

## BROCK'S BANTER: Sex, religion and politics

By Brock Weir

Dark chocolate with quinoa and hemp hearts.

I was braced for the worst, but this was pretty mild from what I had been expecting.

This Easter, as we all know, was unusual in that it fell on April Fool's Day.

As such, not only was I braced for the worst, I expected the worst. There seemed to be infinite possibilities on how this day might go awry.

These possibilities ranged from the benign, like unwrapping colourful egg-shaped foil only to discover an array of red and green grapes underneath the surface, to well, to the more macabre, like coming downstairs on Easter Morning and finding an Alex Forrest-inspired treat bubbling away on the stove.

Perhaps given what's going on in the world right now, people thought April Fool's jokes would be relatively pointless, almost anticlimactic. After all, isn't there a sense right now of living in a time where very few things are actually out of the ordinary? Anyway, if you expect the worst, chances are you're rarely let down.

Although I admit to being slightly disappointed that nobody tried to prank me, or ladle out a stew that just wasn't suited for the occasion, I was, however, heartened that the Easter Bunny decided to hop right up to the prank line by going full-on hipster and delivering the aforementioned dark chocolate with quinoa and hemp hearts treat.

After looking up exactly what a hemp heart was ? after all, it didn't look anything like an artichoke heart or heart of romaine ? and getting assurances that it is indeed something you eat rather than smoke, it actually turned out pretty good.

Score One for the Easter Bunny.

After a few squares had been consumed, it was time for the traditional family gathering.

You all know the score: these occasions, regardless of the family you actually belong to, go one of two ways: a warm and lovely family reunion, or a veritable melee that, somewhere along the way, goes spectacularly off the rails.

I wasn't sure what to expect this time around.

A few weeks ago, I was at a dinner party for five. Admittedly, it was an unusually odd number for a dinner party, but it seemed to work. Conversation seemed to flow like wine ? as did the wine itself. Within just an hour, we had covered topics ranging from the upcoming Provincial Election, the ongoing debate over the Progressive Conservatives' plans for sex-ed reform, philosophical fires stoked by Toronto academics over the use of preferred pronouns, and the revival of the religious right.

In short, a lot of bases were covered.

?Wow,? said one of the guests at around the 90 minute mark. ?We've already covered sex, religion and politics. Now what??

Up until very recently, the old etiquette staple was that these were the three topics that were simply not to be covered in what was described as ?polite? conversation.

A prime example of this is in the classic ?My Fair Lady? when Professor Higgins takes Eliza Doolittle to Ascot to ?try her out? after a crash course not only in etiquette, but elocution.

Brainstorming possible topics of conversation before the main event, Higgins advises her of the path forward: ?The weather and everybody's health.?

Of course, this newfangled ?small talk? doesn't necessarily go as planned, but it serves the purpose.

The dinner party I attended last month proved that discussing sex, religion and politics can indeed be discussed in relatively polite company, leading not to screaming matches, storms around the room, tossed food, a drink in the face, or flounces out the door.

The same held true for my family's Easter Dinner on Sunday night.

As tradition dictates, our family gathering was once again hosted by my aunt and cousin at their home in the southernmost tip of what has colloquially become known, for better or worse, as the heart of Ford Nation.

Back when such a term was first coined, Rob was at his zenith as a politician and provided no shortage of heated dinner table fodder at the time. Now that it was a colloquialism that is very much at the forefront of our minds once again, I was more than curious as to whether dinner table conversation could once again withstand the topics of sex, religion and politics.

Thankfully, not only did it withstand that heady trifecta, but it conspired to create an enlightening atmosphere where political views had evolved and contrary opinions and different perspectives were almost as tantalizing as the food on the table.

Both Easter Dinner and last month's dinner party were almost balms for this particular writer's soul.

Not too long ago, I was zeroing in on despair observing ? but not often participating in ? some of the threads of public discourse

making themselves known online.

We all know about fake news, the ill-informed people who seem to have made it their calling to disseminate the good word, the manufactured bots ? or bots-for-hire ? designed solely to spread misinformation, but there seems to be a growing trend of people simply wanting to shut off all dissenting voices.

A handful of friends, for example, recently published near-manifestos on just what constituted a proper reply to anything they happened to post on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. Although there were a number of points from each individual, it all boiled down to these essentials: 'Only reply to a post if you happen to agree with an opinion. All others will be banned.' 'A Facebook wall is a 'curated' page. Navigate at your own risk.' And, although it wasn't explicitly stated, 'Don't interrupt my echo chamber.' These are mindsets I am seeing with greater and greater frequency as the weeks and months roll on, so these past two experiences were unexpectedly refreshing.

Perhaps this hive mind mentality is limited to social media, but I found it encouraging that, at least in person, these conversations actually provided valuable and informed discourse. It might have led to changed opinions ? it might not ? but these conversations were had.

And that's the important thing.

It left me with a feeling of hope ? but tempered with hope as well that this was not a simple April Fool's prank.

If so, I'd gladly trade my chocolate-covered quinoa and hemp hearts for more conversation.