

# How to Be a Good Host and a Good Guest

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*World Philosophy Day (on 17 November 2022) offered a chance to ask what constitutes good behaviour in a host and, equally, in a guest. A recent article by Megan Dean of Michigan State University, took the rise in food allergies and intolerances as a starting point to ask how a host should act when faced with a guest whose professed allergies seem a tad suspect. Is it OK to ignore guest requests as snowflake signifiers? What should guests do when faced with intolerable food that they failed to inform their host about?*

**Megan Dean:** I think that, you know, hosting and sharing meals is really important part of a lot of our lives. And when we're hosting, we want to be a good host. And when we're a guest, we want to be a good guest. Gut issues and all of the complexities around that, the doubt and the worry that people won't believe you or that they they won't be able to serve food that's appropriate for you. And then you have to refuse the food and then you look rude. You know, all of that stuff gets in the way of what we want to do, which is be together over a shared meal.

**Jeremy:** Megan Dean's article is actually entitled *The Worst Dinner Guest Ever: Gut Issues and Epistemic Justice at the Dinner Table*. And if you couldn't hear it, both the worst dinner guest ever and gut issues are in scare quotes. Now, that dinner guest was originally devised just before Thanksgiving 2011, to which they were definitely not going to be invited. Megan Dean saw a blog post based on it and took it up as a way to question the roles and responsibilities of hosts and guests.

**Megan Dean:** This worst dinner guest ever is someone who was gluten intolerant, allergic to nuts, lactose intolerant, allergic to eggs and vegan.

**Jeremy:** So that's who's coming for dinner. And in true nit picking form, let me point out that if someone's vegan, then I don't need to

care whether they might also be lactose intolerant and allergic to eggs. But I digress. Why are guests with allergies a problem now? Is it because food allergies and intolerances really are much more common today?

**Megan Dean:** You know, I'm not an epidemiologist, but I read a lot of epidemiology about these conditions. And so from what I can tell, it's generally accepted that food allergies are on the rise.

**Jeremy:** Megan Dean, as she admits, is not an epidemiologist. So I turned to Matt Smith, professor of health history at the University of Strathclyde in Scotland.

**Matt Smith:** I study the history of health and medicine, focusing mainly on mental health and psychiatry, allergy and immunology and food and nutrition. We can see that there has been a rise in allergies, both the very serious ones, the anaphylactic reactions that we see and that can cause fatalities — we've seen a lot more fatalities over the last few decades — but also chronic allergies. We've seen more of those in the last few decades as well.

**Jeremy:** So there is something going on. Food allergies are more common now. But for someone who wants to be a good host, there's a problem. Diagnosis. Matt Smith mentioned anaphylaxis. That's the rapid and very serious reaction to some foods — peanuts, sesame, even eggs — that can kill you. People with that kind of allergy know all about it and usually carry an EpiPen to inject themselves with the epinephrine that can save their life in an emergency. But the symptoms of other food allergies and intolerances may be mild or severe, and they may not show up for some time after eating the food in question. For something like a pollen allergy, a scratch skin test works fine. But that's not true for most food allergies.

**Matt Smith:** Here's the thing for food allergy. These tests are simply not particularly effective. And so what we're left with are basically oral tests. And so, for example, my son went through this at one point, and it took nearly 6 hours at a hospital to go through the whole routine, all to find out that he wasn't allergic to anything. Whatever reaction he had, it must have been something else. And I think anyone who has a serious reaction should certainly seek it out. The fact of the matter is that many people don't feel that it's necessary, and in other cases it's just difficult to get access to that sort of advice.

People, many of them, experience these chronic health problems that there doesn't seem to be any other explanation for. The medical community can't help them. They try different things out, they put different things in their body, maybe to try to sort things out. And that doesn't help. And then ultimately, they often come down to what they're eating, by elimination almost. They come to the understanding, at least for themselves, that controlling what they eat makes a real difference. And, you know, if that works for them — maybe there's some placebo in there, maybe there isn't — but if it works for them, then I think in many ways that's fine.

**Jeremy:** So a lot of the time all the evidence we have is some form of self diagnosis. Can you as a host always trust that? Well, for Megan Dean, that's not a problem. As a good host, your duty is to trust your guest.

**Megan Dean:** I think what's really important for me is the context of hosting. And, you know, in my work in this area, I'm really assuming that people who are hosting want to be good hosts. That's kind of the place that I'm coming from. So I assume that if you are having people over you, you want to be a good host. And when we're hosting, you know, we're responsible for the well-being and comfort of our guests. So I think, you know, as a general point, when a guest tells you this thing is going to be detrimental to my well-being and comfort, we should default to taking that seriously.

I think as well, more generally, a lot of the doubts that we might have about somebody's report that they have a food allergy or intolerance or some other gut issue is subject to a lot of prejudice and that there are real reasons why we should doubt our own doubts about that. There are a lot of challenges to getting conclusive diagnoses, and that's just for allergies. But with intolerances, there really aren't tests to determine that conclusively. It's sort of a trial and error thing. If you eat it, does it hurt you? Let's try that again.

So there are some real challenges to people getting diagnoses. But as well, you know, the symptoms of a lot of gut issues are very private in the sense that they pertain to pain is very private, but also they're taboo to talk about know they they happen in the bathroom to be to be blunt about it. And often, especially with intolerances, someone has a reaction. It's going to happen, you know, a few hours to a day after they are exposed to the food. So they might not still be at dinner at

your house when they have the reaction. And, you know, it's not nice usually to tell someone, hey, your food made me sick. So you might never know. You know, there are a lot of reasons why a host might never have access to the evidence. They would need to conclude that, oh, yes, this person's allergy or other gut issue is true, is real. And so I think that really, you know, in general, the default should be, well, the person who has this issue is the person who is best equipped to know whether they have that issue and not me.

**Jeremy:** So let me, as a good host, give my guests the benefit of the doubt. Can I also trust them to tell me what I need to know to be a good host? Megan Dean told me about one study in the UK that found that people there, in the UK, were more likely to say nothing and even eat food that they're allergic to rather than make a fuss.

**Megan Dean:** One person interviewed in that study, he was really interesting because he himself had food intolerances, so he knew first hand like, these things exist, but he was doubtful of other people. He said, Well, they're just ... they might be doing it for attention. If you don't want to be seen as someone who's just doing something for attention, even if you know, I really have this condition, then you might hide it from others. You know, there are a few studies of teenagers with coeliac disease, for instance, that report that the teenagers just stop telling people that they have coeliac. And, you know, in general, teenagers are very sensitive to negative judgments from their peers. And so we can think about that as a group where perhaps, like Brits, they'd be more likely to hide rather than come out and say, well, actually, you know, I can't eat this.

**Jeremy:** I think coeliac is particularly interesting because, for sure, there are people who who have coeliac, who have Crohn's disease, and then there are a whole bunch of other people who say they're gluten intolerant. And I think those people have actually maybe made things more difficult for people who are, as I'm going to say, truly coeliac.

**Megan Dean:** Yeah, I've seen that claim in a few papers that, you know, people who have, quote unquote, like real gut issues, or maybe the gut issues with more serious consequences like food allergy, where you can actually die or coeliac where, you know, there is measurable damage to the body — that folks who have those are sometimes, yeah, resentful of other people who say oh, I have a gluten

allergy, and it's perceived as sort of jumping on a trend. And because it's seen as trendy, it sort of discredits, contributes to doubts, about people who actually have coeliac or actually have allergies.

**Jeremy:** And I think we can both agree that allergies and intolerances are probably something that a host should take account of. But what about straight preferences or choices that people have made? I mean, I'll never, ever cook liver or kidneys for guests, and especially not Americans, even though I love kidneys and liver myself. But I wouldn't expect anyone to tell me as a matter of course, I don't eat offal. I mean, some things that are choices don't even get mentioned in that context.

**Megan Dean:** Yeah. So I think ... You know, Elizabeth Telfer is a philosopher who has a really nice book called Food for Thought, and she writes about hospitality there. She says, when we when we have guests, you know, we often want to, you know, contribute to a pleasant experience for them. And so I think part of that is, we want to offer foods that we expect they will enjoy. Like your example, I think, is a good one because you you do really enjoy, kidneys or liver. But perhaps it's reasonable that you don't expect other people to also take enjoyment in that, particularly when they're from a culture where eating those foods is not commonplace. And so, you know, there's always a certain level of assumptions going into that, about what do we expect other people to like. And obviously that varies culturally, right? So if you're hosting people from a different country who have very different food traditions, it might be harder for you to make informed guesses about what they would like or not like. And it might also be harder for guests.

**Jeremy:** Indeed, that's the old trope about being the guest of honor at a feast and being offered a delicacy that you don't consider a delicacy at all, like curried brains, which Matt Smith found himself offered in Pakistan.

**Matt Smith:** I was the honoured guest. And in that particular culture, showing that you're a good host is really important. And so even though I didn't really want to eat brains, I remember the mad cow years very, very well. Not fondly at all, really. And the province that I'm from, in Alberta, on the basis of a very few number of cases, had its beef exports limited for many years. Despite all that, I felt that it was important for me to overlook or just push to one side my

sensitivities when it came to eating that particular part of the part of the sheep, I guess it was, and just, I guess, be a good guest. I think, on the flip side, I think it is important for the hosts to think about the guests. And so I think when you have different cultures clash like that, we have to do a certain amount of accommodating. Now, having said all that, I'm fairly confident that had I had, for example, if I had had an allergy and I had explained to them that really I can't eat that, you know, you're not going to want to see what happens after I eat that, then they would have been accommodating.

**Jeremy:** Accommodation, though, cuts both ways. As an omnivore, many of my own individual meals are actually vegetarian, so it's no great hardship to make a meal that will satisfy a vegetarian guest and all the rest of us. But I've never once been offered meat by a vegetarian host. Some choices definitely do seem to be privileged over others.

**Megan Dean:** Yeah. So I think that thinking again about the context of hospitality and what we're trying to do when we host can be helpful. So Karen Storr is another philosopher who writes about hospitality. And her view, like when we are trying to be hospitable, when we are hosting somebody, it's a way of showing our respect for that person. All the things we do to make sure a person feels comfortable and welcome are all ways to show our respect for that person. And I think that part of showing respect for someone is also sort of respecting their deeply held beliefs and values. So it wouldn't really be respectful to invite a vegetarian over — who's been a vegetarian for a long time, and they're very deeply committed to that — and serve them meat. You know, that would be actually very disrespectful to serve them meat. Whereas the flipside, I don't think is true.

Like you said, a lot of omnivores eat vegetarian dishes all the time. It's not offensive to their moral integrity to eat a dish that doesn't contain meat, although I don't know, maybe my uncle would disagree with that. He does not like vegetables and thinks that all meals need to have meat and potatoes. And then I think that there is a difference in, how we can show respect for people in terms of the food we serve them, that means serving vegetarians or vegans something with meat in it is deeply disrespectful to them and their commitments. Whereas serving an omnivore a vegetable dish is not.

**Jeremy:** I take your point. Absolutely. And it's very interesting that I've noticed increasingly, meetings that I go to, if there's a meal provided they'll often just provide a vegetarian meal because the omnivores seem to scarf up all the vegetarian food anyway. So, you know, the kind of leftover there is leftover meat. But if they just provide vegetarian, everybody's more or less happy. Maybe not your uncle.

One of the things you say is that as a host, you shouldn't expect a guest to provide a doctor's note saying I am allergic or whatever it might be, and I've got to agree with that. But what, as a host, what can I expect in addition to a guest telling me what they can or cannot eat? I mean, if a guest offers to bring their own food to a dinner party, how should I feel as a host?

**Megan Dean:** Yeah. So I think this sort of goes back to what I was saying a little bit earlier, that guests also have responsibilities, ethical responsibilities, as guests. Again, we should think about what we're trying to do when we're hosting. Some sorts of events that we host, it would be weird if someone brought their own food. You know, I'm thinking about like a wedding dinner or a sit down meal with different courses that have been lovingly prepared. You know, in those cases it might be a bit odd for someone to bring their own dish in a Tupperware container. And we might think, okay, well, if we're going to invite people who have dietary restrictions to that sort of meal, I want to be very proactive about making sure that what I serve and what I prepare is appropriate for them.

**Matt Smith:** We have a tradition in Canada of potluck, where people do bring their own food. So that would be pretty common for me. But no, I've been in that situation and I'm happy with it, you know, And I guess I've also been at that situation where I've prepared things and no one wants to eat it either. So there's all sorts of ways to affront a host, I suppose. But no, I would be pretty accommodating and understanding. People have very marked opinions about their diet and I think to a large degree there's good reasons for that. So, put it this way: I'd be more sympathetic to their food requests; I'd be less sympathetic if they asked me to change the music at that party.

**Jeremy:** That's that's a very good point. I'm allergic to certain kinds of music, for sure.

**Matt Smith:** Me too.

Jeremy: Matt Smith of the University of Strathclyde. And I'm persuaded mostly that a good host will do their best to accommodate a guest's desires, even if they are only preferences rather than allergies or intolerances. But at the same time, a good guest might just unobtrusively push some item to one side if they can't or won't eat it. But I did have one final question for Megan Dean. I wonder whether the worst dinner guest ever actually got invited anywhere. Do people find themselves ... I don't want to say ostracised, that's too deliberate. But do people find themselves eating alone because of their food allergies?

**Megan Dean:** Yeah. So I haven't found a lot of empirical research on that, but I suspect that that is the case, that people will not ... Not only that they maybe don't get invited, but that they turn down invitations because they're worried about seeming like too much of a problem or a ... Um, and I think that's a real shame.

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