

Brooke's holiday party tips

Jamie and I try to keep our get-togethers as intimate as possible — dinner parties are limited to eight people — but the holidays present a unique set of problems, with so many people who need to be seen in such a small amount of time. We may go over our expense — and friend — budget from Thanksgiving to New Year's, but at least we do it in style. Here's how we do it:

Your People: Dinner party, 8 people; holiday cocktail, 30 people.

Guests of a Certain Persuasion: Every persuasion — mix up your guest list for maximum drama and fun. You want different professions, backgrounds and talents (hmmmm ...) represented in your living room, backyard and at the big round table. I don't have any strict rules about the girl/guy ratio at my soirees, but I still keep in mind that people are coming to my fetes with the hope of scoring a number.

Deck the Halls: Forget formal, and think casual, yet elegant food as decoration (apples, citrus, dried spices such as cinnamon sticks, star anise, cardamom seeds) on your buffet and mantel. Inject your "New Year's Cocktail" with a little nostalgia and humor by decorating side tables and windowsills with terribly embarrassing high-school pictures simply framed alongside yearbooks and other awkward teenage memorabilia. Everything looks gorgeous compared to your freshman mug!

Plot Your Way to Perfection: Preparation! Preparation! Preparation! Starting at noon for a party at 8 p.m. is impossible. Impossible. You'll end up so stressed by the time your 30 guests arrive, you won't remember if it's New Year's or Easter.

Invitations — 2-3 weeks prior.

Menu planning — 2 weeks prior.

Grocery shopping — 2 days prior.

Flowers — Same-day morning delivery.

Wine & booze — open all the liquor bottles and about half the wine bottles the day of the party, check martini and wine glasses for water spots. **Food prep** — begin at 10 a.m. to allow yourself time to also place candles, spruce the house, flowers and yourself.

Music — turn on the tunes an hour before guests arrive to get you in the mood.

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Brooke Parkhurst and her boyfriend, James Briscione, in New York City recently. PHOTOS BY BEN TWING

from
Southern
Belle
to
**Dinner
Diva**



PENSACOLA
NATIVE and
GASTRONOMISTA
BROOKE
PARKHURST
PERFECTS THE
ART OF FINE,
RELAXED DINING

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To say that Brooke Parkhurst is an epicurean, or as she calls herself, "a foodie," is an understatement. While most children's milestones are measured with stories of first steps, first words and school accomplishments, the 26-year-old's life is measured by food-related achievements.

At age 3, when her toddler peers were munching macaroni and cheese, she was savoring succulent lobster that she ordered herself from the menu at the Pensacola Country Club.

"She couldn't pronounce some letters, so she said, 'Wobstah, please,'" said Suzanne Parkhurst, Brooke's mom and food muse.

"When she was four or five, we'd go to the Dainty Del (restaurant) after church, and she'd order fish," said Suzanne, a Pensacola native who now lives in Blowing Rock, N.C. "She very politely asked the waitress, 'Pardon me, ma'am. Is the fish fresh? Is it filleted?'"

So it is no surprise to Suzanne or to anyone else who knows Brooke that she is grabbing headlines as a New York dinner diva. Nor is it unexpected that she has found fame with a popular blog and is wrapping up a debut novel about her exploits in the Big Apple, while penning an entertainment and cooking guide with boyfriend James Briscione — a Pensacola-native-turned-gourmet-chef.

"Brooke has a natural flair for cooking beautiful meals and presenting them at the table," said Suzanne, who admits that covering the food beat during her 20 years as writer for the Pensacola News

Journal helped nurture that natural talent. "It looks very artistic, and I didn't teach her that."

During an interview from her SoHo apartment in New York City, Brooke said she believes her new cooking and entertaining guide, "Fresh Affairs," will help transform 20-to-30-somethings into naturals at throwing big-city soirées even if they initially lack the savvy and creativity to pull it off.

"It's about how we live and how we entertain," Brooke said about throwing what her friends say are "unforgettable parties."

The guide combines her passion for entertaining, decorating and wine with James' flare for creating simple, succulent meals.

A Washington High School graduate, James taps into 10 years of combined experience as a chef de cuisine at Birmingham, Ala.'s premier Frank Stitt's Highlands Bar and Grill and as a banquet chef at New York's Daniel — one of the nation's most prestigious restaurants — to create recipes for the book of "food that focuses on pristine local ingredients, streamlined preparations and bold flavors."

"I really like simple, country-style food like you'd see in the countryside of France," the 26-year-old said during a phone interview while taking a quick break at the busy New York restaurant. "They live with what they have, and that breeds seasonality into their food that I really love."

Tips in the guide reflect Brooke's "anti-Martha" philosophy.

"I think that cooking and entertaining should be about having fun and making mistakes, and memorable, yet sometimes messy, food," she said. "I did the prim and proper thing before I knew better. Now, I mix it up. Serve foie gras with grits. Dress up mullet with a reduction sauce. Pass out the week's saucy newspaper headlines to your mother's mannerly Sunday brunch friends (that'll get the conversation going). In that way, I'm a 'high/low' cook and entertainer with a saucy sense of fun."

Brooke's childhood friend Lacy Harrell-Phillips agrees.

"We got to be with them last Christmas in Seaside," said Phillips, 27, of Dallas. She grew up with Brooke in Pensacola. "They (Brooke and James) have such chemistry between them in the kitchen. They're very sophisticated, but fun. They're lighthearted with cooking, but they pay attention to the ingredients and

"My promiscuous palate skips across continents and cultures — thick, tart Greek yogurt for breakfast, New England lobster roll for lunch, sag paneer and naan for dinner — on a daily basis. There are nights when this Southern girl needs ... the flavors of home."

— from Brooke Parkhurst's blog, "Cups and Nibbles" at BrookeParkhurst.com

how they are preparing food."

FACT-BASED FICTION

Because entertaining comes so naturally, writing the guide has evolved instinctively, Brooke said.

"It's much easier than fiction," she said. "With fiction, it's just you and a blank piece of paper."

She should know. Brooke's first tome, "Belle of New York," will be published by Scribner Publishing, a division of Simon & Schuster, and was inspired by her popular blog, "Belle in the Big the Apple."

Similar to the blog, according to the industry newsletter Publisher's Lunch, the book reveals the "musings of a beautiful Southern debutante who comes to New York and lands a job in the mosh pit newsroom of a highly

conservative cable network while reveling in the hedonistic pleasures of the city."

You guessed it: Food or at least high-profile dates at some of the ritziest New York eating establishments are central to the theme.

Although it's fiction, it's based on Brooke's real-life experience as a production assistant at Fox News headquarters, an experience that ended in "total disillusionment," and about the news ethics of the company.

"I quit at age 23 and began my life as a temp worker," she said.

All her life, she had planned to follow the journalism paths of her mother and sister, Sloane Stephens Cox; and that of her late grandfather, Braden Ball, 30-year publisher of the News Journal.

"And then suddenly, I'm a temp, and I'd go home after an empty and fruitless day," she said.

That career derailment steered her onto the promising book-writing track.

Brooke sold her first book before it was even written, thanks to her hip blog posts that caught the attention of media such as Gawker, Wonkette, Salon.com, the BBC, Corriere della Sera and the New York Post.

"Belle" is expected to hit book stores in the fall of 2007.

"Her novel sale was indeed quite a unique triumph, because new writers almost always have to show a full manuscript in order to even get editorial consideration in publishing houses," said Brooke's agent, Bill Contardi,

of New York-based Brandt & Hochman Literary Agents.

"What worked in Brooke's favor were her ongoing blog and the distinctive and entertaining voice of that blog," he said.

Although "Fresh Affairs" has not been submitted to Scribner, "It has been discussed by them with enthusiasm, and they are poised to consider it as soon as 'Belle' is finished and the proposal is ready," Contardi said.

"Scribner has an excellent track record with cooking and entertaining books, (such as) 'Joy of Cooking,' " so Brooke's youthful and Southern slant to the cuisine of living and loving will be in stellar company. It really has potential to be the beginning of a Brooke brand — both in fiction and nonfiction."

IN HER GENES

Brooke credits her mom, as well as a "foodie" family, for infusing her with the idea that quality food and quality times go hand-in-hand.

"I associate food with different occasions and different family members' homes," she said.

"Aunt Christi is well known for her black-bottom pie and other desserts. Aunt Colleen is pickled shrimp. My grandmother (Theda Ball) is gumbo; and my grandfather was collard greens and black-eyed peas."

And family road trips conjure up memories of traveling around the Southeast so her mom could hunt down the best regional fare.

"She planned our vacations around

"Food is the running story of my life."

— Brooke Parkhurst

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food stops," Brooke said. "Georgia is peaches and pecan farms; North Carolina is barbecue."

So it was only natural that during college, while sailing around the islands off of Mallorca, Spain, with a group of Argentines, Brooke insisted that the crew stop at ports known for delicious, regional food.

"I made them dock so I could take the dinghy into the town square and buy fresh tomatoes, greens, bread, herbs, cheeses, cured meats, local wines, homemade pastries or ensaimadas," she said. "I would then buy fish at the port and prepare a meal for the entire crew."

When Brooke came to Pensacola for the birth of her niece, Shelby, only to be chased away to Birmingham by Hurricane Dennis, she ended up weathering the storm dining in the city's finest eateries, including Highlands Bar and Grill.

As she was inspecting the menu, she ran across a familiar name from her childhood and asked the waiter if the chef was from Pensacola. The chef turned out to be James.

"It was a startling moment because the last time I saw him, he was 10 years old," Brooke said. "We were sweethearts at Camp Beckwith, an Episcopal church camp."

And when he came out of the kitchen door to see her, "so tall and handsome in his white chef's jacket and smelling like fried oysters," Brooke said she fell in love.

"Our first date was the next day at the Pepper Place farmer's market in downtown Birmingham," she said. "We caught up with the past 15 years over sniffing peaches and feeling tomatoes. Food is the running storyline of my life."

Brooke's holiday party tips

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Boudoir Drink: Do like Cary Grant and drink a single glass of champagne before the night gets under way — it'll calm your nerves and reassure you that everything will go just swimmingly.

Games: None — if you actually like your guests (and you count a few interesting people among your friends), you won't have to rely on trite, contrived games. Conversation — and a well-stocked bar — should be more than enough to get your party started (and keep it going).

Ipod Shuffle: Although Mariah Carey's "All I Want For Christmas" is on my Ipod's heavy repeat (guilty pleasure), we're going to keep her out of your party tunes. Go to the updated classics that will have everyone humming instead of griping. Think Sinatra, Dean Martin and Louis Armstrong.

Lighting: Turn off the overheads and twist the dimmers. You want soft, flattering light, whether it comes from recessed fixtures or side lamps and candles scattered around your home. Outdoors, consider lighting from the ground up: Place votive candles in a wide circle both around the chimenea and the hors d'oeuvres table. Everyone will look radiant.

Seating: You should always have more seating options than guests, thus facilitating one-on-one and small group conversations. With our New Year's Day party, guests will naturally gravitate to standing around the chimenea. Make sure there are chairs, stools — heck, even logs — placed outside your home and within distance of the fire's warmth.



Dot's Chocolate Decadence Cake

PHOTO BY KATIE KING

COOKING for two

Rejoining us this month is New York City food maven and Pensacola native Brooke Parkhurst, giving us her tips for a romantic dinner for two.

You want to woo your date — not worry him — with a delicious dinner a deux. The key to the evening is to suggest romance, not shout it.

There's no better way to walk this tight-rope act of love, lust and friendship (in a sexy pair of heels, of course) than to make the dinner *together*. You'll both have a blast getting your hands dirty and loosening up with a glass of wine (one for the pot, one for you and him) while sautéing the chicken and putting the finishing touches on the chocolate cake (see recipe page 41).

Present him with a kitchen full of sumptuous ingredients and a nicely

laid-out table instead of the finished product.

Here's a sumptuous way to spend your Valentine's Day Dinner:

"DIRTY HANDS" DINNER A DEUX

**Shrimp and Scallop Gratin
with White Wine Veloute**

**Best-ever Parisian Lemon
Roast Chicken with Savory
Mashed Sweet Potatoes**

**White Chocolate Vanilla Cake
with Bourbon Cherry Syrup**

Here is the recipe for Shrimp and Scallop Gratin. For the the Valentine's menu recipes, visit www.BellaMagazine.com.

You can also find more recipes on Brooke's blog, www.jamieandbelle.blogspot.com

Shrimp and Scallop Gratin with White Wine Veloute

1/2 lb. Shrimp (peeled and deviened)- use a larger size (16/20 count) this means it takes 16-20 shrimp to make 1 pound

1/4 lb. Scallops — again, look for a larger size (10/20 count), in a pinch you could use bay scallops

1 Spring Onion Bulb, sliced
2 slices of bread* torn into pieces and pulsed in a food processor or blender

2 Tbsp Heavy Whipping Cream remember you need some for dessert too!

And, you'll need about a cup of that champagne, you better get AT LEAST two bottles

*If you don't want to make breadcrumbs, buy Panko — a coarse Japanese style bread crumb. Whatever you do, DO NOT use "Italian style."

On a plate, sprinkle the shrimp and scallops with salt and pepper. Place a stainless pan on the stove over high heat. Add about two teaspoons of vegetable oil, just enough to cover the bottom of the pan. When oil begins to shimmer, place the scallops in the pan, flat side down. Sear until golden on one side (about 1 minute). Flip and cook on the other side for 30 seconds. Remove to a clean plate. Turn the heat down to med-high, add the sliced onions to the empty pan and cook for 2 minutes. (You



may need a little more oil.)

When the onions begins to soften, add the shrimp and cook for 2 minutes on each side. The shrimp will begin to turn opaque, at this point pour in the champagne, a little over a cup. Simmer until reduced to 2 Tbsp., add the heavy cream and reduce until thickened. Taste and season with salt and pepper.

Add another little splash of champagne (just in case — you can't have too much).

Divide the shrimp, scallops, and sauce between two bowls and top with the bread crumbs. Slide into oven under the broiler until well browned and bubbly on the sides. Carefully remove from the oven and enjoy immediately.

That's it! Short and sweet.



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