

# COUNTRY LIFE and Plain English canapé competition

Tom Parker Bowles reports on our search for London's best party food

Photographs by Andrew Sydenham



The judging panel in Plain English's London showroom (from left): Interiors Editor Giles Kime, Tony Niblock, Editor Mark Hedges, Claude Compton and Sally Clarke

CONSIDER the canapé: social sustenance, cocktail party pemmican and bite-sized blotter of booze. From sausage to sautéed *foie gras*, vol-au-vent to something-on-a-spoon, they've sure come a long way from their original Gallic incarnation, which was little more than flavoured butter or cream, spread thinly upon a piece of toasted or fried bread. Small enough to eat in one and sufficiently salty to stimulate the thirst.

Okay, so that was more than two centuries in the past. And once that wily old rogue Auguste Escoffier got involved, about 100 years later, things got rather more complicated. Of course, they did. Here was a chef with a taste for excess, and other people's money, with an appetite to match. In *Le Guide Culinaire*, he lists 13 butters (from anchovy and caviar to shrimp and red herring), eight creams (more caviar, plus game, tuna and chicken) and eight toasts (my favourite being Lucile, which mixes tongue, white chicken meat, mustard butter and a pinch of chopped truffle). Sure beats the hell out of the cheese-and-pineapple hedgehog.

As to its roots, the etymology of the canapé is simple enough. It comes from the French word for sofa, or 'bed with a billowing webbing', which, as James Beard pointed out,

'is fairly accurate, for we have a bed of toast or biscuit or pastry shell, hidden by the "mosquito netting" of savoury butters or pastes'. So that's that. But what about hors d'oeuvre, I hear you cry. Both are small bites, intended to stir the appetite. What's the difference between the two?

Well, worry not. If the Ambassador should ask, or even Lady Catherine de Bourgh, merely quote the great Julia Child. 'Simply put,' purrs the original kitchen goddess, 'Beluga caviar on a piece of toasted English muffin would be considered canapé; a kilo tin of caviar, placed on a table served with pieces of English muffin would constitute hors d'oeuvre.' Well, quite.

And that's not all. Child goes on to describe what she hates about modern canapés too: 'Portions that are too big to eat in a mouthful (there goes the Armani!), fruit and cheese stuck with bamboo skewers like matadors's *banderillas* in a defeated bull, garlic doused prawns that function as social repellent, or prosciutto and melon wraps that inevitably turn soggy.' I agree.

Canapés should be eaten in one bite, and should not drip fat or juice down one's tie or blouse. Remember, they are mere ballast, the culinary equivalent of treading water, whose aim is to keep one going through that



Sugar & Spice's Autumn hazelnut



Admirable Crichton's Angus beef and shallot marm.



Create's Lobster mousseline





## Third Quail London's Pea purée

SO pretty you almost felt guilty eating it. A wonderful contrast between jet-black cracker and verdant-green pea purée. The base was made from beetroot and charcoal (achingly trendy) and had a good deep flavour. Not overly smoky, too. Mascarpone, scented with porcini, added a creamy lactic allure and the pea-and-mint purée sang gently of long summer nights. We liked the crunch that came from the sugar snaps, as well as the deep truffle growl, which came from fresh black truffles (hurrah!) rather than that filthy mountebank that is truffle oil. Overall, there was a bracing freshness to this canapé: light, lithe and lovely. (020-8899 6051; [www.quailondon.com](http://www.quailondon.com))

### The rules of canapés

#### Never serve canapés on spoons

Eating from a large spoon is a private pleasure not a spectator sport. You can never look elegant engaging in this sort of caper

#### Never, ever double dip

This heinous activity is the fastest way to guarantee you'll be the party pariah

#### Never consider vol-au-vents as a canapé

A vol-au-vent is a form of dental cement that contains too much pastry to ever be tasty

#### Canapés must look as good as they taste

Canapés must either be gorgeous or presented beautifully and/or quirkily (bark and Astro-turf are all in vogue)

#### Never nibble a canapé

A canapé is the culinary equivalent of a vodka shot. Equally, it should never be the culinary equivalent of a gobstopper

#### A canapé is not a meal

Fish and chips and burgers (however diminutive) are not party food

#### Offer cocktail-stick disposal

Ensure there's a handy receptacle for getting rid of them

#### Don't offer napkins

Any canapé so messy that it requires a clear-up shouldn't be on the plate. Whatever next? A Wet Wipe?

#### Build canapés to last

They must never fall to pieces —and should have enough texture not to get a soggy bottom

## The best of the rest

### Sugar & Spice's Autumn hazelnut

Beautifully presented, this contained the essence of British autumn. However, it was difficult to pick up and there was so much going on that we almost lost the delicate flavour of the woodpigeon (020-7978 4008; [www.sugarandspicefood.com](http://www.sugarandspicefood.com))

### TopHat's Smoked chestnut

This reminded us of bonfires, in a good way. There was smoke, but not too much of it, and the leek ash really worked well. Lots of nuts, too, and a good Brick pastry case ([www.tophatcatering.co.uk](http://www.tophatcatering.co.uk); 020-7924 3180)

### Create's Lobster mousseline

A hell of a lot of work went into this and it looked wonderful. However, there was lots going on and we lost the taste of the lobster (020-8944 4900; [www.createfood.co.uk](http://www.createfood.co.uk))

### The Admirable Crichton's Crisp belly pork

You could taste the quality of the pork and we liked the squid-ink prawn cracker (020-7326 3800; [www.admirable-crichton.co.uk](http://www.admirable-crichton.co.uk))

### The Admirable Crichton's Goat's cheese tomatoes

Again, lots of work goes into creating these 'tomatoes', so they look striking. However, they're a touch bland, the jelly coating is too thick and, please, no more edible soil (*as before*)

### The Admirable Crichton's Angus beef and shallot marmalade

We loved the marmalade, the soft *blini* and the quality of the beef. Simple, yet satisfying (*as before*) 🐦



The Admirable Crichton's canapés are meticulously prepared