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FABULOUS FRANCINE

No one throws a dinner party quite like the 'Duchess of Stony Creek'

By LISA REISMAN • Photographs by Kim Tyler

From the rocky jut of Flying Point in Stony Creek you get the full sweep of the harbor. In the blue water lie pink granite islands, the famed Thimbles, and there's a panorama of boats. Ahead is Wheeler's Island, and nearby is "Cut In Two," now breached by the tides.

This glorious view is always with you when you visit Francine Farkas Sears—Branford's entertaining maven whose fêtes have graced the glossy pages of "Gourmet," "Bon Appetit" and the "New York Times Magazine."

We had moved to the boathouse where, sunk in a leather club chair, I watched sailboats glide past the islands while

mellow jazz filtered through the soft buzz of conversation and laughter. In the interest of full disclosure, I can tell you the wine was Pine Ridge Chenin Blanc, a perfect complement to the briny freshness of raw oysters—bedded in seaweed and served with a mignonette sauce of red-wine vinegar and finely chopped shallots.

It does not, as the cliché goes, get any better than this. Which is exactly how Farkas Sears planned it. To sum up her philosophy: Entertaining matters. Not only is our home a reflection of ourselves, it is a place to welcome, flatter and beguile our guests. "It should be a festivity, going to someone's home," Farkas Sears adds. "You want to treat people



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like it's a luxurious holiday for them."

Even if the elements don't cooperate, as happened the day I visited, when the winds picked up, the waters grew tempestuous, and a cold rain began to fall. All of which threatened an intimate boat tour around the storybook pink-granite Thimble Islands. What's a hostess to do? The unruffled Farkas Sears disappeared into her main house, re-emerging a few moments later with a bundle of waterproof jackets for her guests.

Impeccably clad in a slim-fitting BCBG pant suit, the gracious and self-assured Farkas Sears may look and act the part of society grande dame. What sets her apart is her imperturbable nature. As the former Wall Street stockbroker matter-of-factly put it: "At any event, something won't go as planned. There will be weather. So you find jackets. The electricity will fail. So you scare up some candles. Something will break or spill. So you clean it up. You just go on with the party. It's not a tea ceremony."

Which is not to say that Farkas Sears doesn't take entertaining seriously. "I love people, love bringing them together, planning ways to make them feel valued and important – as they are to me." Combine those ingredients, add a dash of ingenuity, and season with what close friend Agnès Vignery

of Branford terms an "exquisite culinary eye" and you have the recipe for a signature Farkas Sears event. Serves eight to 80, depending on circumstances. Allow for "oyster-opening friends," including Dick Howd and other Stony Creek volunteer firemen colleagues, who may pop by to help set up an authentic clambake on hot stones in the sand.

This decided aversion to rigid formality is something else that distinguishes Farkas Sears. She's always ready to improvise. Not long ago she decided to throw an impromptu lunch that day. Would I attend?

As it turned out, the lunch was a surprise for her staff – or "team," as she refers to them – as reward for their hard work. (When not entertaining, Farkas Sears is the CEO and founder of Fabrique, a manufacturer of designer computer luggage for women; in spite of its small group of employees, the company regularly outrivals competitors 100 times its size.) Making my way inside the house, I came upon Bart Mansi, owner of the popular Guilford Lobster Pound and, as I learned, a revered figure in the shoreline lobster community, grilling the crustaceans and basting them with what he related was Francine's basil sauce. Despite Farkas Sears' entreaties to stay, Mansi was compelled to head back to the Lobster Pound to stem the overflow of customers demanding





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his famous lobster rolls and chowder, but not before Francine carefully wrapped a bottle of Pine Ridge and pressed it into his hands. "For later," she told him.

As she glided around the kitchen, expertly slicing up green tomatoes grown by caretaker and gardener Mario Denardi and then frying them on her 12-burner stove, all the while fielding questions from business manager Marie Gordon and logistics coordinator Max Whalen on the intercom, Farkas Sears shared the wisdom gained from a lifetime of cooking. "Make the most out of what you have," she said in her well-modulated voice as she added sugar and lemon to a sauce for a peach-cobbler dessert while simultaneously reaching for a spatula with her other hand. This year, there was a surplus of tomatoes. Hence, fried green tomatoes.

"Invent on the fly," she said, as she added fresh mint

to the serving plate. "The mint beckoned to me from the garden on my way over from the office. Why not use it as a tasty garnish?" At that moment her eye alighted on a large cylinder of cheese. "Eureka," she said. "Pecorino Romano, for a few added slivers of zing."

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By which time her staff of six had assembled in the boathouse and, after enjoying the fried green tomatoes, retired to a deck behind the house for the meal. "It's all about creating an atmosphere so guests feel at ease," she said amid the leisurely conversation as we dug into the tender, sweet flesh of lobster. Unlike a restaurant or a business function, "it's personal," she continued. "You're at home. That's the bonding beauty of it. It can be relaxed and unhurried. It can be whatever you want it to be." ❁

SHELTER FROM THE STORM

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air at this four diamond, 306 room landmark of the skyline. There are 40 Omni Hotels on the globe, all owned (along with Gold's Gym) by the indefatigable Bob Rowling. Every Omni is encouraged to become as personal and regional of a hotel as possible: this is a super thing for New Haven and the future of this hotel.

Sullivan has just brought on Executive Chef Jeremy Martindale who is heading up all the hotel's food venues and Davenport's on the 19th floor. A recent kitchen fire disaster shape-shifted into the opportunity to redraw the map and after spending a few hours ogling the views from the 19th and sampling some savory fall food it's clear the only direction for this restaurant is up.

Jeremy recently moved to Connecticut from Denver and that Rocky Mountain high to the heights of the 19th floor after growing up in Nebraska and where he became hooked on the cooking biz by peeling shrimp and performing other "glamorous" tasks at a tender age. Even with his artistry, talent and tinkering in cabinetry he never lost that cooking itch and now at 37, after spending seven years with various Omni Hotels, he is ready for his New Haven close up.

Even with the 19th floor closed because of the fire, my New York friend and I were treated like VIP's and spread out on a white clothed corner eight-top, we had the entire space and its magical vistas all to ourselves. Server Anna Feniola spoke about having Chef Jeremy heading the team and her delight and pride made her skills shine throughout the meal. We began with iced Domain Chandon, pink and tightly bubbled and cruised our way through tasting portions of deceptively simple, full-of-flavor food that hinted at the magic that will come once the kitchen is completed.

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