

EQUIPMENT

RIPE ORCHARD PEAR
FINE STRING OR THREAD
A TAPER OR LONG MATCH
A SHARP KNIFE OR TWO



WHEN LEAVES FALL in autumn, so do pears: sometimes all at once, if you allow them to ripen on the tree. If a falling pear happened to land on sharpened blades arranged, the gourmand's classic combination of cheese and pear would be more expediently prepared.

The best kind of pear to eat, and to drop from a considerable height, is a large, plump one. Pears bought in shops are acceptable, though the best are not usually available to buy – it is all too likely that something narrow, like a Conference pear, will be on offer. Find out which of your friends has a tree of Doyenné du Comice or Williams, and invite them to dinner.

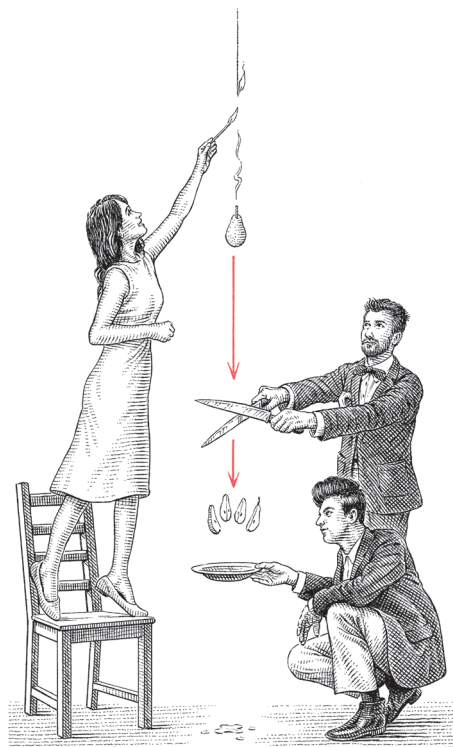
Select a perfectly ripe specimen of good overall shape. Tie a length of fine string or thread to the stalk, knotting it tightly so that it doesn't slip off. A perfectly ripe pear should give a little when pressed around the stalk with one's thumbs. Too ripe – with the slightest hint of mushiness – and the stalk will become detached along with the top of the pear.

Hang the pear as high as you can, over a table or the floor. When no one is looking, wet the bottom of the pear in a glass of water and watch where the drips fall. Mark the spot discreetly – this is the point over which the knife should be held. While one guest holds a knife – blade up – another lights a taper (though a match will do) and sets fire to the string. Wait patiently with a plate and gravity will do the rest.

DAREDEVILS

Prefer a cruciform of knives, as illustrated here.
A very ripe pear will be juicier, messier and tastier.

THE GUILLOTINED PUDDING



IN WHICH THE HOST HANGS, DRAWS
AND QUARTERS A ROGUE DESSERT

EQUIPMENT
SUGAR CUBE
SOLID HIGH-BACKED CHAIR



FOR THOSE OF us who inherit furniture that we don't particularly want, but feel too guilty to throw away, this trick could give new purpose to granny's mahogany chairs. Alternatively, a simple utilitarian seat, solidly constructed, will work just as well, as long as its planes are parallel.

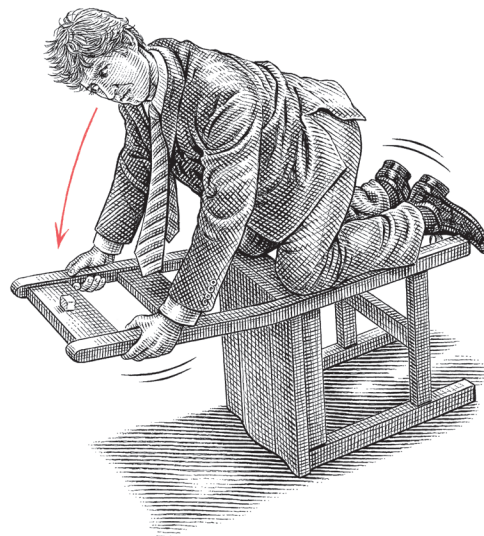
It sounds an easy proposition, to grab a sugar cube between your teeth. But anyone who remembers the chocolate game – in which you may eat as much chocolate as you like until the next person rolls a double, but first you must don hat, scarf and gloves, and you have to use a knife and fork – will be familiar with the feeling of being hopelessly tempted as the dice are rolled and the chocolate taken away. So near and yet so far. It's a kind of hell, reminiscent of the punishment of Tantalus in the underworld: because of his outrageous hubris, he was doomed to spend eternity teased with the food and drink he craved just out of reach.

In this case, the object of desire is a sugar cube. Lay a straight, high-backed chair on the floor horizontally so that the back forms a kind of platform. Place a sugar cube on the top rail and ask a volunteer to climb onto it, shins resting against the chair legs, while grasping each side of the chair back. As the volunteer inches towards the goal, the chair falls forward and the sugar cube rolls away. The dinner guest lurches dramatically forward, possibly landing on their head. Be careful with teeth.

Ordeal

of the

SUGAR CUBE



IN WHICH THE HOST MAKES
SPORT OF GREEDY GUESTS

EQUIPMENT
WINE GLASS
WINE (OR WATER)



A POPULAR DINNER PARTY guest knows that a little Latin goes a long way. An intimacy with epic poetry is less important than a few common expressions, as well as some indispensable verbs, viz. *petere* (to seek) and *fugare* (to flee).

The key to success with this trick is in holding the glass correctly. Grasp a semi-full wine glass with thumb and fingers inverted so that they grip the bowl, not the stem. Your little finger will be at the top, forefinger at the bottom, wrist facing away. Revolve your fully extended arm, like a bowler in cricket, maintaining a steady speed.

The glass begins its journey upright, though halfway through a full revolution it will spend some time upside down. Yet only if you falter will the liquid fall, since it is inclined to travel in the same direction as the glass when the glass is in motion. This is the first law of motion according to Sir Isaac Newton, also known as the law of inertia. In other words, unless acted upon, a stationary object will remain stationary and a moving object will remain in motion, because of balanced forces.

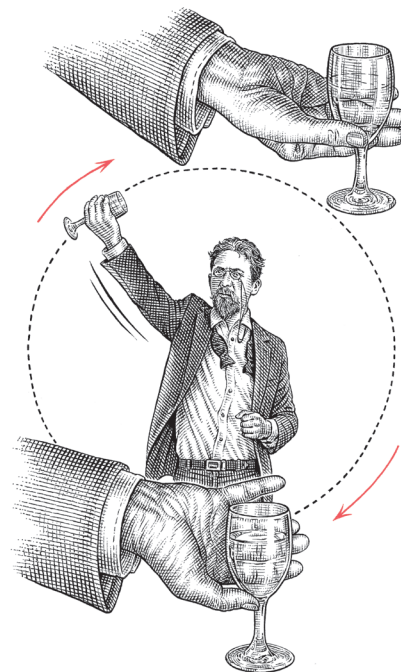
To avoid explanations *ad absurdum*, just think of the moon orbiting the earth. It is pulled towards the earth's centre by gravity, a *centripetal* force (for those conversant in Latin, a force seeking the centre) but it is kept away by a *centrifugal* force (a force fleeing the centre). These are balanced forces and they keep the wine in the glass.

The trickiest part is starting and finishing, while gaining or reducing speed. There is no harm in a little practice ahead of time. Remember: *ars longa, vita brevis*.

DAREDEVILS

Perform this with red wine.

WINE REVOLUTION



IN WHICH THE HOST DESCRIBES
A VINOUS CIRCUIT

EQUIPMENT

STURDY HAMMER
NEEDLE (100% STEEL)
CORK AND SUPPORTS
ALLOY COIN (0% STEEL)



HAMMERS ARE MAINLY associated with daytime activities, swept away in the great tidy-up before guests arrive. Segue seamlessly from dinner to after-dinner hammering by serving something that requires a hammer at the dinner table, for instance crab or lobster. Although being forearmed is as good as being forewarned, advance warning of this activity could be counterproductive.

The challenge for your guests is to pass a needle through a coin. If they know their densities, this is perhaps simple enough – the solid steel needle is denser by far than the alloy coin. But how to keep the needle from bending or even snapping when struck a blow with a hammer?

If there are children or former children in the house, a pair of wooden building blocks would be ideal as supports. Otherwise, two unloved books of similar size would do. Place these side by side with a gap between, like bluffs on either side of a canyon. Across this canyon, place an American penny, nickel or dime. A British penny or tuppence is redundant here, though a 20p piece is acceptable.

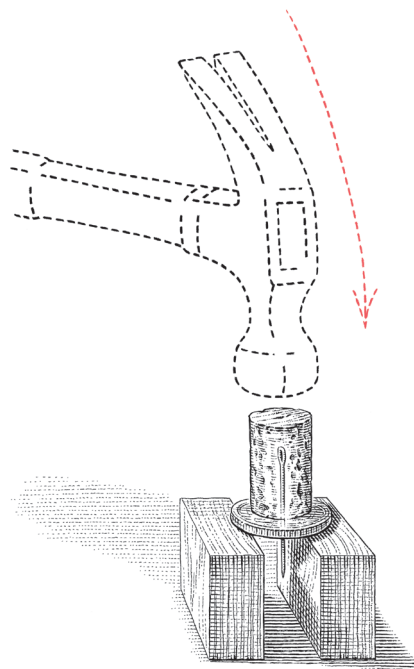
Find a needle in advance – choose a long one so that when it is pushed into a cork the end with the eye stands slightly proud of one end of the cork (half of the eye should be visible). The pointed tip should only just protrude from the cork's other end.

Place the needled cork directly on top of the coin. Hammer the needle with firm but gentle thrusts of the hammer. 'Gentle' is the key word here. The cork will flatten slightly but will keep the needle straight as it pierces the coin and proceeds through it.

DAREDEVILS

Match their strength to that of an old British one pound coin.

PIN MONEY



IN WHICH THE HOST NAILS IT

EQUIPMENT

CHAMPAGNE BOTTLE (EMPTY)
CITRIC/TARTARIC ACID OR CREAM OF TARTAR
BICARBONATE OF SODA
A SPARE PLAYING CARD
STRING, TAPE, KITCHEN PAPER, PIN
TWO PENCILS (OPTIONAL)



IN THE NOVELS of P.G. Wodehouse idle members of the Drones Club would have pulled off a prank like this between lunch courses. However, without the ministrations of a gentleman's gentleman, the tabletop cannon salute does involve some minimal forethought. This is mainly in the obtaining of citric or tartaric acid, a vital ingredient in cordial-making and still purchased from a chemist. In the absence of this, cream of tartar, along with bicarbonate of soda, may be readily found in any well-stocked larder.

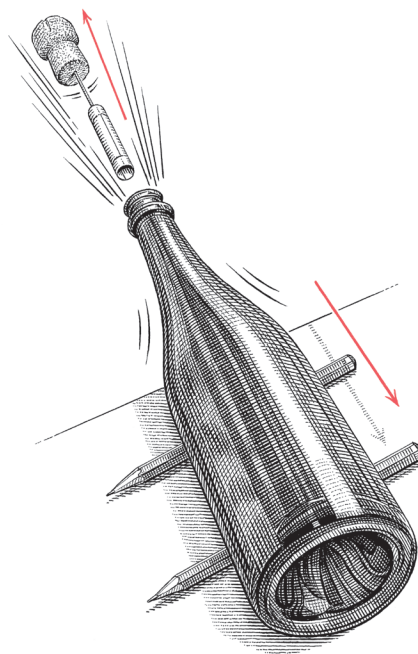
Take an empty champagne bottle and half fill it with water. Dissolve into it one tablespoon of bicarbonate of soda. Place a teaspoon of tartaric acid (or a double quantity of cream of tartar) on a playing card and roll it up, using kitchen paper as a plug. Attach some string to this cartridge-like contrivance, then tape it all together. The other end of the string needs to be tied around a drawing pin, which is pushed into the base of a wine stopper. Make sure that when the bottle is standing upright, the cartridge dangles over the water without touching it, the contents plugged in.

Only place the bottle on its side when you are ready. To get the full *coup de canon*, place the recumbent bottle on two parallel pencils, like runners. When the water penetrates the cartridge, it dissolves the tartaric acid and the resulting reaction fills the bottle with carbonic acid gas, pushing the cork out in a great shot. Like a discharging cannon, the bottle will roll backwards slightly on its runners.

DAREDEVILS

Use double quantities of powder.

BATTERY of BUBBLES



IN WHICH THE HOST
DISPOSES OF THE CORK

EQUIPMENT

DINNER PLATE
THREE CORKS
BOTTLE OF WINE
FOUR GOOD FORKS AND A STOUT NEEDLE



THIS EXPERIMENT in angular momentum has an outlandish appearance that places it firmly in the past. In the Age of Enlightenment, when Sir Isaac Newton's laws of physics were fresh and Josiah Wedgwood was introducing good china to the middle-classes, the messy consequences of dining room experiments were like so many angels dancing on the head of a pin. These days, broken porcelain can lead to broken friendships. Less bold souls may wish to try this at a picnic with melamine plates. And be in the habit of keeping a dressmaker's repair kit on hand at all times.

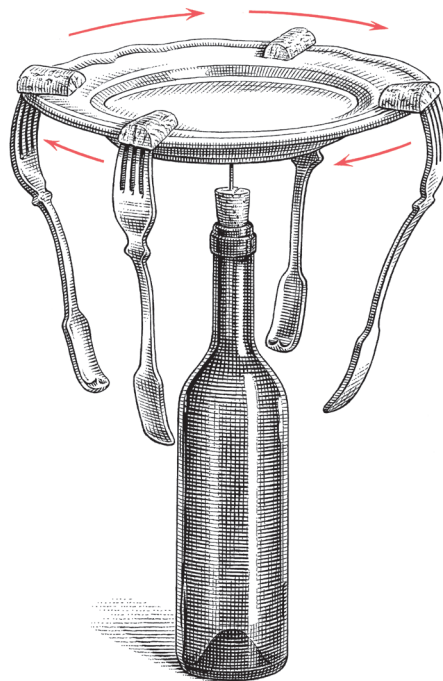
Like spinning plates that lose balance and fall off their pivots when they slow, or a unicycle that fails to hold the pedaller aloft once the wheel stops moving, the cork and fork pin spin relies on the speed of rotation, or angular momentum. Carefully push a needle, eye first, into a cork that is already stuck into a wine bottle. Find two other corks and cut them each in two, lengthways. Push the prongs of four forks into the flat ends of the four cork sections. It is important that the fork prongs be sharp. Place the forked corks at even intervals around the plate, so that the forks are dangling at a slightly acute angle.

Put the plate on top of the needle and start it rotating, finding the pivot point as you do so. The reason for using a needle is to introduce minimum friction, and thus increase velocity in spinning. You may find that the needle's positive qualities are outweighed by its negatives, but just bear this in mind: the faster the spin, the greater the stability. And please, no plastic cutlery.

DAREDEVILS

Send steak knives and porcelain on a heady fair ride.

CORK and FORK PIN SPIN



IN WHICH THE HOST DEVISES
A POSTPRANDIAL WHIRLIGIG