

GOOD COMPANY

Suppose They Gave a Party And Served on Majolica?



Photographs by Rebecca Cooney for The New York Times

SPECIAL DISHES Irwin Schneiderman, left, chairman of the New York City Opera, chatting with Brooke Hayward Duchin at a pre-benefit dinner at the home of Susan Zises Green. Right, Raymond Han.

By RUTH LA FERLA

SOMETIMES the dress code dictates the tone of a party, sometimes the décor. But the dinner service?

"Why not?"

Susan Zises Green, a New York decorator who collects majolica by the cabinetful, sees no reason not to trot out the best for her friends. In fact, she decided that her hand-painted English ceramics, a minor fortune in antiques, were just right for the informal gathering she gave the other night. Ms. Zises Green is a chairwoman of the New York City Opera; the event was a pre-benefit dinner for the benefit dinner that takes place on Tuesday.

"Actually, the majolica was François's idea," Ms. Zises Green announced. Her co-host, the New York



charmed by the saucer-size plates with the leafy pattern that he built an entire meal around them.

"The dishes were so small, so delicate," Mr. Payard said. "So we got the idea for a tasting menu — bite-sized portions, not only the appetizers, but the dinner and the dessert."

The party was a "dîatoire," an ambulatory hybrid of cocktails and dinner not uncommon in France, but perhaps even better suited to harried New Yorkers.

Once it was clear to the guests that they were free to roam — no tables had been set — they began to graze

Perambulating guests grazing through a full meal of small dishes.

with abandon.

First came the hors d'oeuvres of tuna tartare artfully displayed on platters, salmon sushi topped with decorative gold leaves and candied kumquat stuffed with crab meat. Dinner was likewise served, canapé style, from trays.

"So unlike those boring seated affairs," said Sherwin Goldman, the New York City Opera's executive producer. "At most of these things you turn to the left, you turn to the right, and you never remember what you ate, much less what you talked about, or even whom you talked to."

Ward Landrigan, the owner of Verdura, the jewelry concern, chimed in: "At a party like this you're never stuck with the same person."

Peripatetic gatherings are Ms. Zises Green's trademark. She recalled once being host at a dinner for 49, seating guests in the living room, the bedroom, and even the library, then insisting midway through the meal that everyone switch places.

While Mr. Payard toiled in her galley kitchen, confecting temptations with the aid of Philippe Bertineau, his chef, the hostess posted herself at the door. In came the writer and socialite Brooke Hayward Duchin, the New York City Opera composer in residence, Mark Adamo, and the decorator Mario Buatta. They were ushered directly into the dining room.

"When I was young" Ms. Zises Green recalled, "I desperately wanted a dining room." Now that she has one, complete with cheerfully painted panels depicting Hudson Valley scenes, she treats it offhandedly, as the setting for cocktails.

The hors d'oeuvres would have easily passed for the full meal, had it not been for Romain Arnaud, the evening's maître d'hôtel. Portly in his livery, Mr. Arnaud appeared in the foyer and fixed his eyes on Ms. Zises Green.

"Madame, dinner is served," he announced.

AT YOUR SERVICE Romain Arnaud, the evening's maître d'hôtel, offered hors d'oeuvres and announced the start of the meal.

"Madame?" chided Jim Brodsky, a New York events planner and publicist. "There are gentlemen here too." Mr. Arnaud stared him down.

"It is customary," he replied, "to address the hostess, not the guests."

With that, Mr. Arnaud led the party into the living room for entrees. The first, a soothing chilled carrot and parsnip soup, was served in cocktail glasses. "It's not often you get to say cheers with your soup," Mr. Brodsky said, spooning his soup as he strolled.

The dinner, stuffed zucchini blossoms, chicken "jambonettes" and almond-crust lamb, reached its fever pitch with the seafood. As he served the guests, some of whom were seated, Mr. Arnaud presented the plates almost directly under their noses.

"Sautéed rice-crust daurade with baby artichokes and a 'Bari-goule' jus," he intoned, his tongue caressing every Gallic vowel and consonant. But the evening's true climax arrived in the form of a multicourse dessert that included melon soup and phyllo napoleon with chocolate, caramel and coffee Chantilly.

The sight seemed to make Mr. Buatta giddy. One hand gripping his plate, he slid the other into his pocket and pulled out a swatch of shiny acrylic hair, which he attached first to his chin and then to his head. "Oh my God," one guest cried out. "It's Ringo Starr."

Faux beard in hand, Mr. Buatta

rose and meandered toward the door. He may have been planning an exit, but if so he was foiled. Spying him, Mr. Arnaud shot forward, thrusting a green bowl toward Mr. Buatta's chin.

"Surely," he demanded, with all the hauteur he could muster, "you are going to stay for the soufflé."



INCognito Mario Buatta, the decorator, donned a swatch of hair.



BUILDERS François Payard, the pastry chef, constructed a meal around the small majolica dishes collected by Susan Zises Green, the hostess.