

# The American Dinner Party

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The dinner party is a seemingly simple part of the American culture. At its core, a dinner party is a gathering of family, friends or honored guests, who come together to share in food, drink and conversation. Contradictory to this simple appearance, dinner parties contain a wealth of historical influence, social expectations, and gender roles. This intriguing part of American life is, unfortunately disappearing from mainstream society. This decline can be explained by the shift in American dining, from formal to informal, as evidenced by dinner parties.

The modern dinner party has historical roots that can be traced to ancient civilizations. Ancient Greeks would host gatherings that have elements of today's dinner parties. As with modern dinner parties, the host could simply invite friends or family to gather for a meal, however the most popular and prestigious social dining experience in ancient Greece society was the symposium. The symposium, traditionally translated as "banquet", but more literally "gathering of drinkers" was one of the preferred pastimes for the Greeks.<sup>1</sup> It consisted of two parts: the first dedicated to food, generally a simple meal, and a second part dedicated to drinking. However, wine was consumed with the food, and the beverages were accompanied by snacks such as chestnuts, beans, toasted wheat, or honey cakes; all intended to absorb alcohol and extend the festivities.<sup>2</sup> The second part consisted of after dinner drinks and entertainment that usually included conversation or table games. The guests would recline on couches around low tables, which held the food or game boards. Dancers, acrobats, and musicians would entertain the banqueters. The idea of after dinner entertainment, either through conversation, games, or other activities is a common element of modern day dinner parties or social gathering. These great feasts, however, could only be afforded by the rich and were strictly reserved for men.<sup>3</sup> These events were the ultimate

statement of status and wealth in Ancient Greek times.

The Romans also hosted social dining events that contain elements of modern day dinner parties. The Greek practice of reclining and dining continued into ancient Rome, but with a few additions, for one, respectable women were invited to join the party, and for another, drinking was not a separate, post-dinner event, but became part of the dining experience.<sup>4</sup> In Rome, couches for single, generally male, diners existed, but by the later part of the period the practice at dinner parties was for guests to recline on three large beds placed in a U shape.<sup>5</sup> Reclining at parties continued to be primarily an elite practice; poorer citizens did not have the room for beds of this size in their modest homes. Although in previous years, reclining had been shameful for respectable women, they now reclined with men.<sup>6</sup> Class and status was also reflected at these parties. There were specific places that were designated for the host, favored guests, and less-favored guests. The favored guests were situated on couches that were close to the food spread and entertainment, while the less-favored guests were placed behind or further away from the central group.<sup>7</sup> The act of seating guest according to status or social standing can be seen in formal parties through the centuries, even in twentieth century dinner parties.

The birthplace of the modern day dinner party is arguably the Victorian Era formal dinner party. Elegant dinner parties were considered among the most popular form of entertainment in this age, and etiquette and tradition guided the host and guests through the formal affair. *Godey's Lady's Book*, one of the leading guides for etiquette in Philadelphia stated, "The most fashionable as well as pleasant way in the present day to entertain guests is to invite them to evening parties, which vary in size from the 'company,' 'sociable,' 'soiree,' to the party, par excellence, which is but one step from the ball."<sup>8</sup> The Victorians had an

<sup>1</sup> Robert Garland, *Daily Life of the Ancient Greeks* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), 175.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 177

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Faas, *Around the Roman Table: Food and Feasting in Ancient Rome* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994), p. 50.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 52

<sup>8</sup> Duncan A. McKee, "A Gilded Age Dinner: According to Godey's Lady's Book," *New England Antiques Journal* (2005): 5, Accessed May 4, 2014,

obsession with detail, and the attention given to preparing for such an event was paramount for its success. The lady of the house would send out invitations two days to two weeks prior to the gathering, depending on the elaborateness of the event, and some form of reply was expected. Again, Godey's gave guidance, saying, "In writing an invitation for a small party, it is kind, as well as polite, to specify the number of guests invited, that your friends may dress to suit the occasion. To be either too much or too little dressed at such times is embarrassing."<sup>9</sup> The guests were selected to form a group of socially harmonious people who would be comfortable together. The people in attendance of the party were as, if not more, important than the meal itself. A party of highly respected guests was the sign of status within society.

Once the guest list is assembled, the extravagant party can begin. In the earlier years of the period, dinner guests were received at 7 o'clock and could expect to find the formal table spread abundantly with food. As each course was finished, another was set out.<sup>10</sup> These were usually solid and rich dishes, such as roasted or boiled meats, hashes, potatoes, and rich cakes. Guests could expect to dine for nearly two hours, after which they would sometimes retire to another room to eat a dessert of fresh or preserved fruits.<sup>11</sup> A few years later, dinner party fashion had changed, and guests were now expected to arrive between 7:30 and 8:30, with 8 o'clock being the most popular time for dinner. Guests were expected to arrive punctually; period etiquette books recommended no more than fifteen minutes late.<sup>12</sup> The guests, dressed in formal attire, for the gentlemen this meant black pants, waist-coat and jacket, with white tie, shirt and gloves and for the ladies, formal evening dresses and accessories, would gather in the drawing room before the meal.<sup>13</sup> Receiving the guests was the duty of the hostess, and Godey's, as usual, mapped the proper course,

"It is better to be ready too soon than too late, as your guests will be embarrassed if you are not ready to receive them...For the early part of the evening take a position in

your parlor near or opposite to the door, that each guest may find you easily... As each guest or party enters the room, advance a few steps to meet them, speaking first to the lady, or, if there are several ladies, to the eldest, then to the younger ones, and finally to the gentlemen... Do not leave the room during the evening. To see a hostess fidgeting, constantly going in and out, argues ill for her tact in arranging the house for company...Prior to any dinner party, a good hostess had acquainted herself in advance with everyone's rank. Then, the hostess instructed the gentlemen as to which ladies they would escort into the dining room, one at a time, in strictest accordance to both their social standings; the persons of greatest rank or distinction went first while the remaining guests continued to mingle casually in the drawing room. The man of the house typically took the arm of the highest-ranking lady."<sup>14</sup>

Victorian Era dinners were usually served "à la russe", meaning that the footman would stand at the guest's side, offering a dish from which guests served themselves, and the table remained clear of serving dishes and bowls.<sup>15</sup> It was also common for the butler to take a portion from each serving dish that was on the sideboard, and individually arrange each guest's meal upon a plate, then a servant placed the prepared plate before each guest.<sup>16</sup> The number of objects that appeared on a properly set Victorian dinner table was staggering, and if a guest did not use the proper instrument for the proper food, it was seen as vulgar and uncivilized. In many cases, it was not unusual for as many as 24 pieces of silver to be at each place setting. As many as eight forks would be laid out, ranging from a fish fork and dinner fork to an ice cream fork.<sup>17</sup> Knives could add up to eight pieces, being used for butter, cheese, game, roast, and fruit, all accompanied by individual knife rests. All the stemware that would be needed through the meal was placed on the table beforehand, arranged in two rows: a water glass, a glass for chambertin, champagne, a green glass for sauterne, a sherry glass, and a red glass for Rhine

[https://www.antiquesjournal.com/pages04/Monthly\\_pages/sep05/gilded.html](https://www.antiquesjournal.com/pages04/Monthly_pages/sep05/gilded.html)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

wine.<sup>18</sup> Center pieces were also a vital element of the Victorian table setting, including elements such as lace, garlands, fruit, flowers and even candies or bonbons. These elements could define a good hostess from a mediocre one.

The food at the Victorian dinner party was just as extravagant as the other elements. Victorian dinners were well known for the endless procession of soups, meats, salads, puddings, ices, and meringues or pastries.<sup>19</sup> It was not unusual for a period dinner menu to consist of nine courses. *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management* gives a sample menu:

“First Course: Julienne or Vermicelli Soup,  
Second Course: Broiled Salmon, Turbot in  
Lobster Sauce, Filet de Soles, Red Mullet,  
Trout, Lobster Rissoles, Whitebait, Entrees:  
Canards a la Rouennaise, Mutton  
Cutlets, Braised Beef, Spring Chicken,  
Roast Quarter of Lamb, Tongue, Roast  
Saddle of Mutton, Whitebait, Third Course:  
Quails, Roast Ducks, Mayonnaise of  
Chicken, Green Peas, Charlotte Russe,  
Strawberries, Compote of Cherries,  
Neapolitan Cakes, Madeira Wine.”<sup>20</sup>

After dinner, it was customary for the women to retire to a separate sitting room while the gentlemen remained in the dining room or go to the library where they would pass around the port wine while exchanging stories. It was during this time that the men would smoke, something that a gentleman would never do in the presence of a lady.<sup>21</sup> After about a half-hour had passed, the host would suggest to his male guests that they join the ladies in the drawing room, where they would enjoy coffee, tea, and mutual conversation for perhaps yet another half-hour. At last the evening would end, usually around eleven o'clock, and upon acknowledging a lovely evening, guests took their leave.<sup>22</sup> Once again, Godey's Lady's Book had advice on how to say goodnight, “When your guests take leave of you, it will be in the drawing-room, and let that farewell be final. Do not accompany them to the dressing-room, and never stop them in the hall for a last word. Say farewell in the parlor, and do not repeat it.”<sup>23</sup> The Victorian dinner party was

controlled by social expectations and rules of etiquette. Both the dinner and the guests were expected to have a formal manner about them, as reflected in the strict etiquette of the event. The pressure to follow these rules while creating the perfect atmosphere of elegance and grace came down on the shoulders of the hostess. It was the woman's role to execute the perfect dinner party to show the status of her and her family. The formal dinner party was not only a symbol of class and a snapshot of the woman's role in the home, but also a portrait of the formality and strict social rules of the Victorian Era.

Many of the elements of the Victorian era dinner party are present in the 1950s formal dinner party. Similarly to the previous era, dinner parties in the 1950s came with their own set of strict rules of etiquette and expectations. *Amy Vanderbilt's Complete Book of Etiquette: A Guide to Gracious Living*, 1952, is a guide of the appropriate etiquette for almost every element of life of the sophisticated American in this time. There is an entire section dedicated to entertainment, including the formal dinner party. The guide expresses important information the hostess must follow to have a successful party. First, she would need the room to seat all her guests at one dining table, because any variation of this configuration would disqualify the event as a formal dinner.<sup>24</sup> This, as in Ancient Roman times, acted as a sign of wealth and status, for only a family with a large enough home could accommodate the number of people who attended these dinner parties. Also it is important to have a chef or real cuisiniere prepare the appropriate food that exhibits the sophisticated nature of the meal. Also, the hostess would have been expected to have a butler and trained wait staff recruited for the event. These were usually supplied by a catering service, along with any additional kitchen help that may be needed.<sup>25</sup> Once the staff is in place, the next defining element of the formal dinner party is the table settings. According to *The Joy of Cooking* cookbook, originally published in 1931, table décor should include clean pressed linens, high quality flatware, stemware, and china. The table should include the appropriate silverware and glasses according to the food and drink that will be served

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

<sup>24</sup> Amy Vanderbilt, *Amy Vanderbilt's Complete Book of Etiquette: A Guide to Gracious Living* (Doubleday, 1952), p. 264.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 265

at the dinner, much like the Victorian table. Also, like at Victorian parties, the table should be decorated with flowers or fruit.<sup>26</sup> One important rule of the formal party is that there are never serving dishes on the table, unless they are for decorative purposes. Similarly to the Victorian dinner, the meal is composed of many courses, including a soup, fish, roast, salad, fruit, and dessert courses.<sup>27</sup> In between each course, a guest should always have a plate in front of them; the plates for each course should be placed on top of the main course plate. The only time the place should be bare is before dessert, after the main course plate is cleared.<sup>28</sup> Quite often, after the meal, guests retire to a separate sitting room for coffee or post dinner drinks, such as port. Either women exiting first, followed by the men, or both men and women exiting the dining room together was appropriate. Once the dinner is over, no guest could leave after a formal dinner in a private home less than two and a half to three hours and even then, not until the guest or guests of honor have departed.<sup>29</sup> The hostess was the in charge of making sure that all elements of the evening unfolded without issue.

Formal dinner parties were the ultimate expression of social and economic class. However, in the beginning of the twentieth century, a new form of dining emerged, the semi-formal or company dinner. These gatherings did not have the stiff formality and elegance of a formal dinner party and were usually given for a smaller group of four to eight guests. This allowed for middle and lower class families to entertain and emulate the high-class event, without the cost of the formal dinner party. Even though these parties are not as extravagant as a formal party, the household was still expected to put its best face forward. These events also had the expectations for proper and formal etiquette to be shown. Hostesses were expected to be the picture of elegance and grace while she prepared and served dinner, entertained guests, and kept the flow of the party continuous. The ideal hostess became a vital part of women's identities in the 1950s. This phenomenon is part of

what is known as the Separation of Spheres.<sup>30</sup> In the 1950's the cultural hegemony of the time was that the man's role is to be in the workplace, providing for his family, while the woman's role is in the home, taking care of her husband and children. This is reflected in the idea of the perfect hostess. Society stated that a woman should be a "domestic goddess" and a dinner party is the perfect way to show others this trait. In the film *Mona Lisa Smile*, a modern-thinking professor comes to Wellesley College in 1953. She is faced with the classical ideas of the students and staff, who believe that a woman's place is in the home once she is married, even though the students are highly educated, intelligent women. This idea is directly witnessed in a scene when the students are taking part of an etiquette class, hosted at the home of one of the professors. In the scene, the students stand around a properly set table and have clearly been learning how to host dinners. She then gives the students a hypothetical situation: their husband is in line for a promotion and is competing against two other people. To get the edge, they invite the boss and his wife to dinner. An hour before the company arrives; they are informed that the two other competitors and their wives have been invited to dinner. The professor says, "Ever the Wellesley girl, you keep your cool, you understand that the boss is testing you as much as your husband"<sup>31</sup> Etiquette and hosting was such an integral part of the woman's role in society that an entire class was dedicated to it at one of the top colleges in the country. The idea of women needing to be the perfect dinner party hostess is also seen in the advertisements of the day. The United States Brewers Foundation ran a series of ads in the weekly and monthly consumer magazines to promote beer drinking at home. The ads were called "Home Life in America" and each featured an illustration of white middle-class families. One of these ads was Ray Prohaska's painting entitled "The Bride's First Dinner Party."<sup>32</sup> In this painting, a woman is seen placing food on the table while her husband serves drinks to their relaxing guests. The

<sup>26</sup> Irma S. Rombauer, Marion Rombauer Becker, *The Joy of Cooking* (New York: Scribner, 1995), p. 16.

<sup>27</sup> Amy Vanderbilt, *Amy Vanderbilt's Complete Book of Etiquette: A Guide to Gracious Living* (Doubleday, 1952), p. 264.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 266

<sup>29</sup> Ibid

<sup>30</sup> Joan Bursrtn, *Victorian Education and the Idea of Womanhood* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1984) 19.

<sup>31</sup> Lawrence Konner, *Mona Lisa Smile*, directed by Mike Newell (2003; Columbia Pictures), DVD

<sup>32</sup> See Appendix, picture 1



hostess is dressed in a clean nice dress and a stand of pearls, with her hair and makeup done. Her physical appearance gives the impression that she is able to handle the pressure of hosting her first dinner party with ease and enjoyment. This illustrates that she is conforming to the social expectations of taking over the role of the perfect hostess after she is married. Gender roles are heavily reflected in the etiquette and expectations of the 1950s.

Although the American dinner party has deep roots in formal traditions, a shift has occurred in modern society. Formality is no longer an important driving factor in dining and, especially, dinner parties. No longer are women being taught the fine art of hosting the perfect dinner party and the proper etiquette of which spoon to use or who should be seated next to whom. Guy Trebay of *The New York Times* discusses this shift in today's culture in his article "Guess Who Isn't Coming to Dinner: Saving the Endangered Dinner Party." Trebay interviewed famous socialites from around the country and they agreed that the old-fashioned formal dinner party is a thing of the past. Trebay writes,

"Increasingly, such gatherings seem outmoded, squeezed out by overcrowded schedules, the phony urgency of affinity sites, restaurants cultism and overall tectonic shifts in how Americans congregate...The seated dinner, with its minuet of invitation and acceptance, its formalities and protocols, its culinary and dietary challenges, its inherent requirements of guest and host, alike is under threat, many say."<sup>33</sup>

Although formality is in a decline, the ideas behind the dinner party are still alive and well in America. Trebay continues, "If there's one thing you learn in the etiquette business, it's that life is cyclical," said Judith Martin, the etiquette arbiter known as Miss Manners. "The idea of cooking for others is not something that is going to die."<sup>34</sup> This statement is supported by a recent survey, given in May of 2014 to a group of Americans ranging in age and gender.<sup>35</sup> The results of the survey state that of the

64 participants, 32 (50%) have thrown a dinner party, excluding holiday and birthday parties, within the last year. This is evidence that the basic idea of friends and family gathering around a meal is still a part of the American culture.

However, the presentation of these meals is vastly different from the formal, and even the semi-formal, dinner parties of the 1950s and Victorian age. First, the food that is served at modern parties is different. According to the survey, approximately 60% of the dinner parties that were thrown by the participants were single course meals, about 15% were cocktails and appetizers and 25% were multi-course dinners. This greatly differs from the nine course dinners of the Victorian era dinner party or the four course 1950s dinner party. There is also a shift in how people dress when dining, especially at dinner parties. In today's society, people are just as likely to wear blue jeans to a five star restaurant as they are to a local diner. According to the survey, an astounding 87% stated that their dinner parties were casual dress, with roughly 20% stating that the dress was business casual and only about 3% stating that the dress of their party was semiformal or formal. This is also documented in photographs of the corresponding eras. In a snapshot of a 1950s dinner party, the guests are dressed in formal attire.<sup>36</sup> The men are in suits or sports jackets and the women are in evening dresses and are wearing fine jewelry. This is greatly different from a photograph from a modern day photograph of a dinner party, taken for a magazine article.<sup>37</sup> In this photo the guests are all dressed in casual attire. Another interesting difference in these two photographs is the table settings. In the 1950s photo, the table is set in a typical and proper fashion. The table is dressed with a tablecloth and adorned with a platter of fruit. Although the guests have moved to the coffee portion of the dinner, it is visible that they are using china tea cups and saucers. In the modern day photo, the table does not have a tablecloth and the guests are using what looks like every day plates and bowls. The quality and type of china, silverware and glassware that hosts use at modern parties have shifted from that of an earlier time. Trebay also touches on this point in his article saying, "What is surprising is that fewer

<sup>33</sup> Guy Trebay, "Guess Who Isn't Coming to Dinner: Saving the Endangered Dinner Party," *New York Times*, November 29, 2012, New York edition, sec. E

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> Survey created by Amy Nash, May 2014, distributed online, data recorded and analyzed on surveymonkey.com. Here after, all references to this survey are from this source

<sup>36</sup> See appendix, photo 2. Hereafter, all references to "1950s photograph" are from this source.

<sup>37</sup> See appendix, photo 3. Hereafter, all references to "modern day photograph" are from this source.

still see the point in accumulating china, silver and crystal at all, a truth driven home by the dwindling of departments devoted to table-top appointments at traditional purveyors like Tiffany & Company.”<sup>38</sup> The last major difference in these photographs is the role the women are taking at their respective parties. In the 1950s picture, the woman that is assumed to be the hostess is standing up and reaching for a dish. It can be assumed that she is either serving a guest or is beginning to clear the table. These are both important roles of the ideal hostess. In the photograph of the modern dinner party, all the guests are sitting and are passing plates and serving themselves. This directly contradicts the proper etiquette of either plating the meals separately, having the hostess serve each guest, or the formal tradition of having a footman serve the guests. This not only demonstrates a shift in the etiquette of the dinner party, but also a shift in the role of women in modern society. No longer is the woman of the house expected to be the perfect ideal hostess that is in charge of every aspect of the party, but is now an actual member of the party and can enjoy the company of her guests. All of these differences point to the fact that American dinner parties have transformed from an elegant formal affair, to a casual gathering of friends.

American dinner parties are facing another attack on a different front. Many Americans are choosing to go out to a restaurant for meals with friends and family rather than host guests at their house. In the survey, participants were asked “When you gather with friends, are you more likely to: a) go to a bar or restaurant, b) attend someone's home for a homemade meal or c) other. Only about 30% said that they go to a person's home; 60% said that they would rather meet at a restaurant or bar. Another interesting fact about these results from this question is that the majority of people who responded with the answer a) they would prefer to go to a restaurant or bar, are under the age of 35. When asked why they chose this answer, most stated that it was easier than having to prepare a meal and clean their house for guests. Some also said that in the fast paced world, it is easier to incorporate everyone's busy schedule to meet at a restaurant. As mentioned earlier, Guy Trebay mentions this factor as to part of the reason dinner

parties are becoming endangered saying, “Increasingly, such gatherings seem outmoded, squeezed out by overcrowded schedules, the phony urgency of affinity sites, restaurants cultism and overall tectonic shifts in how Americans congregate.”<sup>39</sup> People of the older generation who stated that they would rather go to a person's home explained that they preferred the comforts and relaxed feel of being in a home. They also expressed that it was easier to have conversations in a home setting. This indicates that not only is the shift away from the formal dinner party is related to a change in accepted etiquette, but also is related to generational differences. This idea of the shift in dining being influenced by age and generation would make an interesting course of extended research. Also, examining how class and social status play a role in dinner parties, both historically and today, would be a fascinating study of American culture. Looking through an ethnographic lens and studying the American culture, as it is being lived out in today's society has exposed this shift in the dining habits.

All in all, it is clear that a movement away from the old-fashioned and formal has occurred in American dining, especially in regards to dinner parties. Through time, the face of these parties have evolved from the rigid extravagance of the social soiree in the 1800s, to the high societal expectations of the mid 1900 dinner party, to the casual and informal gathering that is the modern dinner party. Even though the rules of etiquette and social pressures have dissipated over time, the tradition of gathering friends and family together and enjoying each other's company has not changed. This element of community will likely remain a facet of American life for years to come.

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<sup>38</sup> Guy Trebay, “Guess Who Isn't Coming to Dinner: Saving the Endangered Dinner Party,” *New York Times*, November 29, 2012, New York edition, sec. E

<sup>39</sup> Guy Trebay, “Guess Who Isn't Coming to Dinner: Saving the Endangered Dinner Party,” *New York Times*, November 29, 2012, New York edition, sec. E

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## Appendix

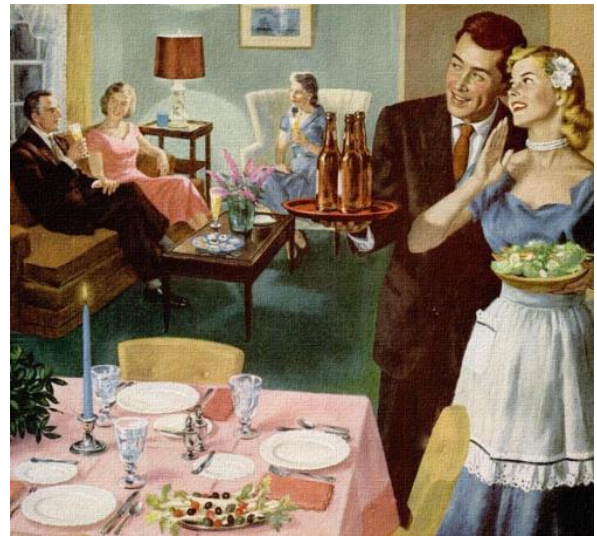


FIG. 1. 'The Bride's First Dinner Party', artwork by Ray Prohaska. 1952.



FIG. 2.  
[http://amberreunion.blogspot.com/2012\\_03\\_01\\_archive.html](http://amberreunion.blogspot.com/2012_03_01_archive.html)



FIG. 3. [www.punchbowl.com](http://www.punchbowl.com)