



Bon Appétit, June 2002

Up On The Roof

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A start-of-summer dinner party in a special New York setting: a garden oasis with a view that just happens to take in the Queensboro Bridge.

Oasis is probably the last word you would use in connection with Long Island City, an area full of old factory buildings just across the East River from Manhattan. But an oasis is exactly what Dagny and Tim DuVal have created in the brick building that once housed a foundry. The structure is both their home and the home of their thriving business, Plant Specialists, a landscaping company that designs and maintains gardens in rural and urban spaces.

The DuVals have conjured this handsome home out of a second-story loft with brick walls and light-trapping skylights, and it is ideal for entertaining—something that Tim and Dagny do without hesitation. “Sometimes we’ll plan ahead, but more often we simply call people and say, ‘Hey, want to come over for dinner?’ We do it by the seat of our pants,” says Dagny.

A big sitting area of comfortable sofas set around a huge coffee table flows right into the kitchen with a counter that’s a natural place for serving appetizers and drinks. There’s not much art, but it really isn’t necessary: Two movie-screen-size windows capture a view of the graceful arc of the Queensboro Bridge.



But best of all is the spectacular rooftop garden right outside. Mixing business with pleasure, Tim and Dagny have given free reign to their love of flowers, trees, shrubs, vines and herbs to fashion an Eden of colors, scents, and textures—oleander, hibiscus, Texas sage, quaking aspen. The garden also has sitting areas, meandering pathways, and a wisteria-covered pergola that shelters a large, inviting dining table. And if the setting weren’t already ideal,



there, just above, is the Cinerama vista of the Manhattan skyline.

“Whether it’s cocktails or a full sitdown dinner, we’re out here as long as the weather allows,” says Tim. For this evening’s party, the weather has cooperated fully: It’s clear, sunny, and warm. In short, a natural for a great time.



Setting the Scene

Dagny DuVal has an extensive collection of vases, bottles, and jars in an assortment of shapes, sizes, and colors. For the outdoor table, she simply lays a burlap runner down the middle and then lines up the containers. Taking inspiration from how the flowers look, and depending on what’s in bloom, she goes through the garden, snipping blossoms, leaves, and bits of vine to create casual little bouquets that are, in aggregate, completely engaging.

You don’t have to labor over doing an elaborate flower arrangement,” Dagny says. “Just mix little bits of lots of different things, and it all works.”

Friend and designer Tom Penn also helps set the scene: He created the silver flatware that’s used on the table, as well as silver cocktail picks for the olives in the Martinis.

The Menu Strategy

Tim and Dagny DuVal love to serve simple food that’s big on flavor. They also like to cook together: She usually works in advance on the appetizers, side dishes, and desert, while he’s the minuteman, ready to grill the main course in the kitchen’s corner fireplace.

The beauty of this menu (aside from the fact that the food is so good) is that much of it can be made ahead. The carrot-cauliflower soup and the sautéed squash can be prepped the day before and finished a few minutes before serving. On the day of the dinner, the “smashed” potatoes are started early, and while they are cooking, the endive spears with smoked salmon can be assembled.

While Tim grills the lamb, Dagny attends to the finishing touches—garnishing the soup, mixing the salad dressing—while guests gather at the counter to chat, nibble, and sip. This gives everyone a chance to be together while the hosts get everything ready. Dessert—lemon cream with a fizz from sparkling wine—can also be prepped ahead and garnished with berries and cookies before serving.



Going with the Flow

One of the keys to the DuVal's success in entertaining is their use of space. They take full advantage of the room they have and make the feast a movable one. This evening starts with wine and cocktails at the large counter that divides the kitchen from the sitting area. Then everyone slowly migrates out to the garden—really just an extension of the interior—and sits at the table for dinner.

Following the main course, hosts and guests move to an alcove-like part of the garden with outdoor chairs and a table, perfect for relaxing and enjoying the dessert and admiring the view. Finally, it's back to the kitchen, for one last glass of wine and lingering conversation.

By moving merely a few feet, the DuVals make each course seem like its own event. It gives a nice pace to the evening—no wonder no one wants to leave.

