

# LIVING THE ARTFUL LIFE

## Santa Cruz Caterer Diane Devine

BY JEANNE HOUSTON



PHOTO BY CHIP SCHEUER

A heart-shaped basket filled with sprays of miniature red chili peppers adorns the weathered wooden door at her home. No sign of a buzzer or bell. Of course not, that would not be in keeping with her style. I knock gently and within seconds, the door is flung open and she is greeting me with the warmth and playfulness that has never changed in the 30 years I have known her. Our friendship has not been one of intimacy more of longevity—familiarity and mutual admiration. We are the same age, have married and raised children and having survived the mental programming of women of the 1950s,

have embarked upon careers *after* the age of 40.

Dressed in white cotton sweater, fashionably shoulder-padded and white silk slacks tucked into silver and maroon cowboy boots, Diane Devine—artist, decorator, chef, gardener and one of Santa Cruz's most sought after party caterers—looks like a figure from one of her paintings: bold, dramatic, colorful and happy. Gigantic silver earrings accentuate her black curly hair and olive skin. Bands of silver jangle on the arm of the hand which holds out a glass of white wine.

I sit down on one of two royal blue

velvet-covered love seats that face each other in front of an open hearth, now crackling with a log fire. Set on the coffee table is an antique Chinese tray heaped with fresh vegetables tumbling out of a giant bird's nest. Orange nasturtiums scatter among varicolored vegies and a mysterious lake of green sauce nestles in the hollowed-out center of a purple cabbage.

Within minutes, I am taken into a world of sensory stimulation. Instant comfort. Instant nourishment. Instant visual delight.

"Diane," I say "here we are in our early 50s. I don't feel it. I know you don't either. Your career as an artistic caterer is skyrocketing and you still find time to paint, garden and be there for your children. What's the recipe?"

***"My other role model, I call her my 'flower mentor,' grew the most beautiful flowers I'd ever seen and decorated her home with unforgettable flair and flamboyance."***

Her dark eyes twinkle. "I think I am one of those lucky women who had wonderful role models to learn from. Both were older women: my grandmother and a friend I met when I was in my early twenties. She was 70.

"My grandmother was a great cook who owned a restaurant called the Mess Shack across from the shipyards in Alameda during World War II. My other role model, I call her my *flower mentor* grew the most beautiful flowers I'd ever seen and decorated her home with unforgettable flair and flamboyance. Both women were utterly unconventional. Both loved and lived their art. The most important thing they taught me was that some of the tasks expected of a housewife in the 50s—cooking, gardening and entertaining—could be developed into an aesthetic form of expression and be creatively fulfilling and fun."

Fun. The perfect word to describe Devine's lifestyle—not funky not satirical, not profoundly serious or even campy. I notice a huge leafless branch of wrinkling persimmons set in a blue and white vase next to the window. Unexpected, even ludicrous, to see a persimmon tree growing in the front ▶







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room. But it is a delightful surprise. It catches me off guard and I scan the room, searching for more aesthetic jolts and the accompanying rush of pleasure. My eyes are drawn to a plot of pansies. I look closer and see sprigs of tiny cherry tomatoes complimenting the purple petals.

"Of course, when I was younger and fully involved in the housewife role, I never dreamed I would make a career of it later. I had majored in education and art at San Francisco State before I married. After we moved to Santa Cruz and started a family I pretty much dropped the art part until our fourth child, April, was born in 1963. Then I began painting. But I always had a garden, collected recipes and loved to cook."

Devine attributes her penchant for natural, home-cooked cuisine to her grandmother who always used vegetables from her own garden in her restaurant. This is also a unique feature of Devine's catering service—the use of herbs, fruits, vegetables and flowers she has grown in her own garden.

She remembers summers in Fort Bragg, where her grandmother had tried to develop a dude ranch. "She had a cow chickens, turkeys, ducks, you name it. She encouraged me to make do and play with what was there—like little jars, boxes, rocks, weeds. She never bought toys. I used to play bakery and make cakes and cookies out of corn meal she had dyed with food coloring. That was my *play dough*."

"My uncle was a world-class gourmet chef. He used to take me horseback riding down to the beach. We picked abalone and crabs off the rocks and cooked them right there *au naturel*. He'd boil the crabs in sea water and barbecue the abalone in their shells. I grew up with delicious food, cooked and served in a natural manner. My grandma used to blow up chicken and turkey bladders to make balloons for me!

"But she wasn't just an apron full of daisies. She had style. She loved to dress up in furs and outlandish hats and jewelry and encourage me to be different, to be independent and resourceful and not be afraid to take risks."

I then recall a vivid scene that has remained in my mind for years. It happened at a local gallery opening many years ago. Recently divorced, Devine had come to the function alone. Dazzling in a white fur coat and satin pants, rhinestones dripping from her ears, she swept into the room like a Hollywood star. She could have been Elizabeth

Taylor! Feminine power emanated from her like electricity—stunning us all! And her impish grin and shining eyes said, "Isn't this outrageous! Isn't this fun?!"

Devine's *flower mentor* lived in Santa Cruz. Hidden from view by a thick wall of trees and hedges, her English cottage and grounds became an artistic retreat for Devine.

She recalls, "This woman was bold and dramatic. She used unorthodox objects in her food displays, in her floral arrangements, like eggplants and artichokes as center pieces and dried twigs jutting out of a spring bouquet. Now this was way before jicama, kiwi and sashimi were even conceived as appetizers. Onion soup and sour cream dip was as far out as anyone got. So, this woman who garnished salads with violets and chive blossoms was absolutely fascinating to me. I acquired a sense of spontaneity from her of informality and unpredictability."

As cheerful and up-beat as Devine's paintings, home and lifestyle appear, the transition from a family oriented existence to a career as a single woman was not easy. But her path has spiraled steadily upward. She started by baking pies for a local restaurant, which meant getting up at 3:30 a.m. Then she became social coordinator for the chancellor of UCSC, cooking gourmet meals for guests such as Gore Vidal and George McGovern.

In Carmel she created Clint Eastwood's favorite muffin and in 1985 won the National Salad Bar Award for the Point Restaurant in Monterey. She catered for weddings, huge corporate parties and small intimate dinners. All the while, she painted, decorated homes and gardened.

"There have been downs," she says. "But I see those disappointments as leading to something better. It's always worked out that way. And I feel lucky to be earning a living at what I love to do. I don't separate my cooking, my gardening or my painting from each other. It's all integrated as my life and I see it all as art, a holistic artful way of living."

When asked if she thought she might now be a role model for other young women, she grinned and said, "Well my daughter April Devine Wolcott has been the cook for Paul Anka's family since she was 18 years old. My daughter Kim is married to an artist and I did receive some fan mail after an article appeared about me in the newspaper."

Time has flown and I regret leaving her nurturing environment. As I get up, she says, "Before you go, come see my



## DINING DIRECTORY

sanctuary Several couples whose weddings I've catered here have had photographs taken in it."

We enter a room off the back hall. I am almost blinded by light. The brick floors, walls, ceiling and furniture are painted a brilliant white! It's her bedroom. Her bed is a thick mattress set on the floor with a coverlet of white cotton quilt. A mound of white lace pillows obscures part of a white Victorian headboard leaning against the wall, strings of blinking lights twined around it. Splashes of green from hanging ferns and potted plants relieve the shocking whiteness. I can't help but laugh. She is laughing, too.

"You need sunglasses to relax here," I say looking up at the blue sky glaring through the skylight.

"That's right," Devine says, and she's grinning. "I want my salads to be so bright and colorful you have to wear sunglasses to eat them, too!"

As I walk down the brick path to my car I glance around the yard, hoping for one last surprise, one last unpredictable

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middle of the field.*

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aesthetic hit. I notice the new meadow she has planted, full of herbs in pots and baskets and a row of white ginger plants. I look over to where her garden should be... and then I see it! Like a ghost from the past, a tall figure of a woman in a long dress stands in the middle of the field. I believe in spirits. Could this be an apparition of her grandmother or her flower mentor?

I approach the figure cautiously lest it disappear. But it remains immovable, still and serene. Then I realize what I see and I scream with delight. It's a scarecrow! She's wearing an antique pink Victorian dress, a Mexican sombrero garlanded with dried flowers hides her face. A basket of seed packets hangs from one of her arms, while the other sways slightly in the breeze, as if she is sowing the earth with seeds. She is the eternal grandmother, the wise old woman and with one foot planted in the vegetable patch and the other in the flowers, she keeps vigil over Devine's domain. ♣



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