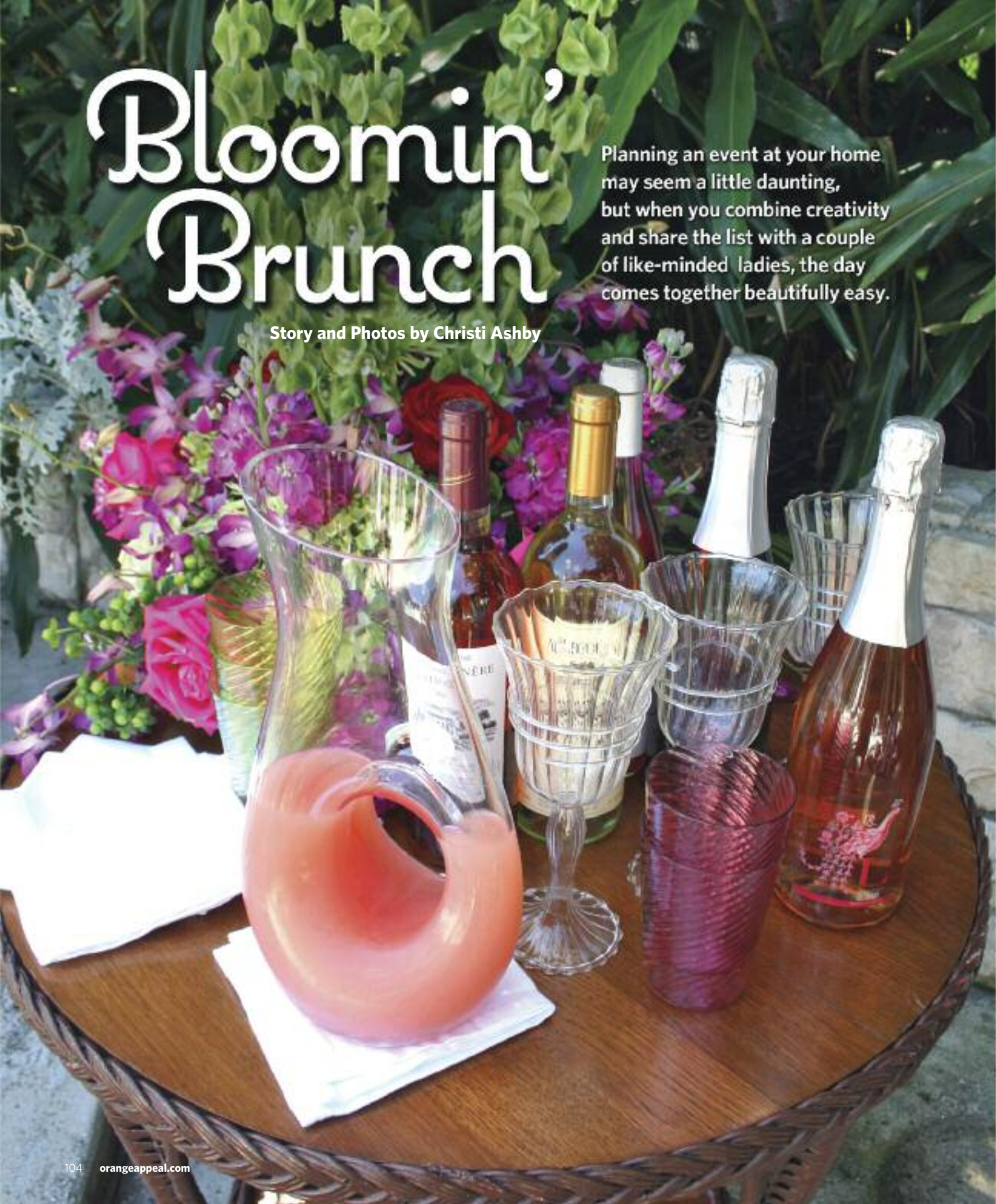


Bloomin' Brunch

Story and Photos by Christi Ashby

Planning an event at your home may seem a little daunting, but when you combine creativity and share the list with a couple of like-minded ladies, the day comes together beautifully easy.



I am fortunate to have two of the most gracious hostesses in my circle of close friends. They can throw together an impromptu cocktail party on the patio or down-home dinner for eight with a dose of grace and elegance and a dash of panache and surprise. Guests are always impressed — and these hostesses show no stress.

So how do they do it? Margie Supplee says, "Preparation is the key to a fun and relaxing gathering for the guests and the hostess." For her it's a matter of having great supplies on hand from napkins and serving ware to decorative items. She has a knack for entertaining with ease that begins with the proper prep work. The theme and menu are planned out weeks in advance, and if she is going to use a new recipe she tests it out at least a week before.

"I select and prepare recipes that can be made ahead of time. This is not the time to try something new. Experiment on the family, not the guests if you want to avoid any calamities. I even choose which serving pieces, dishes, utensils and glassware I will be using. Get them out early to make sure they all work together. And I set the bar up the day before, putting the ice out just before guests arrive," she adds.

Since her home is on a lake with spectacular views, the parties usually flow from inside — where you are greeted with a specialty drink and light nibbles — to outside. Guests have time to mix and mingle before choosing a seat poolside at one of several tables set with a mix of linens, dishes and glasses.

As an antiques and vintage dealer, she is always finding interesting new pieces to adorn the table. And as a master gardener she always makes sure to have plenty of tropical and flowering plants on display as well.

For our ladies brunch she wanted to contribute an appetizer and desserts that were light and elegant. She says the salmon mousse has been a hit at many gatherings and her plated foods are always dressed with garnishes of fresh herbs or fruit.

For Debbie Sheaf it's all about having her guests relax. An interior designer who is the consummate hostess, I think you could ring the bell at her College Park home, be ushered in and served some food and drink within seconds of your arrival. She clearly loves to entertain and added on to her pool home a few years ago to have even more room for her entertaining lifestyle.

"As an interior designer I am constantly trying to think outside the box. Knowing I was having a few get-togethers I wanted to change things up," she says. So recently she switched things around, situating the dining room in the former living room so there would be more space for larger dinner parties. Her large eat-in kitchen has a table that could seat up to eight — which is perfect for watching her last minute prep and plating.

Debbie has a huge collection of china and linens to choose from, so for our brunch she pulled out some pink-hued items. For the main meal she wanted to showcase the eggs in baskets complemented by some blanched asparagus with hollandaise and sliced green tomatoes accompanied by toast points.

"Entertaining is really just about putting your taste and style on display. Your table is a reflection of who you are as a host. When you're entertaining, wonderful linens are a non-negotiable; as you can see a little effort goes a long way. You're only limited by your imagination. Don't be afraid to pull out all the stops," she adds.





I recently hosted a small luncheon with a lemon theme. Everything from the table setting to the menu reflected touches of lemon and colors from yellow to bright green. For this brunch held at Debbie's home, I took my cues from her lovely old china. The deep pink leaves accented with gold created the color scheme that was then pumped up with a dose of lime green.

Since I wanted to make things very personal, I designed the invitation with the china pattern, Debbie's initials (she is known for her monogrammed items) and a harlequin background mimicking the walls in her dining room. From there the menu card kept the same look as the invitation and I place it in a gold frame, onto which I hot glued two antique serving pieces.

I love to give my guests a little something to take home and in this case wanted to combine the gift and place card. I was hoping to make small picture frames with a photo of each guest that included a small magnet on the back for a fun reminder of the day that could go on a refrigerator. However, I could not find what I was looking for. At Michael's I did find the perfectly colored boxes that I added name cards to and a ribbon.

The floral arrangements were made to match the decor by Lee James Floral Designs. I had stopped by earlier in the week with a photo of the table setting and he made varying arrangements to mimic the bold colors we had chosen.

The brunch was fun, festive and relaxing for all of us. Cheers to that!



I like to think being a gracious hostess is really about making everyone feel at ease. No one enjoys a party where the hostess is never seen or so busy she can't converse with everyone. You don't have to be Martha Stewart to make it work. Do what you are best at and leave some of the details to others — including Fresh Market and your florist.

I like to have a theme and not in the over-the-top or expected ways. I consider what the event will be like, often starting with the table setting. Will it be a casual buffet or seated luncheon? What are the main foods going to consist of? Will there be a specialty cocktail to start the festivities?



Recipes

Smoked Salmon Mousse

- 1 pound smoked salmon, 1/4-inch cubes
- 2 cups diced seedless cucumber
- 1/4 C chopped fresh dill
- 1/3 C chopped red onion
- 2 1/4 C sour cream
- 3 T fresh lemon juice
- 1 T freshly grated lemon zest
- 2 T cold water
- 1 envelope unflavored gelatin

Lightly oil an 8-inch round cake pan and line with plastic wrap. Spread 1 1/4 C salmon in cake pan. In a bowl stir together remaining salmon, cucumber, dill, onion, sour cream, lemon juice and zest until well combined.

Put cold water in a small heatproof cup and sprinkle gelatin over it. Set cup in a saucepan and add enough water to reach halfway up side of cup. Heat gelatin mixture over low heat until gelatin is dissolved and stir into salmon mixture. Spoon mixture over salmon in cake pan and chill mousse covered with plastic wrap for at least six hours and up to three days.

To unmold mousse, invert a large plate over the cake pan and invert mousse onto plate. Lift off cake pan and peel off plastic wrap. It works every time! Garnish with dill sprigs.





Lemon-Rosemary Cheesecake

- 2 15 oz. cartons ricotta cheese
- 1/3 C butter
- 1/2 C sugar
- 1/3 C all-purpose flour
- 1 T baking powder
- 1 t vanilla
- 3 slightly beaten eggs
- 1 T fresh rosemary, finely chopped
- 2 t lemon zest

Preheat oven to 300 degrees. Let cheese and butter stand at room temperature for 30 minutes. Grease and lightly flour a 9-inch spring form pan.

In large mixing bowl beat butter and sugar until light and fluffy. Beat in ricotta, flour, baking powder and vanilla until combined. Stir in eggs, rosemary and lemon zest just until combined. Pour into prepared pan.

Bake 40 minutes. Turn off oven and let cheesecake remain in oven for 1 hour. Remove; cool on wire rack for 15 minutes. Loosen cheesecake from sides of pan and cool for another 30 minutes. Cover and refrigerate at least four hours. Garnish with rosemary and lemon slice.

Pecan Mocha Torte

- 1 C pecans
- 2 T flour
- 2 1/2 t baking powder
- 4 eggs
- 3/4 C sugar
- 1 recipe mocha frosting

Prepare 2, 8-inch round cake pans. Combine nuts, flour and baking powder. In a blender, mix eggs and sugar. Add nut mixture and blend until smooth. Bake at 350 degrees for 20 minutes. Cool 10 minutes and remove from pans.

Frosting

- 1 t instant coffee
- 1 C whipping cream
- 1/3 C sugar
- 1/4 C cocoa

Dissolve instant coffee in whipping cream. Beat until thickened. Add sugar and cocoa. Beat until thick. Frost and enjoy. May be garnished with raspberries.