

Come Dine With Me is a television programme in which, over the course of a week, several contestants take it in turns to throw their idea of the perfect dinner party. Unfazed by their glaring social inadequacies, they snipe constantly, secretly score one another, and compete to win a £1,000 prize. As the gatherings get more and more ill-tempered, viewers sit at home and idly speculate which of the chefs will be the first to swap the baking soda for the rat poison.

The construction industry, in comparison, is a happy world of cheery collaboration, fist bumps and group hugs. But what would happen if you mixed the two - in other words, threw some of the industry's finest ingredients into the cauldron of a dinner party? Building opened up its store of contributors, took a sustainability consultant (Cyril Sweett's Isabel McAllister), added a QS (Gleeds senior partner Richard Steer), dropped in a construction lawyer to spice things up (Cameron McKenna's Rupert Choat), tossed in a few guest judges to taste, and gave it a stir.

We began on a Friday evening, chez Richard ...

Location Richard's cosy yet luxurious Victorian house in Balham, south London

Mystery judge Steve McGuckin, managing director of programme and project management, Turner & Townsend

Extra guests Richard's entourage, comprising his partner Wan, his spin doctor Julian Barlow and the au pair, Lynn, who looks after Dotty and Pickles, the Steer household's dog and cat. Two waitresses served dinner, but Steer insists they did none of the cooking.

The diners begin the evening with a glass of champagne in front of a roaring fire in Richard's living room. Richard's partner Wan confirms that he has indeed cooked the meal himself. "He's been shopping and preparing the food for two days," a bemused Wan says, adding that this is the first time in six years that Richard has cooked "anything other than toast". Not a comforting thought for those of us about to sample his culinary efforts. But we plough on regardless, into the first course, which is an immaculately presented simple red pepper soup. Conversation turns to how sustainable the meal is. "Everything's been locally sourced," Richard declares, "apart from the booze. I draw the line at English wine."

"I could actually tell you the carbon footprint of every course," offers sustainability expert Isabel, "but I won't bore you ...". A few moments later and we're on to Dubai's algae problem. Apparently, it can turn Dubai's waters bright blue, green and even vermilion, a fact that leaves everyone staring uncertainly into their bright red soup. Nonetheless it's polished off with gusto and we're on to the main course - a hearty serving of lamb and veggies.

Before dessert, Richard decides it's time to introduce his secret ingredient - a performance poet who goes by the name of "The Judge". We're invited to give three words, which he'll fit into a poem. Steve suggests football, sex and church, adding that these ©

~ F R I D A Y ~

Champagne

Roasted red pepper soup with pesto croutons

Slow-cooked lamb in butter beans with potato mash and roasted vegetables

Chocolate mousse

Selection of English cheeses

Wine:

Gigondas 2007 Côtes du Rhône (a musky red)

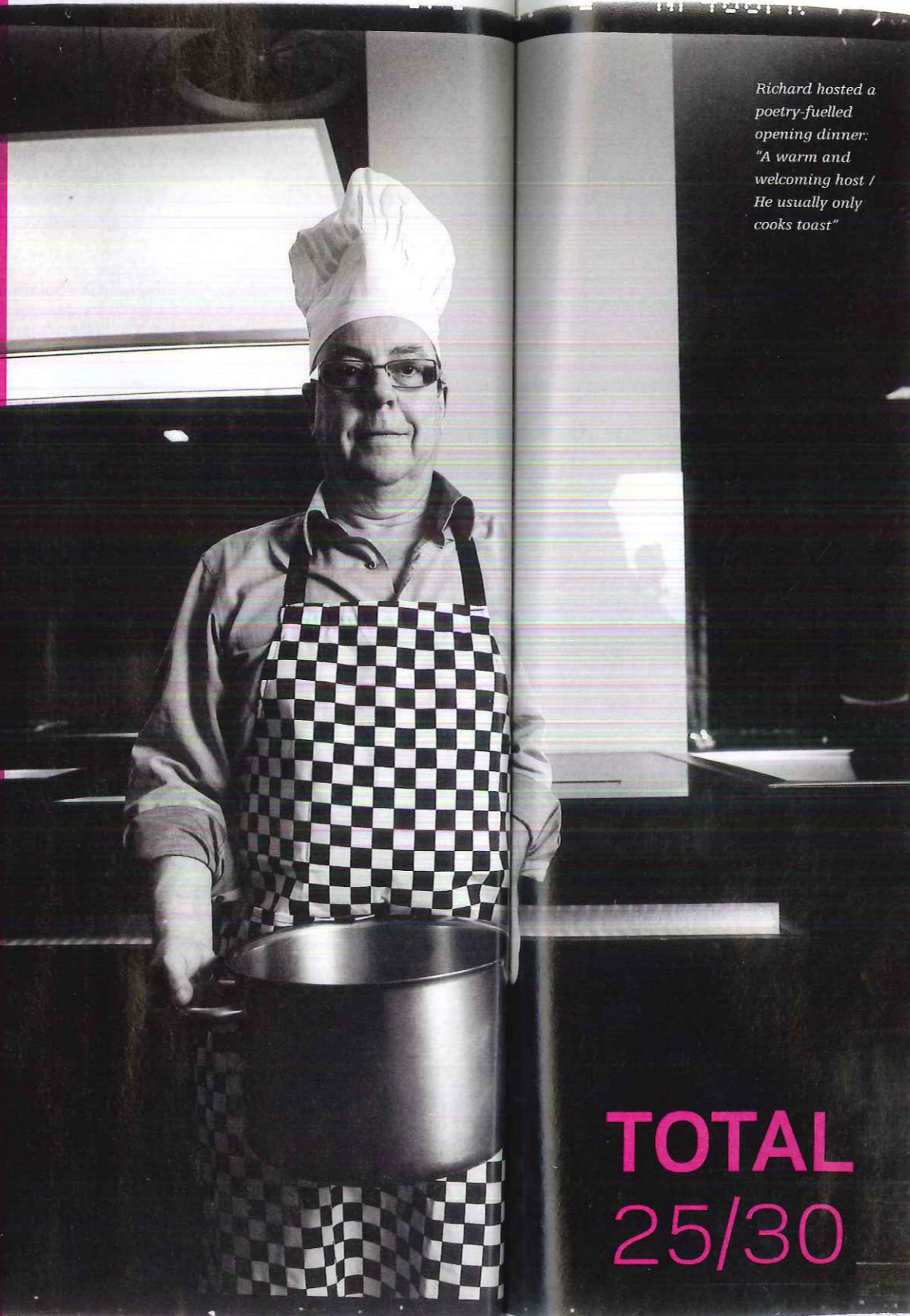
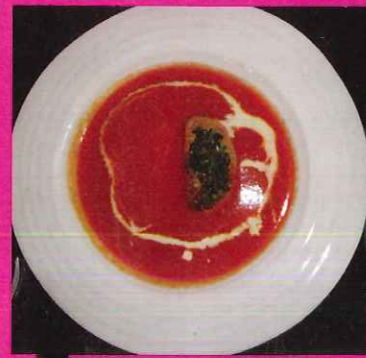


Time to di(n)e ...



Dinner parties are a serious business. So when Building invited three of its regular contributors to take part in a festive Come Dine With Me, the question was: would it be a chance for like-minded professionals to chew the fat, or would things turn bloody? Armed only with a fork, **Roxane McMeeken**, **Sarah Richardson** and **Katie Puckett** went along to find out. Portraits by **Julian Anderson**

'HE'S BEEN PREPARING THE FOOD FOR TWO DAYS,' A BEMUSED WAN SAYS, ADDING THAT THIS IS THE FIRST TIME IN SIX YEARS THAT RICHARD HAS COOKED 'ANYTHING OTHER THAN TOAST'



Richard hosted a poetry-fuelled opening dinner: "A warm and welcoming host / He usually only cooks toast"

TOTAL
25/30

Left: The pig doorstop, a key factor in Rupert giving the evening nine out of 10

are activities "I usually do in that order". Isabel seems impressed (with the poet rather than Steve) and starts to fret over how to compete when it's her turn to host – she lives out in a "normal" house in Walthamstow, E17, a district to which the others have probably never been. "Maybe the answer is to get everyone shit-faced and go down the local kebab?" she suggests.

At this stage, Rupert confesses he'll be "er, outsourcing the cooking" – in other words, getting his firm's catering team on the job. Cue accusations of betrayal and mutterings about "cheating lawyers" all round. As Rupert pleads that "apart from the outsourcing it will be a beautiful, genuine experience", we're distracted from the controversy by the arrival of a spectacular chocolate mousse ...

The verdict

Steve "I have to say the soup was slightly tasteless. But the lamb was succulent, it melted in the mouth. The chocolate mousse was delicious, but the sort of thing you can only handle when you're 20 – it was so rich!"

"Richard and Wan were warm, welcoming and unpretentious hosts. And they were brilliant at topping up my wine." **8.5/10**

Rupert "The soup was definitely the best course – it had obviously seen hotter days, but it tasted very good. The main course was workmanlike – hang on, that sounds awful – let's just say I would not like to criticise it nor lavish praise upon it. It was solid ... The dessert – some felt it was too generous, too rich. I saw it rather as a challenge that I had to overcome, and I succeeded.

"Richard and Wan were fantastically welcoming. Their place is lovely. I particularly like the pig doorstop. I was not entirely convinced about the poet. Let's say I was happier when he wasn't there as I liked my fellow diners' company better." **9/10**

Isabel "The soup was really yummy. It had real depth of flavour. The main was good but it had too many similar, soft textures for me. The chocolate mousse was a killer. It tasted good but I didn't want to eat too much of it. To be polite I ate it all though." **7.5/10**

~ M O N D A Y ~

Ki(e)r Royal

"Crossrail"

Confit duck roulade, red onion crostini, clementine chutney

El Somo Selección 2006, Bodegas El Somo, Rioja

"Leaning Tower of Pisa"

Fillet steak, fondant potato, buttered spinach and red wine jus

Les Charmeuses Côtes de Nuits Villages, Potel 2005

"Millennium Dome"

Rum syrup sponge, double liqueur ice cream with sugar basket

Muscat de Beaumes de Venise 2008

Mince pies, coffee, tea, tisanes

Host Rupert Choat

Location Cameron McKenna's hospitality lounge – a tasteful but ultimately corporate dining room above its offices in Aldersgate Street

Mystery judge Rudi Klein, barrister and chief executive of the Specialist Engineering Contractors Group

Extra guests None that actually get to eat, but there's a small army of chefs, waiters and waitresses

Rupert's first task, as the guests arrive at Cameron McKenna's headquarters, is not to pour the cheekily named Ki(e)r Royale cocktails that kick off his construction themed menu. No, as you would expect given the venue, Rupert has people for that. Instead, he must vigorously defend his right to host the meal at his office, rather than his home (assuming he has one). "I'm merely subcontracting, in the best traditions of the industry!" he protests. "I'm getting people who are good at this sort of thing to help me out, so I can concentrate on the parts of the evening I do best."

Quite what these latent dinner party skills are is still to be revealed, as a waitress rushes past and whispers that she's made a slight alteration to the menu. Building, for

the sake of accuracy, questions Choat as to the detail. "I have no idea," he confesses, glancing around wildly. "Errr, hang on ..." He darts behind the giant Jenga tower looming in the corner for a hurried consultation over the style of potatoes.

Leaving aside the question of Rupert's personal involvement in the cooking, it has to be said he's made a valiant effort in designing the menu. The Crossrail themed starter, a duck roulade, is indeed a feat of engineering. It's perhaps even a bit too progressive for Rudi, who recalls far more traditional Christmases. "I remember my dad cutting the head off a turkey," he says cheerfully, as the other guests furiously dig their way through the tunnels.

As Isabel calls for the corporate lighting to be turned down – a request that prompts a flurry of activity from Rupert's "helpers" – conversation turns to the music playing in the background. "It's Chopin," says Rupert proudly, who has at least brought his own CDs.

The Leaning Tower of Pisa duly arrives, and Isabel begins to probe the guests about their Christmas gift intentions – "You guys already have pretty much everything." Not so, it seems – Richard is very excited about his

© gift to partner Wan this year. "Because it's the credit crunch, we're buying practical presents. She's getting a food processor. And," he adds, leaning forward to emphasise his point, "we're getting a free glass bowl with it, for ordering before 31 December."

As the other guests struggle to absorb the enormity of such a gesture, Rupert gets up to change the CD. But rather than another Chopin, he makes the bizarre decision to introduce the Best of the Eighties – a three-volume set that he may or may not have picked up from a street market in an effort to make himself look down to earth.

As the Millennium Dome materialises before us in sugar-coated form, Rudi and Richard pick that moment to reveal themselves as former Masons. "Do you walk around naked with stags on your head, like druids?" queries Isabel, aghast.

In a desperate move to change the subject, Rupert finally reveals what he has been doing to contribute to the meal – he's devised the party games. With frightening enthusiasm, he produces a wad of Post-it notes with construction-themed people or things written on them, and sticks them to the foreheads of his protesting guests, who must guess their characters. Isabel at least is familiar with the game. "Round where I live, we play it with Rizlas." Rudi winces. "And they want them back afterwards, I presume?"

"Did I commission the pyramids?" asks Richard warily. In the event, Rupert is the one who struggles most with the game – Isabel has assigned him his character, and it's Bob the Builder. Fifteen minutes into the game he's still stumped: "I'm tangible, British and kind of dead ..."

Thankfully, he's put out of his misery before Building has to guess its second post-it incarnation – Japanese knotweed ...

With the eighties disco now truly pumping (although in a very corporate sense) it's over to the giant Jenga. And it's there that the evening gets a bit hazy, which, given that our host has started celebrating the removal of each brick with some mean dance moves, is probably a good thing...

The verdicts

Rudi Crossrail was a valiant attempt at giving an impression of a train going through a tunnel, although when I looked at it I thought it was a wooden log flying down a flume at a theme park. The second course was less of a challenge – provided you got a really excellent piece of meat (which he did) you'd be able to turn it out. The dessert, for presentation, goes up in my esteem, but as far as the taste was concerned it was a little disappointing. **6/10**

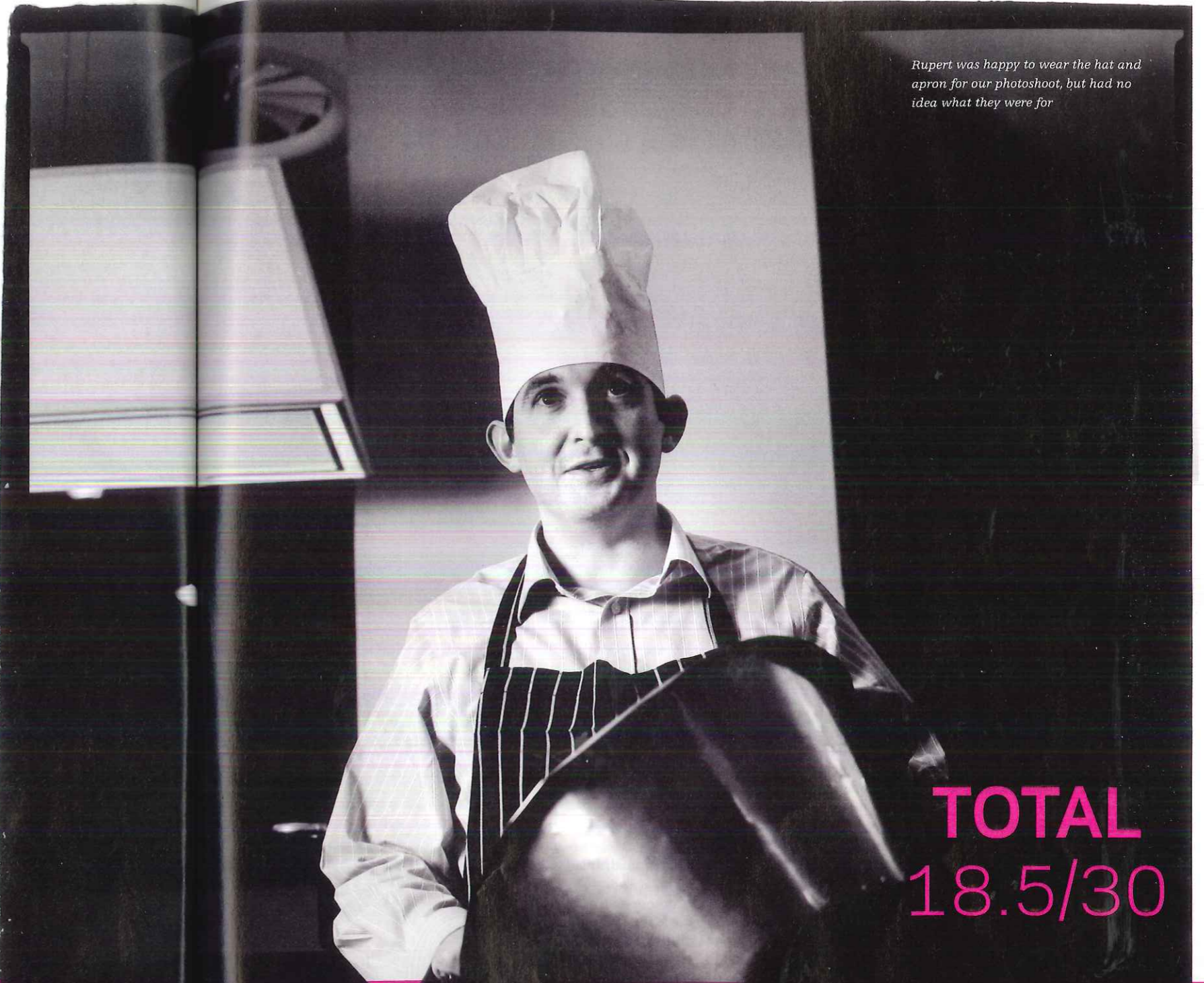
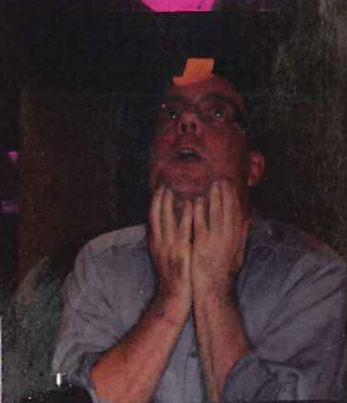
ISABEL HAS ASSIGNED RUPERT HIS CHARACTER, AND IT'S BOB THE BUILDER. FIFTEEN MINUTES INTO THE GAME HE'S STILL STUMPED: 'I'M TANGIBLE, BRITISH AND KIND OF DEAD ...!'

Isabel I liked the engineering of the first course, particularly that cheeky tomato. The main course was beautiful, though he should have gone for a UK-based tower – we have some now. A non-leaning one. The dessert was very kitsch – good but odd – but sponge and hard sugar is a strange hybrid, and I'm not sure it worked (although I did enjoy Rupert's description of how he supposedly "cooked" the sugar). There were good eighties tunes and good banter, but I'm going to have to take points off him for not preparing his own food. If he'd cooked, he'd have got 8.

6.5/10

Richard (sounding suspiciously like the X-Factor's Danni Minogue ...) It's been a very pleasant evening of corporate hospitality, but is that Come Dine with Me? Well, this wasn't in Rupert's home. Rupert has been a charming host, but I have to say a bit slow on pouring the drinks – he hasn't poured the wine or even chosen the wine. And one has to ask why he hasn't cooked round his place in Hampstead. He could have given his wife £10, she could have gone shopping ... **6/10**

Below, left to right: An evening that began promisingly, with the best cooking that Rupert's expense account could buy, swiftly descended into identity crises and the latest craze sweeping the legal world: extreme Jenga dancing



Rupert was happy to wear the hat and apron for our photoshoot, but had no idea what they were for

TOTAL
18.5/30

~ W E D N E S D A Y ~

Aperitifs

Nigella Lawson's Poinsettia (prosecco, cranberry juice and triple sec), bottles of Sol lager and Magners for Rupert

Ceviche, served with soft tacos

Chocolate chilli beef, served with loaded skins

Chocolate lime cheesecake

Wine

Cono Sur, a Chilean pinot noir (produced and transported in the most sustainable fashion possible)

Host Isabel McAllister

Location Isabel's small but perfectly formed terraced house in Walthamstow, E17 - where Rupert is astonished to discover the band East 17 were actually from

Mystery judge Graham Watts, chief executive of Construction Industry Council

Extra guests Kate from Cyril Sweett's marketing department, Isabel's sister Vicky

The third dinner on Come Dine With Me is customarily a lavish feast of backhanded compliments, faint praise and seething resentment, with the occasional flaming row to spice things up. So it's good to see Richard getting a bit of bitching in before late-comer Rupert arrives. The subject is still Rupert's use of Cameron McKenna's corporate flat and caterers the previous Monday. "It was like sitting in the business class lounge at an airport," he begins. "We were served really nice fillet steak by a caterer. That's not what Come Dine With Me is about." But then, Richard himself had waitresses (and an au pair for his pets). "I did have eight people!"

Isabel seems to have put in the most impressive effort. Although she's brought in her sister and Cyril Sweett's marketing manager to help with the last-minute

chopping ("while I was frantically Hoovering"), she was up until 1am the night before cooking the starter and main course, and got up at the crack of dawn to assemble the pud. She has done a hard day's sustainability consulting in the meantime, and does seem a little frazzled.

Isabel requested the guests wear something sparkly - Richard has risen gallantly to the occasion. He disappears upstairs immediately on arrival from the office and returns in his civvies - a startlingly trendy long-sleeved T-shirt with a tie-dyed pattern,

ISABEL REQUESTED THE GUESTS WEAR SOMETHING SPARKLY - RICHARD HAS RISEN TO THE OCCASION WITH A STARTLINGLY TRENDY LONGSLEEVED T-SHIRT WITH A TIE-DYED PATTERN, GOTHIC SCRIPT AND LASHINGS OF SILVER STUDS

gothic script and lashings of silver studs, worn with jeans and black deck shoes also decorated with silver studs. It's a top effort, and Graham is left feeling a little bit dowdy. "I didn't know," he protests. It cuts no ice with Isabel: "I may have to find something sparkly for you," she says sternly.

Isabel's starter is, she says, a high-risk strategy. Ceviche is originally a Peruvian dish, in which raw fish is cooked only in the acidity of lime juice. "I love it, but it's not for everyone." She's more confident about her main course. "It's a winner." Has she cooked it often? "Never. But I've just tasted it."

Challenging though the starter is, it goes down a treat. Actually, the bigger problem is assembling the tacos in such a way that the marinade doesn't run down your arms - as Graham discovers to his cost. The fish is cod - appropriately-fished cod, of course.

Is there not a possible carbon issue with a meal inspired by south and central American cooking, enquires Building. "There would never be a carbon issue with anything I do," declares Isabel. "It is very hard to pick me up on that. I fly once a year, with the best possible offsetting, I take the train to Europe no matter how long it takes. I don't have a car." She disappears into the kitchen before we can probe her further.

While we wait for the chilli, Isabel takes the opportunity to fill some glaring holes in Rupert's knowledge of popular music. She lays on the table a selection of albums currently doing well in the charts. "If you haven't heard any of these, I'm going to be seriously worried." Rupert, tonight wearing a red-tinsel boia, seems to struggle, but then: "I recognise Estelle! Is she the one with the eye patch? ... I like a bit of Elbow, it's got a bit of thrust to it ... Ah, I've heard of Kasabian. I've no idea who or what they are but let's give it a spin. Spin that disc!" What does he think? "Very agreeable!"

Isabel does not own wine glasses because they get broken, so she offers a choice of beakers with cartoon characters on them. As the sustainably sourced wine flows, Richard takes the bull, in this case Rupert, by the horns. "Can I ask you a personal question? Why couldn't we come to your house?"

Speculation mounts as to whether he actually has a house. But according to Isabel, who shared a taxi with him last Friday, it's one of those mansions by Hampstead tube. OCD then? Could he not stand the mess? Richard wonders if his new Russian wife is too beautiful.

"I do live in Hampstead and I have a beautiful wife," admits Rupert at last. "But I'm not the best host, and neither's my wife. I can't cook that well, and it was quite short notice ... Anyway, it's Come Dine With Me, not Come And Eat My Food!"



Top to bottom: Chocolate and beef prove a winning combination; Richard and Isabel compare shoes (his on the left); Richard and Rupert make plans to hit the town in Walthamstow (Isabel smiles knowingly); Graham, the Alesha Dixon of dinner party judges

The verdict

Graham I can't think of anything bad to say. I was the first to arrive and it was a little bit chaotic, but I was so bang on half seven, I had to walk up and down the street a few times first. Isabel is a very attentive hostess and she made sure her guests got lots to

ONLY GRAHAM AMONG THE JUDGES CAN HANDLE SECONDS. HE'S INCREASINGLY PLEASED HIS DINNER WITH THE CEMENTITIOUS SLAG MAKERS ASSOCIATION WAS CANCELLED

Left: The victorious Isabel. What she lacked in venue, she more than made up for with competitive instinct ...

drink, and the food was pretty faultless. And the fact that she was up until 1am cooking and then up again at six in the morning is above and beyond the call of Building. It's been a really, really, really good evening. **10/10**

Richard It was a really nice evening, I thought she was really brilliant, and really good fun. Being absolutely honest, if I had to find a criticism, it wasn't totally sophisticated. It was really at home with Isabel. I thought the chilli was very nice, and it wasn't too chocolatey - I was a bit worried when I saw the menu. It was good hearty food. The cheesecake was scrummy. It was just a pity that Rupert nicked all the cream. **7.5/10**

Rupert I thought the starter was surprisingly delicious - I didn't expect that from a Peruvian dish. The main was very tasty, very filling and it complemented the starter well. The dessert I wasn't so impressed by - I'm not such a big cheesecake fan, but that's just bad luck. It was a fine dessert and I will bow to other people's views. I knew I was going to make a cock-up with the cream. It's been such a good thing to get to know people - a really good lead up to Christmas. I'm looking forward to seeing the guys again. **8/10**

So there it is. A victory for home cooking over corporate hospitality, Walthamstow over the City, and proper music over eighties disco and performance poetry. Rupert danced, Richard sparkled, and Graham got to forget all about cementitious slag makers. Oh, and nobody was poisoned.

For more photos and video interviews with the contestants go to www.building.co.uk