

ABOUT THE CONVENTIONAL DINNER PARTY THERE'S A LOT TO BE SAID, AND WE IN SARASOTA HAVE NEARLY SAID IT ALL. Sarasotans have not only written the book on casual entertaining, but we've incorporated it into our centerpieces and are sending our guests home with a copy. We've become masters of the form, the kind of people who say of our gatherings, "Everyone just convenes in the kitchen"—which is invariably the heart of our homes—and mean it. Nothing against another evening kept with the Joneses, but maybe this year our dinner parties should feel—and be—a little more inspired.

DINING FOR BANDITS

THE CONTEMPORARY PROGRESSIVE DINNER DONE THREE WAYS. BY AMY NANCE PHOTOS BY GENE POLLUX

Fortunately, what's doing in dinner parties is anything but sedentary. The progressive dinner emerged in the '50s when suburbia made it possible for neighbors to easily pop over to each other's houses to dine. In the space of a couple of blocks, groups went from one house to the next to eat courses in succession, which were prepared and presented by the home's hostess, who served her specialty. It was the suburbanite's answer to the city set's social butterflying, where dining out on the town was glamorous, but harried. In a lively caravan up the well-kept sidewalks of this or that Levittown, group dining was removed of its pomp but still felt like an adventure.

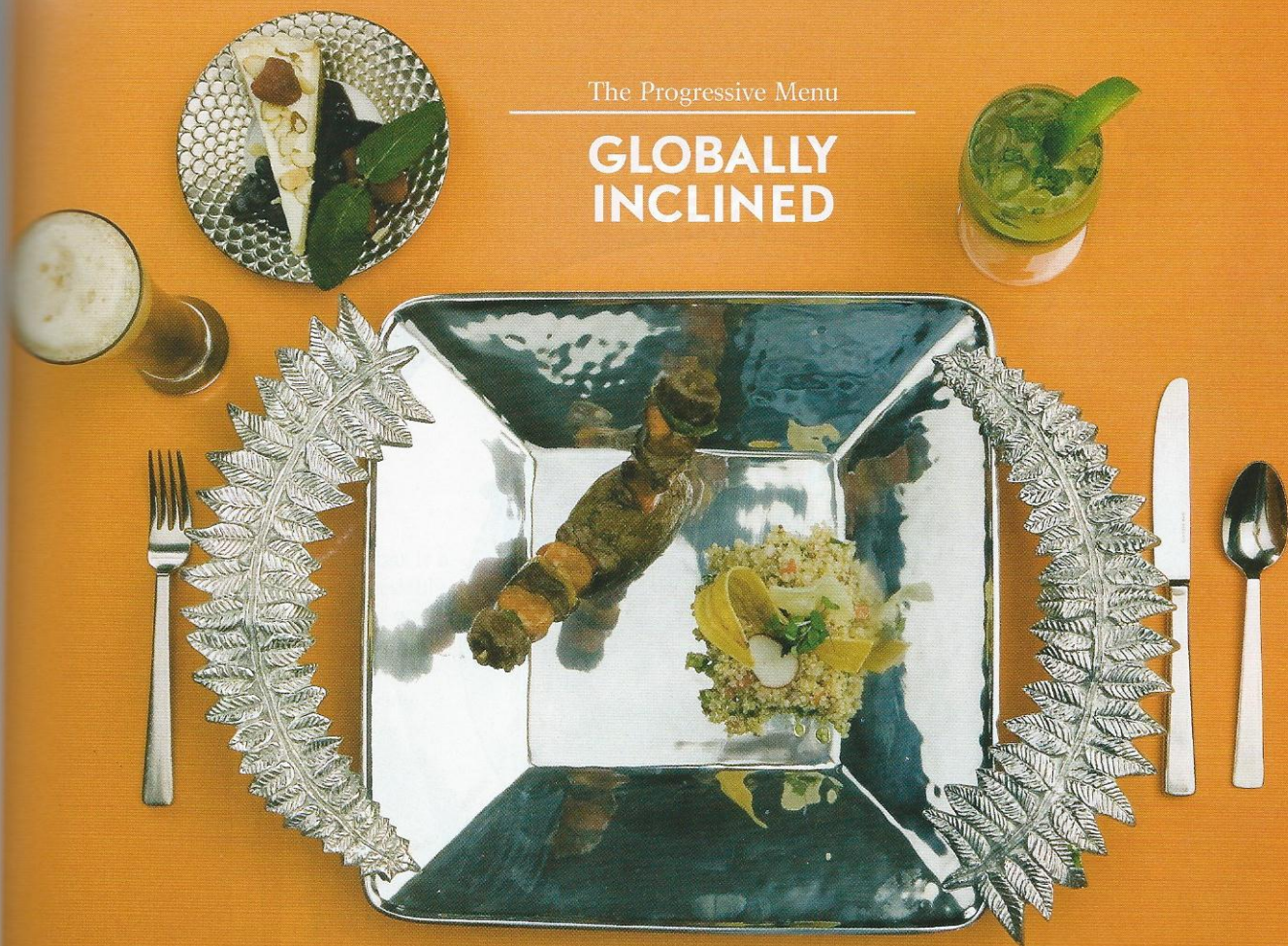
Today, progressive dinners are back and adapted to a whole new era of eating. At a time when dining-on-the-go is strictly understood as drive-thru or take-out and serving courses has gone the way of the hoola hoop, the traveling dinner injects some much-needed excitement into the rather inert business of having dinner. Suddenly this cousin to the pub crawl is taking the indefatigable eater around again, and this time to restaurants. Instead of hopping from one house to the next, groups are bringing their collective palates to bear on the local dining scene, selecting the best plates from the best places and dining accordingly.

It takes some effort to pull off a progressive dinner, but it's worth it. What you get is the slow unfolding of a meal, a true sense of how one course anticipates the next, a feeling for how inevitable each is. Your attention is brought to every aspect of the dinner—the vagaries of appetizer presentation, the smell of espresso flooding a dessert room. For once, you can focus solely on the dish before you. The time between courses only serves to ratchet up your interest and appetite. And at each go there's a new environment, a different scene.

Progressive dining out does away with the challenges that come when you house hop; there's no worry over accommodating everyone, and you don't have to spend the day cleaning. It helps to give some thought to timing (and in some cases a reservation would certainly be in order), but a progressive dinner out doesn't have to feel entirely calculated. Designate a driver (better yet, hire one) to take your group, consider parking and the easiest routes from one restaurant to the next. Groups of six to eight are small enough to get in most places with a short wait. Here we chart a course for three kinds of diners, so round up your entourage.

The Progressive Menu

GLOBALLY INCLINED



PINEAPPLE MOJITO

COCKTAIL The Table's lounge has loads of ambiance and claims the mojito as its signature drink. The pineapple version is spot on for a balmy spring night, and Mesa's mix makes you sit up and take notice. **The Table Restaurant**, 1934 Hillview St., Sarasota, 941-365-4558

PINCHOS DE SOLOMILLO

STARTERS Enjoy these tenderloin brochettes in the tapas bar's new surrounds: Sangria re-opened in February with 150 seats and a full bar. Want more? Try the chuletas de cordero (Mediterranean-style lamb chops). **Sangria**, 1532 Main St., Sarasota, 941-955-8272

ASADO WITH QUINOA SALAD

FIRST Go early to Malabar, the brainchild of Chef Darwin Santa Maria of Selva Grill, and try this Peruvian salad staple. Quinoa's subtle, earthy flavor provides a nice complement to the rich asado. **Malabar**, 1987 Ringling Blvd., Sarasota, 941-955-1313

LOBSTER ROLL

SECOND Chef Baw says these rolls—lobster meat baked on top of a California roll—are favorites, with small groups ordering 30-60 at a time. The restaurant has also unveiled its Yume Pizza: rice base, special sauce and crab steak topped with tuna or salmon and garnished with scallion and fish egg. "Everyone wants to know if we'll deliver it," says Chef Baw. **Yume Sushi**, 1537 Main St., Sarasota, 941-363-0604

AMARETTO CHEESECAKE

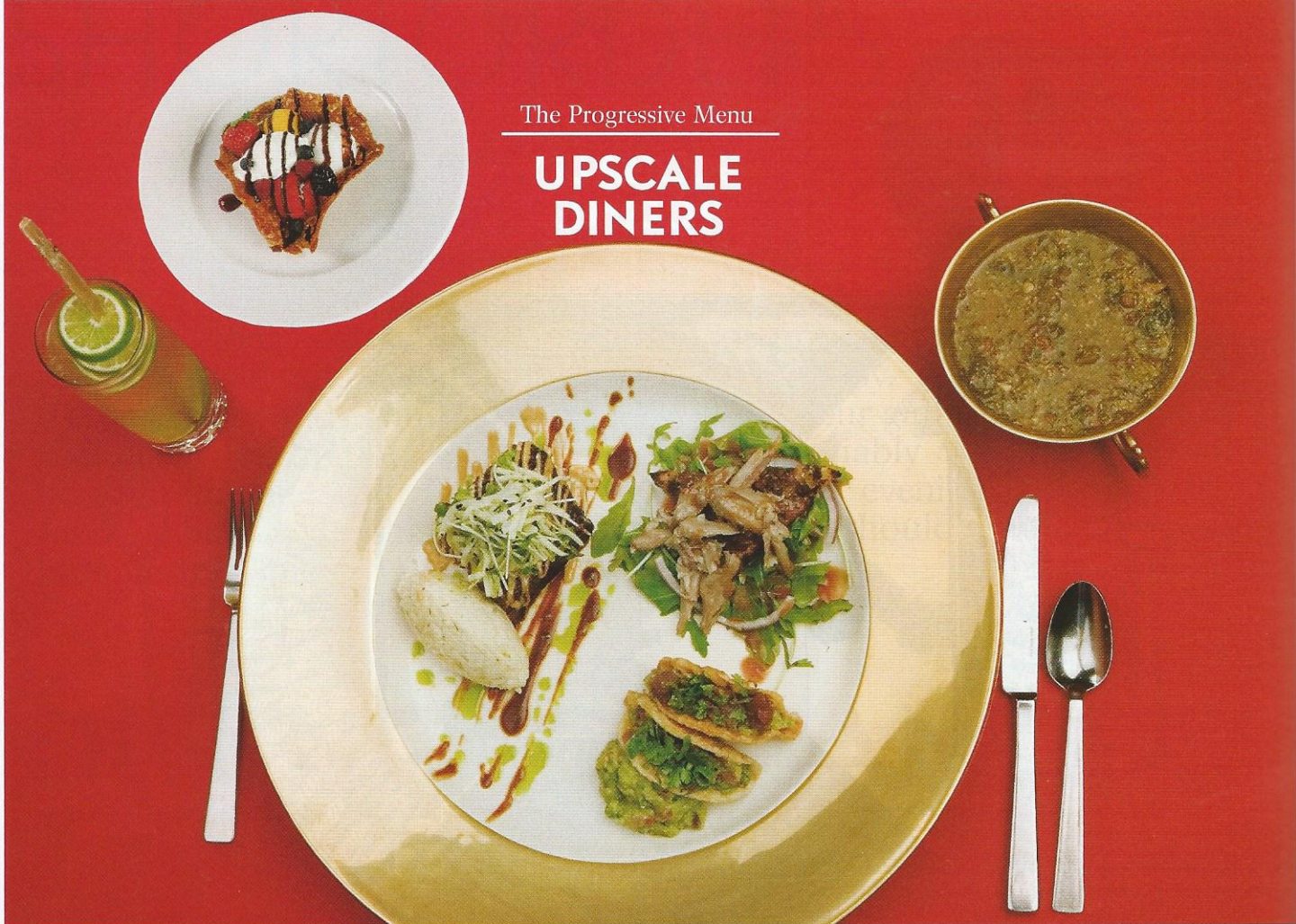
DESSERT Treviso's cheesecake and the traditional tiramisu are perfection, but diners might be swayed by the mini, chocolate bunte cake, a fairly new addition to the dessert menu. Treviso is in the process of becoming the first certified green restaurant in the area, yet another reason to keep it on the progressive rotation. **Treviso**, 5401 Bayshore Rd., Sarasota, 941-360-7390

BELHAVEN BEST BEER

AFTER DINNER DRINKS Owner Karen Ronney describes this beer as "dark and heavy," great for envisioning yourself in a cozy Edinburgh pub. For serious nippers, MacAllisters Malt Whisky Club has over a 100 members, all of whom get to chat up visiting distillers and taste their samples. **MacAllisters**, 8110 Lakewood Main St., Lakewood Ranch, 941-359-2424

The Progressive Menu

UPSCALE DINERS



APPLE PIE MARTINIS

COCKTAIL Make like the suburban couples in Richard Yates' '50s-set novel *Revolutionary Road* and have your progressive dining party over for cocktails before you go afield. What better tribute to the decade that gave us progressive dining than to do a little tongue-in-cheek mixing? Combine three ounces of Absolut vanilla vodka with one ounce of brandy, a teaspoon of dry vermouth and two slices of green apple. Toast to nostalgia.

TUNA TARTAR WONTON TACOS

STARTERS Tacos aren't usually described as "delicate," but there's nothing usual about these. Filled with minced ahi tuna and served with wasabi caviar, the tacos sell out every night, says Pattigeorge's Sandy Wooten. If your group goes on a Sunday, bring your own vintage, as there's no corkage fee. The cooks in your party may want to take orders from Tommy Klauber—look for the chef's interactive dinners this summer. **Pattigeorge's**, 4120 Gulf of Mexico Dr., Longboat Key, 941-383-5111

SOUP AND SALAD

FIRST To say that Derek's does soup is an understatement: past offerings include a roasted pumpkin chestnut bisque with lavender marshmallow and a roasted lamb and apricot soup with hominy and pistachios that was, according to Derek, "kind of Morocco-meets-Mulligatawny stew." Now he's doing a fish and peanut soup with garbanzo beans and such earthy, seasonal greens as kale. Salads have been equally dynamic. On the menu: duck confit salad with arugula, mushroom toast points and red onion in a cherry vinaigrette. Derek's mission is to introduce new textures, flavors and techniques, but mostly to "elegantly update" existing dishes. **Derek's Culinary Casual**, 514 Central Ave., Sarasota, 941-366-6565

ASIAN STYLE BEEF SHORT RIBS

SECOND Settle yourselves in the cozy Mezzanine and compare notes on the fragrant, tamarind and ginger-glazed short ribs, served with a green apple, daikon radish salad. Rustic Grill's environs are a conversation-starter all on their own, and this centerpiece entrée is best enjoyed while overlooking the gothic interior,

with its sumptuous fabrics and impressive chandeliers. **Rustic Grill**, 400 North Lemon Ave., Sarasota, 941-906-1111

TRIO OF SORBETS

DESSERT Executive Pastry Chef Guillaume Marchand's dessert menu is influenced by citrus, and the sorbets here—mango, raspberry and coconut on almond meringue with dark chocolate shard—are a cool, fruity treat. The chef comes to Vernona by way of Barcelona and St. Thomas and says his desserts reflect those food traditions. **Vernona**, 1111 Ritz-Carlton Dr., Sarasota, 941-309-2008

CORK AND STORMY

AFTER DINNER DRINKS The sleek piano lounge upstairs at Cork & The Bottleshop lets weary diners unwind in style. The signature drink here is Cork's rendition of a Dark and Stormy. The lounge's Manhattan—blood orange bitters, Knob Creek bourbon and sweet vermouth—is one of their newest concoctions, so put it on your progressive dinner plan for next time. **Cork & The Bottleshop**, 29 N. Blvd. of Presidents, Sarasota, 941-388-2675

SEAFOOD JUNKIES

MARGARITA

COCKTAIL Hyatt's Boathouse bar is a low key, no fuss institution, accessible by land or boat. Sit outside and watch the seagulls plunge into the marina. A classic margarita from the full bar primes you for a night of salty-dog dining. **The Boathouse**, 1000 Blvd. of the Arts, Sarasota, 941-953-1234

THE MIXED GRILL

STARTERS Sure, it's not a starter per se, but order Captain Brian's mixed grill, which includes three different fish (the offerings change regularly), and you'll have plenty to go around. Split the platter and send it around the table: This seafood is just-caught fresh. Owner Brian Bochan touts the restaurant's "as natural as possible" philosophy, and you can taste it. **Captain Brian's**, 8421 North Tamiami Trl., Sarasota, 941-351-4492

LOBSTER BISQUE

FIRST Dry Dock's lobster bisque is a local legend. Made fresh every day, the soup's appeal may have something to do with the fact that Dry Dock adds cherry to it, says co-owner Eric Hammersand. Also popular? Grouper. This is one place you can count on its being 100 percent authentic, served fresh and caught locally. **Dry Dock Waterfront Grill**, 412 Gulf of Mexico Dr., Longboat Key, 941-383-0102

ARIEL'S CABO FAJITAS WITH SHRIMP

SECOND SKOB's "massive renovation," as Beth Owencipielewski puts it, didn't change a thing when it comes to the "landmarkness of SKOB." What's new is the gorgeous kitchen and more space. The cabo fajitas capture the restaurant's



Product credits: Page 81: Beatriz Ball silver tray, \$120, L'Objet silver plate, \$60. Page 82: L'Objet large gold plate, \$165, and bowl, \$186. Page 83: Allan Lee Collection leaf dish, \$165, tumbler, \$17, and L'Objet gold bowl, \$186; EnvieHome Decor, 1411 1st St., 941-366-7027

signature friendliness and the shrimp is as fresh as it gets. **Siesta Key Oyster Bar**, 5238 Ocean Blvd., Siesta Key, 941-346-5443

TAHITIAN VANILLA CRÈME BRULÉE

DESSERT An exotic twist on the standard, Crab & Fin's warm, light brulée nicely follows an evening of seafood. Sit upstairs and take in the dazzling view of the circle lit up at night, palm trees swaying in the breeze. **Crab & Fin**, 420 St. Armands Circle, Sarasota, 941-388-3964

MAI TAI

AFTER DINNER DRINKS The Bahi Hut has been around since 1956, plenty of time to perfect the closely guarded mai tai recipe, which uses seven different types of rum. According to manager Jim Beck, people come from all over the world to sample this potent take on the kitschy drink—so potent, there's a two drink cap. "One guy from Texas wouldn't accept the limit. We let him have a third, and after it he said, 'See? I'm fine.' He stood up to leave and fell flat on his face." **Bahi Hut**, 4675 N. Tamiami Trl., Sarasota, 941-355-5141