

CAFÉ RESTAURATION AND THE MAKING OF A DINNER SALON

BY SONO OSATO

“Pop the cork and do the deal.”

This was winemaker Sean Thackrey’s gleeful response to a question about whether his wine should be enjoyed in the moment or set aside to appreciate in value. Sean uses grapes the way a painter uses paint. His approach to winemaking is iconoclastic and irreverent. His attitude of “cut the pretense and just do it” affirms my own philosophy about life.

I love to give dinner parties and have been doing so for a very long time. In an intimate and relaxed setting, the dinner table becomes level ground. Despite differences in occupation, class or background—no matter how diverse the group—the power and magic of a dinner party is that, through conversation, people search for what they have in common. When they leave, bonds of friendship have been strengthened. For me, sharing the comforts of food and company is as quintessentially communal as it can get; it is one of the primary ways I build community.

Between June 1997 and May 1998 I created a series of seven dinner parties that were a modern-day salon in the tradition of those held in the 1920s by Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. It was at one of those dinner parties that the conversation with Sean occurred.

My idea was to treat *salon* as a verb rather than a noun, and strip away any elitist veneer. As a verb or an “act,” *salon* implies something clandestine and voluntary, held together by a shared curiosity and a need to discover something hidden from convention. A salon can have any texture and character one chooses, and anyone can do it. All one needs is the desire to congregate, a place to do so, and the resources of friends and materials.

My co-hostess was Jane



Dinner Menu, November 1997



Café Restauration table setting

Handel and we called it Café Restauration. Inspired by the facts that the etymological root of restaurant is *restaurer*, French for *restore*, and the name refers to the way restaurants began as simple roadside inns or homes that offered refuge and food to weary travelers.

Along with a desire to create community, Café Restauration was inspired by a combination of several ideas, the first of which was alchemy, or making something wonderful out of very simple resources. As an artist, my resources were and are humble, but what I do not have in material wealth I make up for with an aesthetic honed by instinct.

One important resource I did have at that time was fabulous studio: Located in the industrial warehouse section of Oakland, it had been a factory during World War II and the occupant before me was the seminal artist Jay de Feo. It still retained much of the character of its past. The ceilings were high and all along the eastern wall ran a row of windows, affording a stunning view of the East Bay hills. Then there was the 12-foot mahogany bar that was a remnant of the factory bosses’ back room, complete with a well for ice and a rack for bottles.

Included in my mix of resources were a husband and wife team, Pamela Ong (chef) and Tyler Williams (maitre d’, sommelier and generator of great energy), with whom I had bonded during our years of working together in several restaurants. Pam’s gifts as a chef were extraordinary and each meal was a unique work of art, to which Tyler carefully paired two or three wines.

Some dinners went better than others, but overall it was a remarkable achievement. What made the dinners enchanting was that Jane, Tyler, Pam and I did everything ourselves, down



Sean Thackrey and Mary Curtis Radcliff make a toast

to the last detail. The dinners were hand-crafted, beginning with the invitations, which I designed and produced, usually included a piece of writing about community or food—morsel-sized missives written by myself or Jane. The members of our mailing list, whether they attended a dinner or not, would

receive a gift from the get go, basically a piece of mail art that could be kept as a memento.

As each guest arrived, he or she would be treated to a cocktail of Tyler's invention—either a new spin on an old classic or an entirely unique concoction, such as the Nebula, which Tyler created in honor of Sean Thackrey's wines which he names after constellations. The table would be dressed with what I had on hand, or found during my bottom-feeding adventures in pursuit of antique flatware, etc. on the flea. The table decoration, like the invitations, was a kind of collage, or installation: At each place setting was the evening's menu, which I also designed and produced by hand, with each person's name embossed into it—an additional keepsake.

Every evening featured a guest artist who would present his or her work, usually during the dessert segment. These individuals were culled from our personal, very eclectic, coterie of literary, music, video and performance artists from around the Bay Area.

If I had not lost my studio to gentrification and the dotcom boom in 1999, I would probably have continued Café Restauration. But what remains is its core principle: *Salon* is a verb, not a noun. Anyone can do it. All that matters is that it comes from the heart. How one proceeds in practicing salon is entirely up to what one has to work with, their creativity and desire to bring people together. People—friends, family and acquaintances one would like to know better—are the ultimate resource. It's a fairly simple recipe. Just gather them together, give them food and wine and let the evening run its course. I'll leave it at that.

Sono Osato is an artist who now lives in Brooklyn, New York. Her current body of work, which combines painting with assemblage by inlaying parts of old adding machines and typewriters into the layers of paint, is entitled "Babylon/the Buried Language Series." Each painting is named after an archeological site in Iraq. Sono's work can be viewed at sonoosato.com and at Brian Gross Fine Art in San Francisco. Her dinner-party-friendly apartment now contains a table for 10 which she built out of a salvaged door and metal H-leg units she found for dirt cheap online.

INDIAN SUMMER COCKTAIL

By Candice Erickson
(Photograph by Jayme Burrows)

In Southern California we are lucky to have an extended summer that lasts almost to winter. This drink is an ode to our famous "Indian Summer" that sneaks its way into the autumn months. It has a tropical twist from the summertime yet utilizes the magnificent fall pomegranate.

1½ ounces spiced rum
1½ ounces aged rum
1 ounce fresh lime juice
1 ounce fresh orange juice
½ ounce mango purée
Pomegranate juice float
Lime wedge
Ice



Fill a tall glass with ice. Pour in rum and citrus juices. Then squeeze in mango purée. Stir together with spoon and drizzle with fresh pomegranate juice. Garnish with lime wedge.

Candice Erickson lives in Ventura with her husband and two children. They cook together as a family on a daily basis and love to hike in the backcountry of Ojai. Candice is the lead bartender at Maravilla bar at the Ojai Valley Inn, and enjoys creating cocktails with seasonal, locally grown ingredients.

