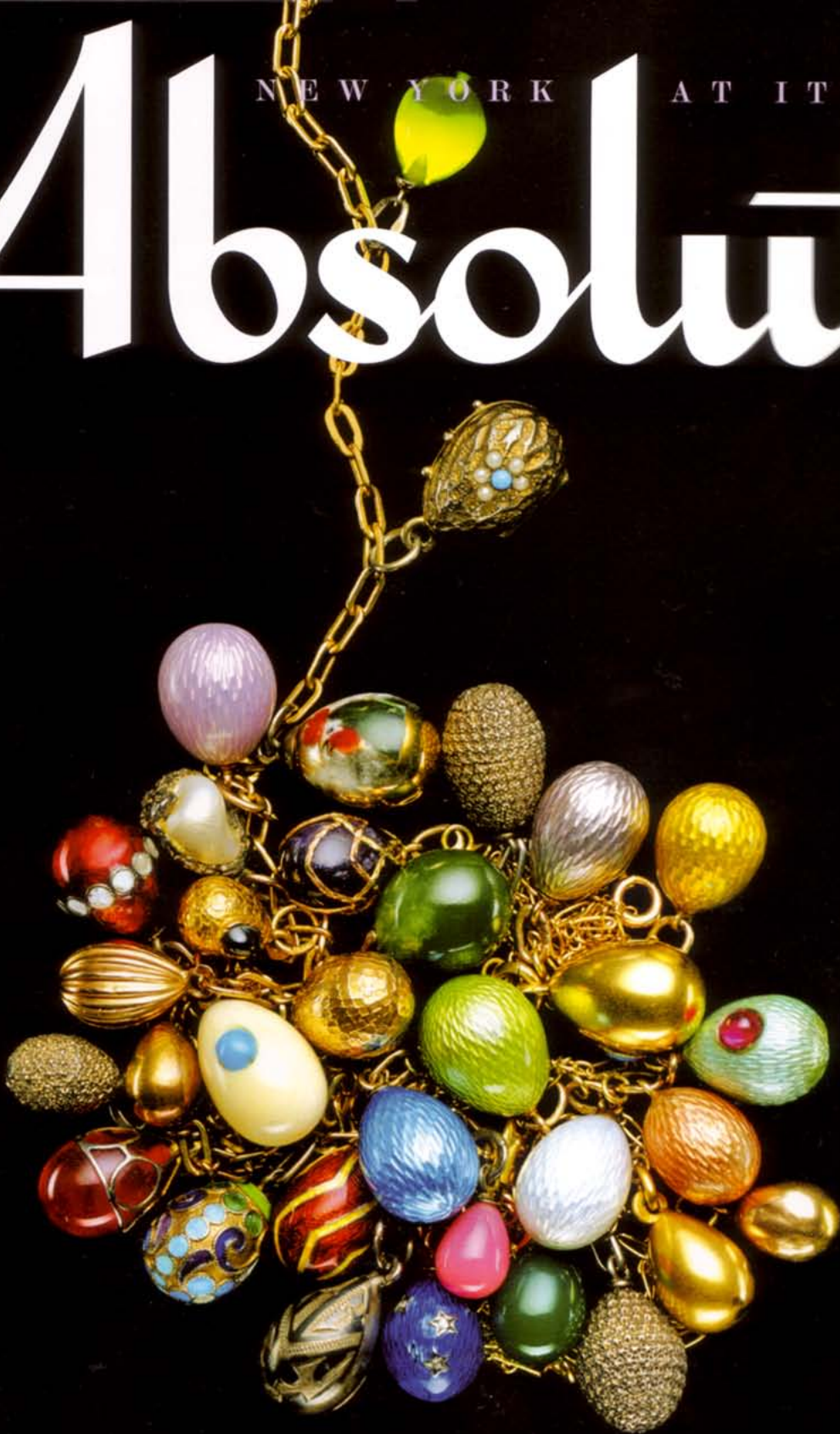


NUMBER 2. \$8.00

APRIL 2005.

NEW YORK AT ITS BEST

Absolute



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10 Top Caterers

New Yorkers known for their parties reveal who rules the kitchen when guests come to dinner.

Daniel Isengart

FANS Celerie Kemble, interior designer, and her fiancé, financier Boykin Curry. Isengart is the not so hidden force behind the dinners for 8 to 12 the couple often throws.

A NATURAL CHOICE Isengart “goes to the market and is inspired by whatever smells fabulous,” Kemble says. The menus, often finalized the day of the party, draw on regional European cooking. A Catalan dinner might start with salt-cod cakes and a Seville orange dip, followed by roasted baby leeks, then pork tenderloin with squash and a Serrano ham glaze.

POWERS OF ISENGART The chef knows that only a certain kind of client will go for his unusual flavors—and put up with a menu that remains half-baked until the day of the party. (“I will not cook for someone with no soul” is his mantra.) But for the right host the element of surprise is half the fun. As Kemble says, “We’ve never eaten the same thing twice.”

AND HE SINGS Isengart is a part-time cabaret crooner who’s been known to perform at Café Sabarsky in his off-hours. And, as Kemble puts it, “He looks like he should be in an Abercrombie ad.” As you’d expect, the couple encourages him not to stay in the kitchen all night.

718-522-1015; MAIL@ISENGART.INFO. FROM \$450 PER DAY PLUS FOOD EXPENSES.

Mama Duke’s Southern Cuisine

FANS Andrew Saffir, film producer, and Daniel Benedict, designer, hosts of breezy back-yard Hamptons fêtes.

YES, IT’S THAT COMBS Janice Combs, Puffy’s mom, serves up a hearty Southern buffet. Sweet-potato pie, grits, buttery corn bread, and “Puffy Shrimp” precede turkey meat loaf, catfish, mac ’n’ cheese, and Saffir’s favorite, fried chicken.

PARTY HEARTY For a bash last summer, Saffir says, “we didn’t want to go the typical tomatoes-and-mozzarella-and-rare-tuna route.” Instead they served a fried-chicken feast. “Guests were gorging on the creamed corn and corn bread. People were picking up the chicken with their hands and devouring it!” It’s not exactly bikini-friendly fare, but he swears that “every social X-ray there ate every last bite.”

243 FLATBUSH AVE., BROOKLYN. 718-857-8700. FROM \$15 PER PERSON FOR HORS D’OEUVRES AND \$30 PER PERSON FOR DINNER.

Bite

FAN Bronson van Wyck, event planner to P. Diddy, Gucci, and President Bush. “I had Bite do a relaxed buffet dinner for 66 on my terrace last summer, and then a 13-course tasting menu for 12 the next week.”

COOL CREDENTIALS Bite’s Scott Skey and Nick Hosea are alumni of Nobu, Caviar Russe, March, and Mesa Grill. “They can do mellow dining with their eyes closed,” van Wyck says, “but they really shine in intimate, highly choreographed events.”

GO WITH THE FLOW The fare may sound standard, but in Bite’s hands it’s far from ordinary. Risotto comes in tiny individual pots; sherry-poached salmon is wrapped in braised cabbage leaves. “Imagine a scene from *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover*,” van Wyck says—“in 3-D in your own home.” But the food is just as good sans drama. A rustic dinner for 12 is pure comfort: figs with prosciutto, slow-braised veal shank, and ganache bread pudding.

295 PACIFIC ST., BROOKLYN. 917-676-1320. FROM \$35 PER PERSON FOR HORS D’OEUVRES AND \$85 PER PERSON FOR DINNER.

Jon Tierney

FAN Designer Lela Rose, whose theme parties are as theatrical (tulle curtains and break-dancing drag queens) as her fashion shows. She often collaborates with Tierney on the food.

BEHIND THE SCENES An unusually flexible chef, Tierney is as willing to help the hostess execute her own vision as he is to create an event from scratch. “I’m a little bit of a control freak,” Rose admits. “I know exactly what I want, and he’s capable of doing anything”—including the last-minute grilling she was planning to do herself.

FEASTS IN ALL FLAVORS Tierney will accommodate any request, be it tapas for 20, decadent cocktails for 100, or haute French for 250. Typical passed hors d’oeuvres: wonton shrimp, goat-cheese quesadillas, and smoked salmon on wafers. He’s equally good with more exotic flavors—grilled pineapple with bourbon, brown sugar, and butter; or beef wrapped in swiss chard with wild mushrooms.

917-538-5511; JONTIERNEY1@EARTHLINK.NET. FROM \$45 PER PERSON FOR HORS D’OEUVRES AND \$75 PER PERSON FOR DINNER.

Gay Jordan Bespoke Food

FAN Interior designer Joanne de Guardiola and her banker husband, Roberto, hosts of poolside barbecues in Southampton and black-tie dinners in Manhattan.

A MODERN CLASSIC Jordan is an institution among Upper East Side hostesses who believe in the seductive power of a formal meal and flawless service. “I’ve used her for 20 years,” de Guardiola says. “It’s a triple-A company—the staff and the captains are all very well trained.” And, not incidentally, “her food’s excellent.”

ALL IN GOOD TASTE Jordan’s cooking often has an exotic twist, but the foundation is East Coast classic: from shrimp cocktail and chicken-