



Fashionable hosts rented a pineapple as a centrepiece.



DINE IN STYLE THIS CHRISTMAS

*Whatever your taste or budget, there is an antique or vintage dinner service for you, says **Willa Latham***

The Christmas holiday offers the perfect excuse for a truly beautiful dinner party. In our busy lives, how often do we get to spend time on planning and decorating a lavish meal for friends or family? For me, it's the best part of Christmas, and to make this year's festive dinner truly memorable, why not serve it on a beautiful antique dinner service?

'But I can't put it in the dishwasher,' I hear you cry. 'What if I break something?' you ask. Have no fear. Antique dinner services can be surprisingly robust and, not only that, they earn their keep for the rest of the year as a stunning decorative addition to your dresser. So, if you've been tempted to invest in a beautiful dinner service in the past, but concerns about care, cleaning and storage have put you off, now is the time to set aside your anxieties and take the plunge. Britain has a trove of beautiful antique and vintage porcelain dinner services, so it is not difficult to find one.

Table services have a long history here. During the Georgian period, the dinner party became a popular way for the upper classes to socialise, and when the Industrial Revolution created a new class of aspiring industrialists, they were keen to follow this trend. Dinner parties were not only gatherings of friends, but also a chance to show off wealth and gain influence; they were how business deals were made and marriages agreed, and porcelain factories got very busy in the 19th century: every self-respecting household needed both a dinner service and a dessert service. And as the dinner service had to withstand the heavy use of knives and forks, it was usually simple in design, with a huge number of plates for all the different courses. The dessert service, however, was a more elaborate affair: a highly decorated and expensive set and, unlike today, its design was entirely unrelated to the main dinner service.

Dessert is often the most memorable course at a dinner party; not only is it eaten last and therefore ►



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE

An ironstone transfer-printed dessert service, c1835; Samuel Alcock 1820s dessert dish with two handles so the butler wouldn't get his fingers in the food, £185; an elegant Ridgway compot c1845.

BELOW Spode Blue Italian transfer plate, c1820, £125, all *Gentle Rattle of China*.

remembered best, but it's also served at a stage when the wine has been flowing and tongues are loosened. The dessert course is the point at which the most interesting conversations are taking shape. Added to which, in a 19th-century room lit by candles, heavily gilded dishes would have looked stunning, reflecting the flickering candlelight around the table.

Today, dessert often involves just one plate with a beautiful piece of cake or ice cream. But in the Georgian and early Victorian times, dessert was a lengthy affair with a choice of fruits, nuts, trifles, various fruit sauces (or compotes) and cream. Dessert was taken on large plates, often big enough to use as dinner plates today, that came with many variously shaped serving dishes. So if you are interested in buying a beautiful, colourful set of dishes for use on

special occasions, I recommend you start your search by looking at dessert services.

Over the years, the way dishes were served changed. In Georgian times, all the components of each course would be placed on the table at once. The eclectic assortment of dishes were laid out in a geometric pattern with a display of porcelain figures, flowers and sometimes even fountains. There were oval and rectangular dishes for vegetables, large tureens for potatoes or soup, but also very specialised small dishes for delicacies such as artichokes, sweet meats and various condiments.

For the dessert course, there would be a central compot for a gorgeous fruit display and you could rent a pineapple – not to eat, but to symbolise hospitality and wealth. There were various rectangular dishes for trifles or crumbles. Shell dishes, which are deep round vessels with one handle for passing around the table, held nuts and fruits, and some footed sauce tureens

STARTING YOUR COLLECTION

Exceptionally beautiful patterns in good condition are costly collector's items. But it's easy to find moderately priced large sets if you are willing to put up with some wear – a few chips and short cracks coming off the rims (which don't matter for use), and the odd rivet repair. In fact, if you compare the price of a new dinner service from one of the better department stores with buying an antique service, you realise that there is hardly any price difference; if anything the antiques may cost less.

1 For the newcomer, transfer-printed wares are a great place to start. You have the option of classic blue-and-white printed

pearlware dishes, or their more colourful stoneware cousins. These services were mass-produced, made for frequent use and are less expensive than hand-painted equivalents, and they will give you a good feel for how to use them. I have a set of both and use them regularly.

2 On the next rung up, there are plenty of slightly worn hand-painted sets that look stunning displayed on a shelf or dresser, and

won't get messed up too much if you use them now and then.

3 Ready to invest? If buying at auction, it's advisable to see the service in person. Auction houses do not guarantee the condition of their items, which can be difficult to determine from online photos. If buying from a dealer, your service should come fully vetted and guaranteed, but you will pay a bit more. Of course, nothing is as exciting as finding one at a fair or antiques centre.



RIGHT Metal rivets secure a long crack on a large Victorian serving platter by Bloor Derby; a decorative, shell-shaped serving dish by Bloor Derby painted by Richard Dobson, c1815, with a single handle for ease of passing around the table.

were used for fruit compote or cream. Guests could fill large plates with a little of everything to enjoy over a long period of talk and laughter, livened up by good dessert wine.

During the Industrial Revolution, something different began to happen. For the new industrialists, a beautiful dinner service was no longer enough to signal wealth and status; a fleet of servants would be a far better demonstration of power. And so dishes were no longer placed on the table for diners to help themselves; instead they were set out on a mirror-backed commode, which allowed the housekeeper to keep a discreet eye on the diners' needs. Plates were brought to the table by a train of servants whose numbers undoubtedly impressed the guests. However, these 'servants' were very often every last person in the village hired for the night rather than members of the household, because really, who could afford that many staff?

This is also why, in the boom years of the Industrial Revolution, when parties were at their most popular, plates sometimes had two handles added: you wouldn't want your servant putting their grubby fingers in your food when they brought your plate to the table!

All those fragile dishes needed careful handling, of course, and over the years I've often been asked: 'How did they manage to keep them in such good condition?' I found the answer at Petworth House in Surrey, which still has its Still Room intact. The Still Room was a special kitchen for preparing tea, distilling (hence the name), and washing the fine china. It had a padded sink, and the maids working there were paid extra and strictly managed. After washing, every dish was checked by the housekeeper for chips or cracks, and damaged pieces were either replaced, or – more likely – repaired.

Oh yes, the rivet repairs! These are the staples one sees on antique dishes, and they were the way damaged dishes were repaired in the 19th century. Nowadays, although repairs are invisible, they cannot be exposed to liquid. Rivet repairs, however, are clearly visible from the back, yet they are incredibly strong, hardly visible on the face of the piece, and they make dishes watertight again, which is ideal if you want to continue using and washing them. As servants demanded better wages, table services became simpler in order to save on the cost of employing the people to handle them.

Desserts changed, too: cakes became popular and, by the mid-to-late 19th century, the dishes that made up



the dessert service had changed again, and included various high-footed comports or stands for cakes. Fast forward to current times, and many of my clients buy a beautiful dessert service for use at annual festivities, and for display throughout the rest of the year. I have received wonderful pictures of the services they have bought from me, laid out for Christmas. I once had a set of 23 orange-bordered plates, each with a stunning individual flower, that remained unsold for years. Then a client showed up and said they were exactly what he had been searching for: his family counts 23 members and he hosts every year at Thanksgiving.

As well as their beauty, antique services have the added charm of history, a bonus that cannot be bought with a modern service. There is no scope to wonder about who used the dishes before you, the food that was eaten, the conversations that were had, and the occasions that were celebrated... ■

Read Willa's blog gentlerattleofchina.com, and follow her on Instagram @gentlerattleofchina

CARING FOR ANTIQUE SERVICES

- The best way to prevent breakage is to remove risk. So no cluttered kitchen surface, no tall objects that could fall over on the table (be careful with that pepper mill!)
- Wash up the antiques last, once the kitchen surfaces are clear.
- Never use the dishwasher; clean them by hand in warm water – not hot! – using a plastic tub and mild soap.
- Avoid metal or stone sinks, and tackle one piece at a time, so nothing gets

chipped or knocked.

- Use a cloth or the soft side of a scrubby sponge and never soak the dishes.
- When stacking dishes, put a piece of kitchen paper between each one to guard against stacking wear.
- Avoid strongly coloured or acidic foods (beetroot, vinegar or lemon), which can discolour antique porcelain if it has any crazing. So check carefully for crazing when choosing which dishes to use for colourful foods.
- And, finally, don't chat and handle dishes at the same time... pay full attention, and you'll lessen the chance of accidents.