

ENTERTAINING WITH STYLE

Dinner at the Concert

AN ELEGANT LAKEFRONT HOME
IN UPSTATE NEW YORK IS THE SETTING
FOR AN AFTERNOON OF
FINE MUSIC AND GOOD FOOD—
AND THE WHOLE TOWN IS INVITED



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ABOVE: With the chamber orchestra making music on her porch, Louise Robinson makes a pint with a coffee cup as her guests enjoy dessert. OPPOSITE: The delicious muffuletta sandwich, old-fashioned coleslaw and six-bean salad are a colorful and easy-to-prepare picnic supper. (Recipes begin on page 82.)



ABOVE RIGHT: Better than Carnegie Hall? Some of the musicians rehearse on the dock at Brook Farm. LEFT, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The Robinsons' daughter, Peggy Manning, settles in for the evening; chilled cucumber soup with garlic and mint is the refreshing first course; a homemade sign marks the way to the music; fresh blackberry pie is an ideal finale. (Recipes begin on page 82.)



STYLE NOTES

For this back-yard picnic, the Robinsons spread a big cotton tablecloth on the lawn. It's a bit more elegant than a blanket. For atmosphere, Louise places a few candle lanterns around the tablecloth and lights the candles as dusk settles in. They're much safer than candlesticks. And for a dash of color, she wraps the bottom of a bouquet of wildflowers in a damp paper towel and then aluminum foil and stands it in one cylinder of a rattan wine carrier.

"THIS PLACE IS TOO BEAUTIFUL not to share," Louise Robinson says, gazing out at a view of Skaneateles Lake shimmering in the sun against a backdrop of green hills. "We wouldn't want it all to ourselves." Dave, her husband, agrees: "It needs music and people. It needs the festival." The *it* he refers to is their 28-acre lakefront home, Brook Farm, in upstate New York.

So every August since 1980—when the Robinsons helped found the Skaneateles Festival, a month of concerts by musicians from all over the world—the

couple has given unique meaning to the notion of a home entertainment center.

"We set it up for the musicians to come with their families, stay with us and others in town, and have all their meals here," Louise says. "They can practice in the house or down by the lake. Their children have room to play and swim. And it seems to make for happy performers."

On Saturday nights Brook Farm also becomes an outdoor concert hall, with the festival's chamber orchestra performing on the broad porch of the hundred-year-old clapboard house in front of a thousand

music lovers sprawled on the rolling lawn. "I go full tilt all day Saturday," says Dave, a retired psychiatrist and the festival's stage manager. "It's chaos here. But it's also heavenly listening to the musicians rehearse. Louise and I met while singing in the choir at Penn State, and music has always been a big part of our lives."

He started his day by running around town to put up signs, returned to replace the porch furniture with 30 music stands and chairs, and is now off to his vast garden to harvest vegetables for dinner—the pre-concert meal for the musicians as



Host Dave Robinson savors the scenery, the music—and the sensational pie.

hours ahead of the evening's performance, as do Joan Christy, president of the festival's board of directors, and her husband, Tom Bersani. They all know there's much to be done before they can sit down to eat. "Can you lift?" Dave greets Tom, nodding toward the piano, which needs to be moved outdoors. "Did you bring extra plates?" Louise asks Peggy, an artist, who has them tucked into a picnic basket she wove. "This is festival frenzy. This is the highlight of our year," Peggy says, laughing as she sets up supper for the musicians.

Yet by early evening the Robinsons are dining alfresco as calmly as any of the hundreds of other picnickers who have literally blanketed the lawn. "It's so great to sit out here and eat and drink, so different from a stuffy concert hall," Tom says, pouring some wine. "And with food this good, you keep on eating," John groans, not refusing a second piece of the pie.

But as dusk falls, culinary pleasures are stilled by the magnificent sounds of the orchestra: flute solos more piercing than any birdsong, piano pieces of breathtaking precision and passion, and the greatness of Mozart—as big as the cosmos—filling the air beneath the stars.

"Wow, that was something!" Louise softly exclaims, as the audience breaks into a standing ovation. "It's wonderful," Dave agrees. "And to have something so beautiful here...well, it feels good to have helped make it happen."

well as the Robinsons' own picnic.

"I like to use what Dave grows and to match it with my recipe ideas. It makes me happy," Louise says. "I usually prepare one meal a day during the festival, and not necessarily every dish. Other people bring over the rest, and I supervise and supplement as needed." Louise grew up on a farm, accustomed to helping her mother prepare and preserve the harvest, and her eyes still light up at the sight of abundance as Dave carries in baskets of tomatoes, cucumbers, beans, peppers and herbs. Drawn into the kitchen by the aroma of fresh basil, violinist Michelle LaCourse comments, "Sometimes we musicians joke that we just come back for the food. We've got to be the best-fed festival orchestra."

"The performers are sophisticated about cuisine, so I wouldn't feel right serving them things that aren't a little cre-

ative," Louise says as she decides to showcase the cucumbers in a no-cook soup. "But I keep things fairly simple, too."

Demonstrating her garden-inspired style, she tosses handfuls of basil into the food processor to make a wonderfully piquant dressing for a thick *muffuletta*. "I modify this according to the vegetables we have," she notes of the sandwich. Similarly, green beans and wax beans go into a variation on three-bean salad designed on the spot to accommodate them. And just as fresh thyme brings elegance to the beans, so oregano distinguishes a crisp coleslaw.

The last of the season's blackberries mingle with warm memories. "My dad used to like to pick blackberries, and Mother would make a pie," the cook says. "I like to continue the family traditions."

The Robinsons' daughter and son-in-law, Peggy and John Manning, arrive

Dinner for Six

- Chilled Cucumber Soup
- Family-Style Muffuletta
- Old-fashioned Coleslaw
- Six-Bean Salad
- Chardonnay
- Fresh Blackberry Pie

Chilled Cucumber Soup

6 SERVINGS

- 6 cups chopped seeded peeled cucumbers (about 4 large)
- 2 cups plain yogurt

- 1 tablespoon honey
- ½ teaspoon minced garlic
- 3 tablespoons chopped fresh mint

Additional chopped fresh mint

Puree half of each of first 5 ingredients in blender until smooth. Transfer to bowl. Repeat with remaining half of same 5 ingredients. Season soup with salt and pepper. Cover and chill until cold. (Can be prepared 1 day ahead. Keep chilled.)

Ladle soup into bowls. Garnish with additional mint and serve.

Family-Style Muffuletta

A group-size version of an Italian cold-cut and olive-salad sandwich popularized in New Orleans. Uncork a Chardonnay.

6 SERVINGS

- 1 cup (packed) fresh basil leaves
- ½ cup olive oil
- ½ cup pitted Kalamata olives or other brine-cured black olives
- ¼ cup drained capers
- 1 tablespoon chopped garlic

- 1 round 2-pound loaf sourdough or French bread (about 10 inches in diameter)
- ¾ pound thinly sliced salami
- ¾ pound thinly sliced provolone cheese
- 2 7.25-ounce jars roasted red peppers, drained
- 1 large onion, thinly sliced
- 6 plum tomatoes, sliced

Blend first 5 ingredients in processor until basil and olives are finely chopped. Season dressing with salt and pepper. (Can be made 1 day ahead. Cover and chill.)

Cut bread horizontally in half. Pull or cut out enough interior bread to leave 1½-inch-thick shell. Spread half of dressing on cut side of bottom bread shell. Layer with half each of salami, cheese, peppers, onion and tomatoes. Repeat with remaining salami, cheese, peppers, onion and tomatoes. Spread remaining half of dressing on cut side of top bread shell; press onto filling. Wrap tightly in plastic; chill at least 1 hour. (Can be made 1 day ahead. Keep chilled.)

Place muffuletta on platter. Cut into wedges and serve.

ENTERTAINING WITH STYLE

Old-fashioned Coleslaw

6 TO 8 SERVINGS

- ½ cup white wine vinegar
- ½ cup sugar
- 4 teaspoons minced fresh oregano or 2 teaspoons dried
- 10 cups finely sliced green cabbage (about 1 medium head)
- 2 red bell peppers, diced
- 2 carrots, peeled, grated
- 2 celery stalks, chopped
- ¾ cup chopped red onion

Combine first 3 ingredients in large bowl; stir until sugar dissolves. Add cabbage, bell peppers, carrots, celery and onion and toss to combine. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Cover and refrigerate 4 hours, tossing occasionally. (Can be prepared 1 day ahead. Keep refrigerated. Drain before serving, if desired.)

Six-Bean Salad

6 TO 8 SERVINGS

- ½ pound green beans, trimmed, cut into 2-inch pieces
- ½ pound yellow wax beans, trimmed, cut into 2-inch pieces
- 1 small onion, coarsely chopped
- ½ cup red wine vinegar
- ½ cup olive oil
- 1 large garlic clove
- 3 tablespoons chopped fresh thyme or 3 teaspoons dried
- 1 15- to 16-ounce can black-eyed peas, rinsed, drained
- 1 15- to 16-ounce can Great Northern beans, rinsed, drained
- 1 15- to 16-ounce can kidney beans, rinsed, drained
- 1½ cups frozen baby lima beans, thawed

Chopped fresh parsley

Cook green and yellow beans in pot of boiling salted water until crisp-tender about 4 minutes. Drain. Rinse under cold water; drain again.

Combine onion, vinegar, oil and garlic in blender; puree until smooth. Pour into large bowl. Mix in thyme. Season dressing to taste with salt and pepper. Add black-eyed peas, Great Northern beans, kidney

beans and lima beans and toss to blend.

Mix green and yellow beans into salad. Cover and chill 4 hours, tossing occasionally. (Can be made 3 hours ahead. Keep refrigerated.) Sprinkle with parsley.

Fresh Blackberry Pie

6 SERVINGS

CRUST

- 2 cups unbleached all purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ¾ cup chilled solid vegetable shortening, cut into pieces
- ¼ cup (about) ice water

FILLING

- 1 cup plus 1 tablespoon sugar
- ¼ cup unbleached all purpose flour
- 4 ½-pint baskets blackberries (about 5¾ cups)
- 2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice

Whipped cream (optional)

FOR CRUST: Stir flour and salt in large bowl. Add shortening and rub in with fingertips until mixture resembles coarse meal. Using fork, gradually mix in enough water to bind dough together. Divide dough in half. Flatten each half into disk. Wrap in plastic and refrigerate until cold, at least 1 hour. (Can be prepared 1 day ahead. Keep refrigerated. Soften dough slightly at room temperature before rolling.)

FOR FILLING: Position rack in bottom third of oven and preheat to 425°F. Stir 1 cup sugar and flour in large bowl to blend. Add berries and lemon juice and toss gently to combine.

Roll out 1 dough disk on lightly floured surface to 11- to 12-inch round. Transfer to 9-inch-diameter pie dish. Spoon filling into crust. Roll out remaining dough disk to 11- to 12-inch round; place dough over filling. Press edges together to seal. Fold overhang under. Crimp edge decoratively. Using small sharp knife, cut several slits in top crust for steam to escape. Sprinkle top crust with remaining 1 tablespoon sugar.

Bake pie 15 minutes. Reduce oven temperature to 350°F. Bake pie until crust is golden, about 45 minutes longer. Serve pie warm or at room temperature with whipped cream, if desired. ❖