shawcross goes exactly by the book. For her professional standards, it’s all in the ingredients, and sometimes there is just no substitute; certainly not for the beef tenderloin, prosciutto and rosemary, or cremin mushrooms, all of which were part of Shawcross’ holiday supper menu. Remember, above all, it’s all about spending time with friends. Whatever the rush, never sacrifice this ingredient. It’s the most important one of all.

2. Chef and author, Debi Shawcross.
3. Prosciutto-wrapped shrimp with caramelized onion sauce.
4. Roasted beef tenderloin with prosciutto and rosemary.
5. A sprig of thyme finishes off a place setting.
6. Chef Moss, Shawcross and Chiwon Hahn.
7. Brandied wild mushroom pâté.
8. Jeff Shawcross.
BRANDED WILD MUSHROOM PATE

To serve:
- Spread pâté on toasted rye bread and sprinkle with finely snipped chives for garnish.

LOBSTER SALAD WITH ROASTED PEPPERS, MISO DRESSING AND GOAT CHEESE

For the cakes:
- Melt chocolate and cream in a double boiler. Whisk gently to blend. Place a plate on top, invert and remove ramekins. Place a chocolate ball in the middle of each ramekin. About 15 minutes. Run a small, sharp knife around the inside of each ramekin. Place one plate on top, invert and remove ramekins.

INDIVIDUAL CHOCOLATE LAVA CAKES

For the cakes:
- Preheat the oven to 450 degrees. Spring form 4-inch ramekins with cooking spray. Melt the chocolate and butter in a double boiler and whisk until smooth. Place in the refrigerator until cool.

All recipes serve 8 to 10.