Mystery Dinner Instructions:

A favorite family tradition in my family is having a “Mystery Dinner”. There is a theme of some kind – Halloween, Valentines Day, Birthday, etc. This is often also called a Mixed-Up Dinner. There are multiple variations.

Invitations are sent ahead of time to increase the anticipation and excitement. Sometimes with the ahead of time preparation, there might be brown bagged food in the fridge that is “off limits” to peeking. In our home, a sheet was taped up between the kitchen and dining room so that we couldn’t see into the kitchen and it was set up earlier in the day to give time for preparation and we were instructed to stay out. Sometimes coming dressed for the theme was also encouraged (red at Valentines, orange and black for Halloween, etc). The idea is to look forward to the family dinner and have a little less traditional meal together and a surprise to look forward to. In our home, one parent prepared and served and the other parent sat with the kids (and now adult kids) during the meal and participated fully with a menu of their own. A few decorations like a tablecloth or themed paper products can be added – and the clean up is a breeze too!

Alter the general idea to meet your family ages and needs.

We start with family members being seated and each person receiving a menu and pencil. Everyone is instructed to put their name on the outside and numbers on the inside items in any random way they choose. Each item should be completed with a number (no blanks). This determines the order they receive their items. Make sure to take the writing utensils after the menus are complete so there are no changes once the family starts to figure out which code words equal which items. We had the dinner with utensils and beverages coming randomly with everything else – depending on your preferences you may choose these items to be received first (but usually all ages of people enjoy the challenge and gamble of not knowing when they’re coming). Menu items are chosen based on funny things that have to be eaten without utensils (jello and whipped cream, spaghetti, etc). We also had times when some younger family members received utensils with items needed per their age.
Each item is served one at a time in order of that person’s menu. Sometimes dessert might come first (again, sometimes per age of child, this can be altered in the kitchen as needed). The item must be finished or put in the middle (for anyone to take) before the next item is received (ie: you cannot keep a dessert on the side waiting for a spoon, if you don’t want to eat the dessert you put it in the middle and anyone around the table can take it). When someone finishes their current menu item and is ready for the next one they send their Menu back to the kitchen with the server. Their next item and menu come back to them – one item at a time. Once a person receives their utensil(s)/beverage they keep them for the remainder of the meal.

Kitchen help: Servers have a key menu in the kitchen and X out each of the items on the individual menus as they are served (that way when the menu comes back to the kitchen the kitchen help knows which one to send out next).

Be creative, make it fit your family, and send me your ideas and pictures to add to my ideas!

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Remember a few benefits of family meals:

- **Nutrition** – healthier dietary patterns
- **Emotional Wellbeing** – promotes self-esteem and is healthy for family relationships
- **Healthy Behaviors** – children may be less likely to engage in risk taking behaviors (like substance use) and may be more likely to have friends who do not engage in risk taking behaviors

*Benefits of Family Mealtime* by Cindy Nelson and Makendra Goff, to read more including tips to increase family meals visit: [https://tinyurl.com/3j7earem](https://tinyurl.com/3j7earem)
Menu Key for Kitchen

_____ SPIDER WEB (NAPKIN)
_____ MOSTLY GHOSTLY (DRINK)
_____ PUMPKIN FINGERS (CARROT STICKS)
_____ TRICK OR TREAT (MAIN DISH)
_____ BAT EYEBALLS (OLIVES)
_____ WITCHES BREW (JELLO/WHIPPED CREAM OR ICE CREAM, DESSERT THAT IS FUNNY WITHOUT UTENSILS)
_____ HAUNTED HOUSE (SPOON)
_____ BOO TO YOU (SMALL BAG FILLED WITH SMALL ITEMS OF SOME KIND)
Cut out each and use a construction paper to make traditional folded menu

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**NAME:** _____________________________

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**MENU**

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- SPIDER WEB
- MOSTLY GHOSTLY
- PUMPKIN FINGERS
- TRICK OR TREAT
- BAT EYEBALLS
- WITCHES BREW
- HAUNTED HOUSE
- BOO TO YOU