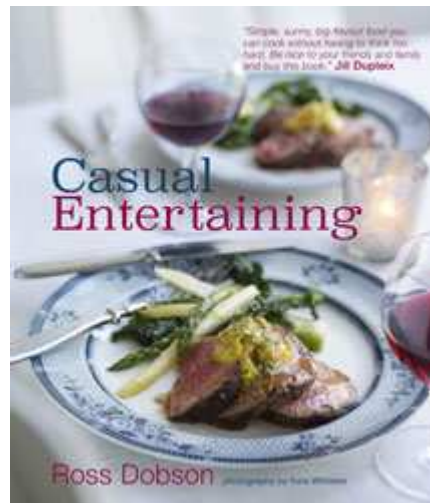


# *Casual Entertaining* with Ross Dobson



**Q. Your new book *Casual Entertaining* is all about cooking for friends. What is the single most important piece of advice you would give anyone planning to entertain at home?**

The best advice I can give is do not try and do too much – keep it simple and keep it casual. Feed your guests a couple of good quality things (preferably dishes you have cooked before) rather than trying to tackle heaps of different dishes and follow new recipes. You will only end up stressed and in a pickle which isn't any fun for you or your guests!

**Q. How would you say home entertaining has changed over recent years and what are the most popular new trends?**

Generally we are much more knowledgeable and savvy about food. We are more interested in sourcing good fresh produce and ingredients than we used to be, and we are willing to try out new ideas. Also in many homes now there are two people who work which, in turn, impacts on what we decide to cook. We simply don't have the time to slave over a stove all day yet we do not really want to just throw a packet of dried soup mix into some sour cream, serve it as a dip and call it cooking. While we are now embracing the more exotic flavours of north Africa and the Middle East, I do feel as if we are also revisiting some old-school favourites, especially classic French recipes – SO long as they are not too complex, and most of them, perhaps surprisingly, are not.

**Q. Which are your favourite recipes in your new book and why?**

We (that is, us food writers) are lucky when we get to write a book with recipes that we know our friends and family will enjoy. When it's cold I like to roast anything – simple roast chicken is one of my favourites, and being Australian I am partial to lamb. On a warm night, I like to serve up a curry or any of the pasta recipes in the book. To make the occasion seem more special I might start the meal off with a grazing plate of some home-made Parmesan crackers, slow-roasted tomatoes and good Spanish Serrano ham.

**Q. How often do you entertain at home?**

Because I now work on the weekend at my new Café, Monday night has become my Friday night. I host a regular Monday night dinner for friends and what I cook changes from season to season and according to my mood. At the moment we have a lot of slow-cooked dishes, soups and even a curry on the menu so this is not what I feel like cooking once I'm home. Instead, I will often steam a whole fish with ginger and shallots or slow braise some pork and serve it with rice and Asian greens, very different to the type of food I cook all weekend at the café. That said, I do have a lovely pork and pistachio terrine on the menu there at the moment and I find myself making an extra one to take home with me to entertain with. It is so very easy – I just slice it and serve a dressed green salad and a good relish or pickle with it, along with plenty of hot toast or crusty bread.

**Q. Tell us more about your new café?**

Café at Lewers is on the Nepean River, about an hours drive out of Sydney, at the foot of the Blue Mountains and in the beautiful gardens of an art gallery. Everything on the menu is made with locally grown food. The fresh produce, the eggs, even the bread and bottled water comes from the nearby Blue Mountains. The breakfast and lunch menu changes seasonally and at the moment we serve home-made crumpets with local jam, cranberry and walnut bread with ricotta and local 'scrub' honey. For lunch we have a local mushroom ragù with fresh pasta, Spanish minestrone and the pork and pistachio terrine I mentioned before.

**Q. What do you plan to cook tonight?**

It's winter and pretty cold here right now so I am cooking slow-cooked, crisp-skinned pork belly. It is so simple but does require just a bit of forward planning. I put serving portions of boneless pork belly in a dish, cover with baking paper and put something heavy on the pork overnight (a heavy based casserole dish is perfect) so that the pork is flattened. I then salt the skin and leave it to sit at room temperature for about an hour, rinse the salt off then pat dry. I cook in a 150°C (325°F) Gas 3 oven for 2 hours, basting from time to time with the oil in the pan. After 2 hours, turn the temperature up to a hot 230°C (450°F) Gas 8 and cook for 5–minutes, so the skin really crisps up. I then let the pork rest for about 15 minutes and serve it with apple sauce on the side. Easy and very delicious.