

“Get off social media and really spend some quality time together,” urges David Burtka.



Burtka and his spouse, actor Neil Patrick Harris.

# FOOD FRIENDS & FUN

WITH DAVID BURTKA

AS THE ACTOR-TURNED-CHEF'S NEW COOKBOOK, *LIFE IS A PARTY*, PROVES, THROWING AN AMAZING BASH DOESN'T HAVE TO INVOLVE A LOT OF TIME AND TROUBLE. BY DEBORAH SKOLNIK



You're probably thinking you've seen this handsome face before—and you're right. David Burtka is a successful actor who's appeared on TV shows including *The West Wing* and *How I Met Your Mother*, and in Broadway productions such as *Gypsy* and *It Shoulda Been You*. Then again, you might have seen him in a celebrity magazine like *People*, alongside his spouse, actor Neil Patrick Harris, and their twins, Gideon Scott and Harper Grace. Now, the spotlight is shining on David—who is also a Le Cordon Bleu-trained chef and former caterer—for a whole different reason: his first-ever cookbook, *Life is a Party*, has just been published. Organized by seasons, it's full of step-by-step plans for hosting bashes at any time of year, for any crowd. As he explains, throwing a party isn't as intimidating as it seems, and you'll get even more out of it than you put in.

***You could have written almost any kind of cookbook. What inspired you to write this particular one, about parties?***

I just always love entertaining. I also feel like these days, with what's going on in the world, with politics and the earth, and with the way people are acting, we have an obligation to get together with our loved ones, our friends and our families. Put down your phone. Get off social media and really spend some quality time together, some togetherness time. Because that's all that life is about—spending it with family and friends and really celebrating the loved ones you have around you.

***Why do you think people often don't throw as many parties as they should?***

I think people get intimidated. They feel like in order to throw a party, they have to do it all themselves—they have to make everything and spend a lot of money. But in the book I'm telling you that's not the case. You could take a relaxed approach and source materials so you're not having to do it all yourself.

***And you're a fan of getting guests to help out, right?***

One of the first things people do when they come over to someone's house is they say, "What can I do?" I really think people love to be included. That way, they feel like they're a part of something as opposed to just having someone wait on them hand and foot. I always feel bad when the host is running around and sweating and telling me not to do anything. I always feel like it's better to say, "Hey, can you shake some cocktails?" or "Why don't you fold those napkins?" or "Why don't you help me in the kitchen? I need some herbs to be picked, or slice those carrots." Everyone just ends up in the kitchen anyway!

***How do you think your acting experience helped you be a better chef and host?***

I really think that acting and being a chef are very much alike. With acting, you have to know your lines, you have to know your spaces, you have to know your dance steps, and then it's show time and you let it all go. That's the same with throwing a party. You

need to know your recipes and you've got to be prepared the night before and know what you're doing. And then once the party's happening you kind of let it go and you have to have a good time too. I think we see so many people just running around and not having a good time at their party. Why even throw a party, why even have your friends over if you're just going to be stressed and not have a good time?

***You also ran your own catering company in LA for a time. How did your experience as a caterer inform your recipes and help shape your approach to parties?***

I ended up seeing what people liked and responded to. I also found out what were easy recipes I could do that had a wow factor to them. So I was able to test things out. Having my catering company was a nice preview to what I'd like to do to show people how to throw parties.

***What is your definition of a successful party?***

Oh, I think it's a couple of Fs: Food, Friends and Fun. Also, I think if you put a little bit of an extra touch to your party, if you make your guests feel extra special, then I think, in turn, they will have a better time. They'll feel that extra specialness that you put into making them feel good. It doesn't matter what it is, just in the little specificity. If there's a little handcrafted thing on your table setting or a table topic on your table—I talk about these in the book—these little touches sort of elevate a party to a much greater party.

***Has having children changed the way you throw parties?***

Yes, in many ways. I have less time to put things together. [But] they can also help me get things ready and they love it. They really love to entertain, to help set the table or help me with dinner or decorating or time management. My son loves to be the errand boy. It's also not so late of a night anymore. We're not going until three o'clock in the morning, and then you've got to get up early. I do have adult parties and dinners and other things, but I do try to include the kids as much as I can. A lot of people just feel like, "oh, there's a kids' table," and they put out a crappy kids' buffet where they're just eating not-great food, but I don't do that. I put the kids on a pedestal still.

***What are your rules for planning seating arrangements?***

If you sleep together, you don't sit together. I think it's great because people get to know each other more. When you're with your spouse or date, you tend to feel like you're just talking to them the whole time. But I think it's really important to get out there and talk to other people and get to know them. I also like to

## Sbagliato Cocktail

MAKES 2 DRINKS  
PREP TIME: 5 minutes  
ACTIVE TIME: 5 minutes  
TOTAL TIME: 10 minutes  
EASY

**Ice**  
**3 ounces Campari**  
**3 ounces sweet vermouth**  
**6 to 8 ounces prosecco**  
**2 orange wheels, for garnish**

1. Fill two white wine glasses halfway with ice and pour 1½ ounces each of the Campari and the vermouth into each one.
2. Stir at least 20 times (a colder drink will allow the prosecco to remain bubblier longer).
3. Add prosecco to fill the glasses ¾ of the way.
4. Swipe an orange wheel around the rim of each glass, then drop it into the glass before serving.

This refreshing yet potent Negroni-inspired cocktail is pretty much all alcohol, so sip slowly! The mildly bitter Campari helps open up your appetite and enhance the flavor of other foods.



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**Figs**  
with goat cheese and pink  
peppercorn honey

SERVES 16

PREP TIME: 5 minutes

ACTIVE TIME: 15 minutes

TOTAL TIME: 30 minutes

MODERATE

- ¼ cup sliced almonds
- ½ cup honey
- 1 tablespoon whole pink peppercorns, lightly crushed
- 16 ripe fresh figs
- 4 ounces fresh goat's-milk cheese (chèvre)
- Kosher salt

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F.

2. Spread the almonds on a small baking sheet and toast in the oven until lightly

golden, 6 to 7 minutes; transfer to a plate and set aside to cool.

3. In a small saucepan, warm the honey and pink peppercorns over medium-low heat until the honey is warm and fluid but hasn't come to a simmer, 4 to 5 minutes. Remove from the heat and let the honey cool completely.

4. Cut off the top ½ inch of each fig. Use a very small spoon to scoop out the seeds from each fig, creating a hollowed-out core, and transfer the seeds to a small bowl. Add the goat cheese, 2 tablespoons of the cooled honey, and a pinch of salt to the seeds and stir to combine. Spoon the mixture into the figs with a small spoon. Drizzle the figs with the remaining honey and top with the toasted almonds before serving.



So simple, so satisfying, so wow. If there's any cheese filling left over, it's fantastic spread on toast or crackers!



**Oven-Dried Tomatoes**

MAKES ABOUT 1 cup

PREP TIME: 5 minutes

ACTIVE TIME: 5 minutes

TOTAL TIME: 1 hour 40 minutes

EASY

- 1 pint cherry tomatoes, halved
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1/2 teaspoon kosher salt

1. Preheat the oven to 300°F.

2. Place the tomatoes in a bowl, drizzle them with the olive oil, and sprinkle with the salt. Spread them over a rimmed baking sheet in a single layer. Toss to coat. Roast, tossing once halfway through the cooking time, until they shrivel and caramelize,

about 1 hour 30 minutes. Remove from the oven and serve warm or at room temperature. (These can be kept in an airtight container in the refrigerator covered in olive oil for up to 2 months.)

**FOR THE SALAD**

- 3 cups baby arugula
- Juice of 1 small lemon
- Oven-Dried Tomatoes
- Balsamic vinegar reduction, for drizzling

**SPECIAL EQUIPMENT**

- Spice grinder or mortar and pestle,
- outdoor grill or grill pan

**Porcini-Rubbed Rib Eye Steak**  
with oven-dried tomatoes  
and arugula

SERVES 3 TO 6

PREP TIME: 10 minutes

ACTIVE TIME: 25 minutes

TOTAL TIME: 35 minutes

EASY

**FOR THE STEAKS**

- ¼ cup broken-up small pieces of dried porcini mushrooms, or ¼ cup porcini mushroom powder (available from Amazon)
- 2 tablespoons kosher salt
- 2 tablespoons whole black peppercorns
- 1 tablespoon granulated garlic
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 tablespoon red pepper flakes
- 3 (1-inch-thick) bone-in or boneless rib eye steaks
- Olive oil, for the grill pan

1. Make the steaks: If you're using whole dried porcini and have a spice grinder, process the mushrooms in the spice grinder until they form a fine powder; transfer to a jar or small bowl. Process the salt and peppercorns in the same grinder and add them to the mushroom powder. Process the granulated garlic, sugar and red pepper flakes in the grinder, add them to the spice mixture, and shake (or stir) to combine. (If you don't have a spice grinder, use the dried porcini powder and pound everything in a mortar and pestle.)

2. Place the spice mixture on a rimmed baking sheet and coat all sides of the steaks evenly with the spices.

3. Lightly coat a grill or grill pan with olive oil. Heat the grill to medium-high or heat the grill pan over medium-high heat. Place the steaks on the grill and cook until they feel like the flesh between your thumb and your pointer finger when lightly pressed, 4 to 5 minutes per side for bone-in and 3 to 4 minutes per side for boneless. Transfer to a cutting board and let rest as you make the salad.

4. Make the salad: In a medium bowl, toss the arugula with the lemon juice; transfer to a large platter.

5. Slice the steaks crosswise into ½-inch-thick pieces and against the grain, then arrange the steak over the salad. Sprinkle the oven-dried cherry tomatoes over the steak and drizzle with balsamic vinegar reduction before serving.





put the more interesting, more outgoing people in the middle because they draw the attention in, and then put the people who are more shy, or take a little bit more time to open up, on the sides or next to the host so they can feel safe.

**What is Neil Patrick Harris' favorite dish that you make?**

There's a lot of them. I think he really loves my bolognese, and he also likes my porcini-rubbed ribeye [page 83]. He also loves anything that has to do with green chile—he loves green chile nachos and green chile enchiladas.

**What might a typical family dinner be in your home?**

It always seems to be different, whether it's poultry, meat or fish. I sous vide things, meaning I cook them in a water bath, and freeze them. After this I'm actually figuring out what we're going to have for dinner tonight. I tend to do meatless Mondays, so maybe we'll do some sort of Moroccan rice thing with chickpeas because I have these chickpeas soaking right now.

**Why is summertime the best party-throwing season of all?**

Oh my gosh, it's because you get to go outside! So go out there, take along a picnic—there's a whole summer picnic guide in my book that helps you learn what to bring and how to bring it. I think it's really fun not to take the outside for granted and to enjoy this awesome weather that we're having. 🍷

**PLAYLIST**

- SUMMER MADNESS** by Kool & the Gang
- SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER** by The Motels
- SUMMER BREEZE** by Jason Mraz
- SUMMERTIME** by Annie Lennox
- YOUR SUMMER DREAM** by The Beach Boys
- BUZZCUT SEASON** by Lorde
- FEELING GOOD** by Nina Simone
- FANTASY** by Alina Baraz and Galimatias
- A SUMMER SONG** by Chad and Jeremy
- ENDLESS SUMMER NIGHTS** by Richard Marx
- LAZY** by Marilyn Monroe
- UP ON THE ROOF** by The Drifters
- LOVELY DAY** by Bill Withers

**Brown Butter Mixed Berry Tart**

SERVES 12

PREP TIME 20 minutes  
ACTIVE TIME 20 minutes  
TOTAL TIME 1 hour 20 minutes  
EASY

- 1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter**
- ½ cup plus ⅓ cup granulated sugar**
- 1¼ cups all-purpose flour**
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt**
- ½ teaspoon vanilla extract**
- 2 large eggs**
- 1 vanilla bean, split lengthwise and seeds scraped out, pod discarded or reserved for another use**
- 2 (6-ounce) packages raspberries (3 cups)**
- 1 (6-ounce) package blackberries (1½ cups)**
- Confectioners' sugar, for dusting (optional)**

**SPECIAL EQUIPMENT**

**9-inch tart pan with removable bottom**

1. Preheat the oven to 375°F.
2. In a small saucepan, melt the butter over medium heat, then cook, stirring frequently, until deep golden brown but not burned, about 5 minutes. Remove from the heat and set aside.
3. In a medium bowl, combine ½ cup of the sugar, 1 cup of the flour and the salt. Add ½ cup of the browned butter and the vanilla extract, then mix with your fingers until the mixture is crumbly and homogeneous, about 6 minutes.

4. Press the mixture into an even layer over the bottom and up the sides of a 9-inch tart pan with a removable bottom.

5. Use a fork to poke 8 or 9 holes all over the bottom of the tart shell and bake for 8 minutes, then rotate the pan 180 degrees and bake for 8 minutes more, until lightly golden. Remove the tart crust from the oven and let cool.

6. In a large bowl, whisk together the eggs, vanilla bean seeds, and the remaining ½ cup sugar until combined, then whisk in the remaining browned butter and the remaining ¼ cup flour; set aside. It should look thin and drippy.

7. Arrange the raspberries and blackberries in the tart pan, pointy-side up, starting with one ring of blackberries along the outside edge, then filling in with smaller and smaller rings of raspberries and ending with a small cluster of blackberries in the center.

8. Carefully pour the custard over the berries, filling in the spaces between them as best you can. Tap the tart pan on the counter so the filling oozes between the berries. Return the tart to the oven and bake, rotating the pan halfway through the cooking time, until the filling has risen, the top is golden brown, and a toothpick inserted into the center of the tart comes out dry (not including berry juice!), 35 to 40 minutes. Remove from the oven and let cool for 10 minutes, then sprinkle with confectioners' sugar, if desired. Slice and serve while still slightly warm or at room temperature.



The first time I went to Ina Garten's house in the Hamptons, I made this tart for her, and I think it solidified our friendship. There are no rules, so if you prefer blackberries or strawberries, by all means, use them!