

UWC North York May 2026 Grace Morgan Dinner Speaker

John Ota, *The Dining Room*

Good lighting be it sunlight, chandeliers, candelabras, candlesticks, oil lamps, electric, bright or dim, is key for a dining room to be distinctive whether it's ostentatious or modest, historic or current, said John, author of *The Dining Room* (Penguin Random House Canada, March 2026.) He has architecture degrees from several universities and worked in architecture and design for many years in New York, Toronto, and Vancouver, and with the Ontario Ministry of Culture. He previously spoke to us about his 2020 book *The Kitchen*.

The Dining Room gives his impressions of the dining rooms of a dozen famous people, including Jackie Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., Mexican artist Frida Kahlo, Frank Sinatra, *Anne of Green Gables* author Lucy Maud Montgomery, supplemented with anecdotes and recipes he garnered, then cooked himself. He also went to Highclere Castle in England, the historic vast estate that was the setting for the TV series *Downton Abbey*. "I saw that the series duplicated the dining room perfectly, including having, as Highclere does, a portrait of King Charles 1 on horseback.

The catalyst for the book was a special dinner party he did for his wife Frances Rowe some years ago to celebrate her survival from a severe stroke. "The food, ambience, tableware, glassware, were representative of historic dining rooms. I got yellow and gold wallpaper similar to that in *Downton Abbey's* dining room and replicated Japanese gold-coloured dining room screens by fashioning my own out of wood and covering it in gold fabric.

"Delicate shades of yellow and gold enhance candlelight; brighter shades provide a glow. Mexican artist Frida Kahlo's dining room and kitchen floors are painted a sunny yellow. Jackie Kennedy had gold faux wicker chairs, and gold-rimmed plates for the glamorous May 11, 1962 state dinner she organized in honour of visiting French cultural affairs minister André Malraux."

Dining rooms are more than a place to eat, John noted. "Throughout history they've been used to convey wealth and status. Diplomacy is another objective. Jackie Kennedy used her elegant dinner for Malraux to persuade him to send the Mona Lisa on exhibit to America. Frida Kahlo's dining room was part of her strategy to spotlight 'the best of Mexico' in food, culture, and heritage. Martin Luther King's childhood home's dining room had tall windows that sunlight poured through. This was where as a young boy racism was explained to him by his mother and she told him, 'You're as good as anyone.' Lucy Maud Montgomery's dining room had beige wallpaper which gave a welcoming ambience and was beautifully lit with oil lamps which created dramatic shadows and reflections."

There were lots of rules of conduct. France – platters of food at the centre, ends and sides, help yourself. Russia – footmen carried around multiple courses from which each person helped themselves; Victorian England – "Side by side male-female seating. First course: hostess spoke to the man to her right followed by the other women doing the same; second, to the left; third-right again and so on, alternating.

"Some say the dining room now is dead; I say it's been redesigned, as open concept linked to the kitchen and living room, and is better than ever."

Susan Goldenberg