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SERVING IN STYLE

The tables we set reflect our rich dining traditions
BY KIT BERNARDI

To entertain is to open the doors to your home and heart. From elegant dinners and cocktail parties to pizza nights and backyard barbecues, get-togethers with family and friends create strong connections and memories that nurture us through our lives.

Acclaimed James Beard Award-winning chefs, top tastemakers and event planners from across the U.S. offer their advice on how to get your next dinner party or at-home affair started.

FORGE CONNECTION THROUGH FOOD

“Cooking is more than creating a meal. It’s storytelling, a way to connect people to traditions and history,” says Serigne Mbaye, chef and owner of Dakar NOLA in New Orleans. His Senegalese pescatarian tasting menu restaurant, which he co-owns with partner Effie Richardson, won the 2024 James Beard Award for Best New Restaurant.

Mbaye says that the seven-course tasting menu is “both a history lesson and (a) celebration of cultural fusion.” The bold-flavored cuisine reflects the intertwined histories of Senegal and New Orleans by drawing on shared culinary traditions, ingredients and cultural influences tracing back to the transatlantic connections formed during the

African diaspora.

Slow-cooking stews in cast-iron pots emphasizes their rich, layered flavors. Charcoal grilling meats and fish infuses the smoky tastes of Senegalese culture’s traditional open-flame cooking methods. In keeping with West African dining culture, Dakar NOLA serves some courses family-style. Dishware and serving pieces were designed for Dakar Nola by Potsalot Pottery, an artisan pottery studio-shop located next door to the restaurant.

When entertaining at home, Mbaye recommends serving guests family-style using artisanal vessels because it encourages guest interaction and provides opportunities to talk about the shared meal’s history and cultural significance.



Do-it-yourself sangria bar



TRY TEXTURE AND TRENDS

“Like natural landscapes, beautiful table settings composed of multiple textures, patterns, shapes and colors reflect the season and make dining experiences feel more organic, relaxed and current,” says Desirée Adams, owner of Verve Event Co. in Rochester, N.Y., which designs weddings in Upstate New York as well as destination weddings.

To create visually interesting table settings that always incorporate surprising decorative elements, Adams starts with a patterned tablecloth, such as a toile or lace. Grouping candles of various heights adds dimension and breaks up visual lines of sight. Instead of napkin rings, she suggests using ribbons and making guests feel extra special with personal notes written on their place cards. Sculptural floral arrangements and etched glassware elevate the table’s artistry.

GET INSPIRED BY CULTURE

Chefs Lois Ellen Frank and Walter Whitewater, collaborate at Santa Fe, N.M.-based Red Mesa Cuisine, a catering company that serves Indigenous cuisine and provides cultural education. They produce private parties and special events held nationwide and internationally.

“For special occasions, the dining table could be decorated with Navajo rugs, woven baskets and natural items important in the region’s Native American culture, such as dried corn, squash, sun-



Interior of restaurant Dakar NOLA

flowers, and branches of juniper, cedar bush or pine,” says Whitewater, a member of the Diné (Navajo) Nation.

“We have served food straight from the oven to table in black micaceous clay pots and casserole clay dishes, on wooden planks and atop stone surfaces,” Frank says.

ENTERTAIN WITH EASE

Menu choices help ensure that you spend more time with your guests, instead of the kitchen.

“Make food that is not too technical or finicky, and can be partially or completely prepared in advance,” says Brody Olive, executive chef of Voyagers Restaurant at Perdido Beach Resort in Orange Beach, Ala. >



A wedding reception designed by Verve Event Co.

Olive says that some fish dishes and no-bake desserts deliver great flavor with little fuss. Try a traditional Gulf Coast favorite: single-pot shrimp and crawfish boils. For breakfast, Olive cooks crab-meat-bacon frittata. Pairing seafood with champagne “checks all the boxes,” he says.

“When entertaining at home, I lean on custard-based desserts like crème brûlée, flan or key lime pie because, unlike baking, these are relatively easy to construct with minimal ingredients, and I can let the refrigerator do most of the work,” Olive says.

PLATE UP MEMORIES

Fond memories of her large Irish family’s themed dinners served on her grandmother’s fine china inspired James Beard Award-nominated chef Kate Williams when she designed The Lady of the House, her restaurant in Detroit.

Williams serves guests on silver serving pieces, antique cake stands, her heirloom dishware and china donated by restaurant patrons.

If guests are arriving at different times, “Serve a varie-

ty of visually appealing, cold and room temperature foods, like quiche, salads and fruit, that can sit out and not diminish in quality,” Williams says.

A beautiful, thoughtfully set kids’ table invites younger guests to partake in family dining traditions. “Whenever friends and family dine together, they celebrate their shared stories and make more memories passed down for generations, just like heirloom china,” she says.

CREATE A CRAFT COCKTAIL BAR

Palm Springs, Calif.-based influencer Kelly Lee of Kelly-Golightly.com recommends setting up serve-yourself drink stations atop credenzas and bar carts, so you are free from bartending to mingle with guests. Framed mirrors used as trays, chrome ice buckets and svelte martini glasses filled with olives and citrus outfit her stylish bars.

“To quickly get guests beverages in-hand, I pre-make cocktails, like sangria or paloma, and mocktails, such as nojitos, which are nonalcoholic mojitos,” Lee says. ■



Le Creuset Flamme Dorée enameled cast-iron cookware

Essentials We Love for Cooking and Entertaining

Every home cook can use a cast-iron skillet and Dutch oven, versatile tools that radiate heat to cook foods evenly. From roasting meat to baking bread, use cast-iron cookware on the stovetop, in the oven and over an open fire. Seasoned cast-iron cookware does not chip, is nonstick when seasoned, cleans easily and lasts for generations. Time-tested brands are **Lodge** and **Camp Chef**. **The Oyster Bed** makes products of metal alloy that withstand temperatures up to 1,000 degrees, perfect for baking, grilling and serving cold foods.

Vessels that easily go from oven to table holding food’s heat can also make beautiful centerpieces. **Le Creuset** enameled cast-iron cookware is made in France and comes in more than 200 colors. Celebrating its 100th anniversary this year, the company just released limited-edition color Flamme Dorée, which translates to “golden flame.” Le Creuset recently introduced the Alpine Outdoor Collection, a matte black enamel cookware specifically designed for open-flame cooking. The brand also makes kitchen tools, stoneware dishware and serving pieces.

Cooking vessels of sculptural shapes and various colors lend themselves to multiple purposes for entertaining. Depending upon the size, they can double as beverage coolers, punch bowls or flower vases. **MacKenzie-Childs**, known for whimsical checkered, hand-painted dinnerware, introduced the neutral Mocha Check pattern collection this year to celebrate 2025 Pantone color of the year Mocha Mousse. Another favorite brand for tabletop pops of color and pattern in dishware and textiles is Finnish design house **Marimekko**.

— Kit Bernardi



Lady of the House restaurant

FEATURED CONTRIBUTORS



JENNIFER BRADLEY FRANKLIN is an Atlanta-based journalist and author whose work appears in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Travel + Leisure*, *Condé Nast Traveler* and others. She loves writing about people who are making the world a better (and more beautiful) place, so interviewing Drew and Jonathan Scott for a feature (**PAGE 44**) was a pleasure. “Even though I’ve watched *Property Brothers* over the years, hearing more about how they got their start in television was inspiring,” she says.



MATT ALDERTON is a Chicago-based freelance writer who regularly reports on architecture and design. His work has been published by *USA TODAY*, *The Washington Post*, *AARP* and the International Interior Design Association, among others. Writing his feature stories focusing on sustainable design (**PAGE 56**) and multigenerational living (**PAGE 54**) taught him an important lesson: “Your home shouldn’t just look good; it should feel good, too,” he says.



DEANNA TAYLOR is a criminal defense attorney turned journalist, author and editor who hails from Charlotte, N.C. Her work has appeared in publications such as *Essence*, *EBONY*, *Condé Nast Traveler* and *The Charlotte Observer*. For this issue, she wrote an essay about inheriting her late mother’s home (**PAGE 50**). “Taking over, renovating and now living in my mother’s home has truly been the therapy I didn’t know I needed,” she says.



KIT BERNARDI is a Chicago-based journalist and photographer who regularly covers travel, food, art, architecture and design worldwide. She has written for numerous outlets including *USA TODAY*, *Garden & Gun*, *AARP* and the Guggenheim Museum and foundation website. In this issue, she interviewed award-winning chefs and top tastemakers who offered advice on how to entertain at home with ease and personal style (**PAGE 30**).



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