

the comfort of things

GROWN-UP
TABLEWARE

There are certain things in your home that are like old friends: they always cheer you up. This month we feel the love for grown-up tableware

Words: **CLARE GOGERTY**

Sometimes it's the things that you pick up and handle every day that matter most. Eat your porridge from a pleasingly shaped bowl, or drink tea from a cup and saucer rather than a chipped mug and a moment of delight is yours. Invest in cutlery that sits comfortably and heavily in your hand, or find generous dishes and platters to share food from, and life feels more abundant, more joyful. There are small moments of happiness to be had when you find a teapot that pours properly or replace a carton with a milk jug.

As more of us eat on the sofa or grab a bite to eat without giving it much attention, however, tableware has become more casual and some

"Whatever you put on the table should give you a hit of gratification"

of its niceties neglected. The rise of Instagram-able bowl food has sent sales of plates plummeting and made knives redundant. Tables are laid less frequently as we adopt a more relaxed approach to eating and, while it's a relief not to have to worry about centrepieces and the correct arrangement of cutlery, sometimes – when friends are coming for supper, or the in-laws are visiting, say – it feels right to do things properly.

Central to this approach is recognising the need to move on from that white 18-piece Ikea starter pack and to splash the cash on tableware that is a little more grown-up. Something patterned or coloured perhaps. Maybe a couple of items made from bone china or porcelain. Many attractive sets exist (check out Rex by Habitat, Nordic Sea Dinnerware by Broste Copenhagen and Karuma by Nkuku) that will bring a little personality to the table. You will be able to use the same plates and bowls for a weekday supper as when you have guests, just ramp it up with glassware, side plates, linen napkins and serving dishes. Fortunately, these days there are no rules to follow except, perhaps, that whatever you choose to put on the table should give you a small but significant hit of gratification.



A GUIDE TO LAYING THE TABLE

PROBABLY ESSENTIAL

Fortunately, the trend for unfussy table settings requires just a few well-chosen items. You will always need plates: Debrett's says the diameter of a dinner plate should be 10in (25cm) and side plates, 6in (15cm) but we're not going to judge. Best avoid square plates, unless you're a contestant on *Masterchef*. Cork or slate tablemats sit nicely on a wooden table, as do linen napkins. Unless you only eat sandwiches, you'll always need cutlery, so invest in some good quality ones, and steer clear of fashionable options like gold, copper or black if you want long-term satisfaction.

OPTIONAL BUT TEMPTING

A tureen with a ladle is a theatrical way to dish up soup, while a decanter adds swank (and disguises cheap wine). Side plates aren't essential but are a handy place to lay a chunk of bread. The trend for 'chargers' beneath dinner plates, however, is one piece of crockery too far, in our opinion.

NO LONGER REQUIRED

Tablecloths, once laid at every meal, now only come out on special occasions – it is easier to wipe a table with a damp cloth than to launder a piece of material, after all. (Runners are not to be sniffed at when entertaining, though.) Cruet sets have been abandoned in favour of grinders and pinch pots. And whither the fish knife, that puzzlingly shaped utensil, now only seen in charity shops?

Glass, £6; pitcher, £39; Eucalyptus bowl, £10; pasta bowl, £10; dinner plate, £12, large bowl, £40, linen tablecloth, £75, all murmur.co.uk. Opposite: 12-piece Bicester dinner set, £14.99; 16-piece Bosa dinner set, £26.99; 16-piece cutlery set, £24.99, all argos.co.uk



THREE TO MAKE, BUY OR CUSTOMISE

Napkins, folded neatly beside each setting (or even better, in a napkin ring), are a simple way to add the finishing touches to a meal. (There is also a whole world of napkin folding to discover, but we shan't be going into that here)



1 MAKE
Once you've made a few fabric napkins, you'll wonder how you ever made do with paper napkins or (on a bad day) pieces of kitchen towel. It's a very quick and simple project - they are just a square of fabric, hemmed, after all - that enables you to co-ordinate napkins with tableware, wallpaper, even food. To make four napkins, cut an 92x92 cm piece of linen* neatly into four 46x46cm squares. Fold one edge over by about 1cm and iron. Fold again, this time about 2cm. Iron. Do the same for the opposite side. Stitch in place. Repeat for the other two sides.



2 BUY
The ostensible purpose of napkins is to mop up spillages, wipe mouth and fingers and generally keep things tidy, but they also make the table look finished by adding a decorative flourish. They are generally square (either 40x40cm or 65x65cm) and look neatest folded into a rectangle and placed on a side plate. Unsurprisingly, there are plenty to choose from: plain linen or heavy white cotton are popular right now and suit most occasions: try West Elm's Belgian Flax Linen napkins, £8 each, or Habitat's 100% linen Albany napkins, £5 each.



3 CUSTOMISE
This is a clever way of folding napkins. Fold the napkin in half from bottom to top to form a rectangle with the open end facing away from you. Fold top layer halfway down. Flip the napkin over. Fold napkin in half from right to left, then in half again from right to left. Flip napkin over. This creates a pocket into which you can neatly insert a piece of card. Use the card to write a menu or your guest's name. Tie a piece of twine around it to secure a small bunch of herbs or flowers as a final flourish.

Taken from *How to Set a Table* (Ebury Press)



Peapod tableware from £15 (four coasters) thornbackandpeel.co.uk

HOME QUANDARIES

I love having friends over for meals and enjoy preparing and cooking the food but by the time the doorbell rings and they all pile in, the table is still bare. As a result, I throw plates and cutlery on it in a higgledy-piggledy fashion that looks nothing like those attractive overhead shots you see in magazines. How can I master table laying?

Answer in brief: Table laying is actually a pretty straightforward business that should not daunt you.

Unless you live in a stately home and have to wrestle with silverware, napery and cut glass, all you need to do is place a few plates and cutlery on the table in an orderly fashion. Dragoon another member of the household to carry out this task, preferably an hour or so before guests arrive, and it becomes even simpler. With a little supervision, children can lay a table as well as anybody, and often respond positively to being trusted with this grown-up task. You can swan in at the end to straighten napkins and make sure glasses are fingerprint-free.

PHOTOGRAPHY: SHUTTERSTOCK



Orla Kiely Acorn Spot bamboo side plate | £7
A new design from the queen of pattern to jolly up any gathering. orkiely.com

Table brush set | £30
Sweep crumbs from the table like a professional. no-56.com

Helene pasta bowls | £45 for four
Generously sized to heap with spaghetti or salad. swooneditions.com

Rosendahl salt and pepper cellars | £26.95
Season food with a sprinkle of sea salt and coarse pepper. black-by-design.co.uk

Oak veneer coasters | £9 for four
Keeps table tops free from rings without looking showy. creative-tops.com

Light blue Kenza dinner plate | £3.50
A prompt to think beyond white crockery and enter a world of pattern and colour. tesco.com

Fossano 16-piece cutlery set | £75
An elegant design that sits nicely in the hand. habitat.co.uk

Eastnor blue stripe cotton tablecloth | £35
Made from yarn-dyed organic cotton. Nice and spring-like. cottageinthehills.com