

Auction Experience Created & Sold by Auction Results for The Adler Planetarium

A feast fit for the prairie



By Judy Hevrdejs, Tribune reporter

The setting for the dinner was a majestic Oak Park home with a Prairie School personality, its broad features embraced by lush green surroundings.

It is where Lisa and Ray Lewis held a little dinner party for a dozen close friends, a six-course feast plus a trio of hors d'oeuvres and those end-of-the-meal sweets called mignardises.



Seven wines were poured, from the opening sparkling chardonnay -- a 2002 Iron Horse Vineyards Vrais Amis -- on through the liqueur finale -- L. Garnier Liqueur Fabriquee par les Peres Chartreux V.E.P. And if that Iron Horse sparkler wasn't enough to kick off the evening this past summer, there was also a gin-and-sparkling brut sip.

At this point and if you've been keeping count -- there were nearly 100 glasses and 72 individual plates needed for the feast -- you're saying to yourself: "Excellent."

Or maybe: "They gotta be crazy."

Lisa and Ray Lewis, it should be noted, are a perfectly sane couple from Oak Park. They didn't cook the meal nor pour a single glass of wine. They don't even live in the house where the dinner was held.



Yet what the couple did (and what many will do at assorted benefits and galas this season) was bid on an item during a live auction at the Adler Planetarium's annual fundraiser, the Celestial Ball.

That item? A dinner for 12 from the culinary team at Sepia, a much-lauded three-star West Loop restaurant, prepared and served in Frank Lloyd Wright's Arthur B. Heurtley House, the home of Patty and Ken Hunt, and a National Historic Landmark.



So as the dinner hour approached, hosts Lisa and Ray Lewis weren't in the kitchen where Sepia chef Andrew Zimmerman was adapting to the quirks of a refurbished 1920s Magic Chef stove.



Instead, the couple arrived with their guests for a sunlit tour of Wright's beautifully restored creation before sitting down at a long table set with orchids and candles, gold-rimmed plates and crystal and the evening's first course: mole-cured hamachi, avocado, cucumber, jicama consomme.



"We knew everything would be exceptional," says Lisa Lewis.

Pulling off an exceptional dinner party can be a challenge for anyone -- even when there's a professional chef in the kitchen plus a sommelier, sous-chef, restaurateur and two servers sweating last-minute details.

A dinner party requires planning. And in the case of this dinner, it required teamwork.

More than a year before hostess Lisa's first conversation with Sepia chef Zimmerman and restaurateur Emmanuel Nony, the teamwork began. That's when Lisa, who had been tapped to chair the Adler gala, asked friend Laura Myntti to help gather auction items for the fundraiser.

"Patty's a good friend of mine," recalls Myntti. "I told her I needed interesting things for the auction."

And Patty Hunt said? "I'll give you a party for 12 at my house if you do the catering," Myntti says.

"These kinds of parties are pretty easy to throw because, mostly, I just have to have the house cleaned. It's a painless way to help charitable organizations," says Hunt, who offers her home for such events several times a year.

Next, Myntti called Sepia's Nony, who agreed to handle the food and wine. "I said, 'Do you know anybody that would be interested? And he called me back and said, 'You know, I think I would.' "

Fast-forward to the night of the Adler gala: The Lewises, bidding for the first time on such an item, won. (The winning bid? \$9,000.)

"I entertain all the time," says Lisa Lewis. "In all types of styles -- from sit-down dinner parties to hay-bale barbecues. But the important ingredient and my special stamp is the great company that I invite."

When she talked with Zimmerman about the dinner, she explained her approach to food. "We made sure the cooks knew we're kind of food people -- people who have a sense of food and appreciate good food and wine," says Lewis.

"I was given a pretty blank slate of 'Sure, whatever you'd like. We don't have any food allergies or anything,' " says Zimmerman. "I was tempted because our blood pudding really goes over very well. Yet you also try to not get too challenging on something like this."

More important, he needed to know where his team would be working. Which is why he tries to visit a home before a big night, checking "everything from where the counters are to how much refrigerator space they have, to what kind of stove they have," he says. "Then I try to figure out how I am going to deliver the same kind of product to them that we would do at the restaurant."

Schedule gridlock meant the chef couldn't visit Heurtley House prior to the

dinner, so Nony took "a zillion photographs of the stove, the countertops, the plateware. It gave me a better idea of what I was getting into," he said. "It's a tiny kitchen, but it's got great counter space. At the end of the day, it's how well the stove works."

That stove was the 1920s Magic Chef. "It was a beautiful museum piece, but it was not what I'm used to," says Zimmerman, who brought in reinforcements: a portable induction burner and an immersion circulator for sous-vide cooking.

They also brought slate and wood serving boards. Champagne flutes. Different plates for each course. Pots and pans. Knives. Wines. And all the food, including 5 liters of olive oil.

Why bother with plates and glasses? Simple, says Zimmerman, "This was an auctioned-off night of having us come to this special house and present a combination of the Heurtley House experience and the Sepia experience. A lot of time was spent on the design and the feeling that you get at Sepia, and we wanted the food to have that same sort of attention paid to it, flavorwise, but also aesthetically."



Preparation began two days earlier: braising lamb shoulder, mixing pasta dough. When the Sepia crew arrived at Heurtley House the afternoon of the dinner, unpacking and setting up had to be done; herbs, greens and sauces were set out; and most important, Zimmerman and sous chef Miles Schaefer had to get to know that old stove.

At 5:30 p.m., an hour before guests would arrive, Zimmerman and Nony walked staff through the menu.

"Strawberries on the salad are from Mick Klug's farm," says the chef. "The black dots on the plate are licorice syrup."

"Synchronize the service," says Nony.

The legendary architect of the Heurtley House -- who once said, "Study nature, love nature, stay close to nature. It will never fail you" -- would have approved.

By 6:15 p.m., the kitchen's rhythm was rocking. Serving trays and garnishes were lined up. Zimmerman was heating oil for croquettes. Schaefer was plating, each pure white plate a canvas for the simple yet elegant art. Boiling pasta. Grating truffles. Searing lamb.



10:05 p.m.: Schaefer plated white chocolate cakes.

10:10 p.m.: Zimmerman positioned berry garnishes.

10:15 p.m.: The final course was on the table.

It was as if a switch had been flipped in the kitchen at the moment wine director Arthur Hon popped the cork on the evening's first Iron Horse bubbly.

A WINNING MENU

To start:

Pork pate, pickles, mustard, toast English pea raviolini, thyme butter, parmesan Serrano-marcona almond croquettes, romesco

Dinner:

Mole-cured hamachi, avocado, cucumber, jicama consomme Local beets, Prairie Fruits Farm chevre, red leaf clover, pickled unripe strawberries, licorice Buckwheat pasta alla chitarra, buckwheat shoots, foie gras butter, summer

truffles Olive oil-poached halibut, morels, baby leeks, white blossom peas, white asparagus, ramp butter Roasted lamb rack, braised lamb pastilla, eggplant marmalade, lamb jus

Dessert:

White chocolate cake, yuzu curd, local berry salad, mulberry sauce Mignardises

WHEN A CHEF TAKES OVER

- Who's coming to dinner? Do any guests have special needs, allergies.
- Make space (lots of it) in the refrigerator. "That is a big help," says Sepia's Andrew Zimmerman.
- Clear kitchen counters of blenders, food processors, etc. "We need a place to put all the plates so we can plate," he says.
- Let the chef know what dishes, glassware and cookware can be used. But: "If the idea of the dinner is to bring as much of a specific restaurant's experience into your home, then it shouldn't be served on your china."
- Have the chef come to the house to "see what equipment you have and discuss what the chef might need to bring."
- Be willing to let go. Let the chefs do their job. "If you micromanage everything," says the chef, "you probably won't get the best food on the plate."