



Time to (Really) Set The Table

HISTORY RE-PLATING ITSELF
A table setting inspired by Elizabeth Taylor's 1976 trip to Iran, by the event designers Candice & Alison. Flatware, \$455 for 80-piece set, neimanmarcus.com; Tablecloth, \$90, zarahome.com; Candle Holder, from \$20, Pier 1, 800-245-4595.

The rise of 'culinary happenings'—parties that push tabletop design to a new level—offers lessons anyone can use to dine more divinely

BY JULIE BAUMGARDNER

IN 1600, THE WEDDING of Marie de Medici and Henry IV, the king of France, became the stuff of legend—and not simply because the epic banquet encompassed 50 courses.

The real surprise came when the nearly 300 guests in attendance picked up their napkins and, in each case, a songbird flew out from beneath the folds.

Centuries later, the idea of unleashing starlings and swallows on your dinner guests may sound like cruel and unusual

punishment (or at least an invitation to a lawsuit), but the instinct to charm your friends with a dramatic table setting is still just as strong. And if you're still relying on your standard strategies—a vase of African daisies, a scattering of votive candles—it may be time to up your game. Recent years have seen the emergence of a trend toward high-profile, promotional events in which dinner is given a contemporary-art twist—dubbed "culinary happenings"—which have redefined the very idea of a table setting and can inspire anyone to rethink his or her entertaining routine.

Admittedly, some of the tricks of this new trade are rather extreme. To add an element of drama to a Parisian dinner for Hermès in 2012, managing director Pierre-Alexandre Dumas gave attendees small hammers to break open one of the dishes: a pot-au-feu encased in a brick of hard clay. At the Brooklyn Museum's annual Artist's Ball last year, 16 artists were asked to create interactive tabletops. In one, conceptual prankster Nina Katchadourian had her table guests twist napkins into a variety of Flemish Renaissance millinery styles. All one

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DESIGN & DECORATING

PRIDE OF PLACE-SETTING

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needed was a white napkin, a sense of humor and a mood board of Jan Van Eyck paintings for inspiration.

These sorts of dinners—featuring table settings that upend notions of what's expected of a guest—create “more opportunities to think beyond the visual and communicate with our senses,” said artist and designer Emilie Baltz, a leader in conceptually driven dining. In her “Traces” series at Hotel Particulier last year for New York's Armory Art Show, she eliminated all the décor, plates and utensils: Chefs walked on an otherwise empty plank-wood table and served “dinner”—an abstract sculpture made from ribbons of beets, with a choice of radicchio beds or rolled arancini—which was then eaten by hand. “In a world that's flat in screens, we need these sensory landscapes,” said Ms. Baltz.

A sense of humor is at the heart of these radical rethinks of the traditional table setting. “Times have been tough, and we're all looking for reprieve,” said Toronto-based Colette Van Den Thillart, who as British dec-

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orator Nicky Haslam's right-hand-designer since 2003, has created tabletops for Cartier, the Windsor Polo Club and London's National Gallery. “I'm seeing that the pendulum is swinging to more layering, more complexity, more joy, more whimsicality.”

Creating a tabletop is “an aspect of design that's fun and approachable for everyone,” said Shauna Levy, president of Design Exchange, a Toronto museum that this week opened “Dinner by Design,” an exhibition for which 11 Canadian designers of all disciplines have filled the museum's home, the historic Trading Floor Hall in the former Toronto Stock Exchange, with table-setting installations.

Candice Chan and Alison Slight, the Canadian event designers who go by Candice & Alison, took inspiration for their Design Exchange table from Truman Capote's 1966 “Black and White Ball” in Manhattan—specifically the socialite guests that Mr. Capote dubbed “swans,” from Babe Paley to Gloria Guinness. “Each chair has an identity,” said Ms. Slight, “and there will be a scroll that'll tell her story.”

Ms. Van Den Thillart, another participant in the exhibition, often channels her current obsessions when creating a setting that has a big wow factor. For one arrangement (see below), she drew on the witty mid-cen-



TABLE MANNERISTS From top: an installation by Sarah Richardson at Toronto's Design Exchange; a leafy setting at Spazio Pontaccio in Milan.

screwdrivers, palette knives and wrenches for a whimsical take on standard cutlery.

While your mother-in-law may react poorly to the prospect of eating linguine Alfredo with a pair of needle nose pliers, using décor the “wrong” way is the sort of move even the faint of heart can do at home, suggested Diana Perrin, co-founder of tabletop design firm Casa de Perrin, in Los Angeles. “Repurposing things in ways that they aren't meant to be used can add depth to a table,” she said—for example, serving an amuse-bouche in a Champagne coupe or a dessert course on a charger. “A tiny molten lava cake with all that space around it can be really dramatic,” she said.

Incorporating elements of nature into your setting also adds theatricality without devolving into gimmickry. Alberto Pellini and Eleonora Negri, owners of Milanese design hub Spazio Pontaccio, staged a 50-person dinner during their city's annual design fair last April that doubled as a sly marketing tool: Each piece of table-top décor was an exclusive product the pair were set to release—geometric-patterned plates from La Directeur designer Federico Pepe, gold cutlery by industrial designer Alessandro Zambelli and crystal barware by young British design talent Lee Broom. But it was the large, waxy leaves the duo used as place mats that delighted their diners most. One can easily replicate this trick at home with either banana or lotus leaves, both readily found online.

“Nature is so varied,” said Robin Standefer of New York team Roman and Williams, the designers responsible for the interiors of the Ace Hotel New York and the Standard New York—and some renowned dinner parties. “It's an endless source for a table of excitement that works in any country, any city, any climate.” Ms. Standefer and her partner, Stephen Alesch, say they get many of their table-setting ideas from their natural surroundings. “Go get a branch from outside,” said Mr. Alesch. “Get leaves from a tree. When you're at the beach, get a stack of beach rocks. Stick the clam shells all around the table.”

The one thing to watch out for is overindulgence. “Be disciplined,” cautioned Mr. Alesch. “You can't throw everything you love into a pile.” And keep it lighthearted. “There's nothing like a wonderful dinner party to make you feel happy,” said Ms. Van Den Thillart. “And if you do a table that's a little irreverent and whimsical, it sets the mood. You're saying, ‘Let's go for it.’”

tury American furniture designer John Dickinson, conceptual artist Daniel Arsham, Surrealism and the color white. (“Picasso said it was the most intellectual of all colors,” she said.)

While it can help to have a concept when masterminding your table setting, it needn't be as multilayered as Ms. Van Den Thillart's. For the “One Night in Tehran” setting that Candice & Alison created for the cover of this week's *Off Duty* (see D1), the designers started with images of Elizabeth Taylor's 1976 voyage to Iran. The result: a mélange of Middle Eastern-inspired textiles, lattice-patterned dinnerware and an array of fresh calla lilies presented in vessels of different shapes and sizes, instead of clustered more predictably in one central vase.

Creating a conversation-starting place setting can be a cure for the too-many-iPhones-at-the-table conundrum. That approach fuels Francesca Sarti, a Milan-based food



designer who concocts inventive culinary experiences for design brands, such as J. Hill, and art spaces like the Serpentine Gallery in London. “Using a different sort of

tool is an opportunity to create a playground,” said Ms. Sarti, whose firm, Arabeschi di Latte, once staged a dinner in Milan for an Italian hardware manufacturer, using

BROWN-, GOLD- AND WHITE-PLATE SPECIALS

You don't need an art degree to add a note of whimsy, drama or—why not?—vegetation to place settings. We asked these designers to show you how



A Winter Still Life

To outfit this winter-friendly table setting, Robin Standefer and Stephen Alesch, founders of the New York studio Roman and Williams, piled on edible decorations such as cabbages, radicchio, kale and artichokes, which will keep even after it's dried. “I love that it's somewhat maximalist,” said Ms. Standefer, “like a Dutch still life.”

The pair often sources elements from nature, using pods or teasel roots instead of napkin rings. For a simpler way to extend the organic theme, the duo recommended a charger in egg-

plant or black tones and linens in deep browns or earthy grays.

For the dinner plate here, they opted for a one-of-a-kind patterned dish by one of their favorite artisans: the Japanese ceramic master Makoto Kagoshima. “[His work] is my platonian ideal of the Scandinavian-meets-American-folk-art plate,” said Ms. Standefer. “I love the juxtaposition—it's meticulously crafted but hardy as well.” And although you could put, say, a damask tablecloth beneath this setting, Ms. Standefer advises against it. “A beautiful gray

linen is gorgeous,” she said, as well as the tie-dyed one here.

Dinner Plate, \$44, Bowl, \$42, Decanter, \$149, and Napkin, \$160 for four, *il Buco Vita*, 917-946-3085; Makoto Kagoshima Plate, from \$140, *chariotsonfire.com*; Fork and knife, \$42 for set of six assorted pieces, *John Derian Company*, 212-677-3917; Spoon, from \$20, and Jar, from \$18, *Red Chair Antiques*, 518-828-1158; Glass, \$95, *Eskandar*, 212-533-4200; Audrey Louise Reynolds Tablecloth, \$495, *alrdeyeing.com*; Ted Muehling Candlesticks, from \$975, *E.R. Butler & Co.*, 212-925-3565

Baroque Minimalism

An elegant table setting needn't be fussy, said Diana Perrin, who co-founded the Los Angeles-based table-top styling company Casa de Perrin with her husband, Josh. Napkin rings, for example, aren't especially in vogue just now, she added, so if you crave a more minimalist setting like this one, edit them out.

But even if you keep it relatively simple, look for discreet ways to personalize each setting. Casa de Perrin's suggestion? Individual salt cellars. “We have thousands,” Ms. Perrin said. The sort of thing that your germaphobic friends will thank you for, they are also prettier than basic salt-and-pepper shakers, especially if filled with colored salts or handsomely wrapped mints.

And don't be afraid to hide splurge-worthy luxury items like the 24-karat-gold charger shown here beneath a plainer dinner plate. When you pick up the plates to change courses, guests will notice the mouth-blown glass and delicate, hand-etched patterning. “A product [created] with that much care makes a difference,” she said.

Her final rule: Don't mix-and-match everything. “If every single thing is different, it's overwhelming,” she said.

Charger, \$15, China Plates, from \$3 each, Flatware, \$2 per piece, Stemware, \$3 each, and Salt and Pepper Cellars, \$2 each, available for rent (minimum orders from \$1,000) at *casade-perrin.com*; Tablecloth, \$40 for 70- by 70-inch, *williams-sonoma.com*



White That Doesn't Say ‘Wedding’

It's not easy to do an all-white table setting, said Toronto designer Colette Van Den Thillart. “It can look very wedding-y.” But she likes to experiment, so for this rather snowy arrangement, Ms. Van Den Thillart combined unglazed porcelain chargers and a white dinner plate with a winky key-motif salad plate, a water goblet and wine glasses ringed with a band of gold. Instead of flowers, she subbed in botanically flamboyant silver-and-gold candlestick holders.

To extend the color scheme, Ms. Van Den Thillart added whitened fruit. “A florist can dip fruit in plaster,” she said. “You can also do it at home, but it depends on how crafty you are.”

So it doesn't skew too bridal, she recommends a colored table cloth like the one above: a moss-green “Shutter Stripe” cloth from the Random Harvest Collection by Nicky Haslam. Final flourish: a few moss-covered stones.

Charger, \$47 for six, *creative-hobbies.com*; Astier de Villatte Plate, \$75, *abchome.com*, and Saucer, \$72, *johnderian.com*; Gio Ponti Silverware, \$675 for five pieces, and Knife, \$80, from *Metropolis Modern*, *Istdibs.com*; Wine Glass, \$50, *michaelwainwright.com*; Baccarat Water Goblet, \$150, *Bergdorf Goodman*, 888-774-2424; NH Design Fabric, to the trade, *Claremont Furnishing*, 212-486-1252; Hervé van der Straeten Candlestick Holders, from \$2,400, *Maison Gerard*, 212-674-7611; Pears, \$275 each, *creelandgow.com*; Stones, from \$1 each, *Sprout Home*, 718-388-4440