

All in two days' work

Danielle Garonce's non-stop effort culminates in raves for the cocktail dinner for 12 she served from the client's kitchen

BY SUSAN SCHWARTZ, THE GAZETTE APRIL 14, 2010



Danielle Garonce starts shopping at Atwater Market the day before the event.

Photograph by: Phil Carpenter, The Gazette

MONTREAL - The square white serving plate held just-assembled crostini of Quebec goat cheese, a layer of Roma tomatoes that had been sliced thick and roasted with balsamic vinegar and thyme for three hours, and sautéed portabella mushrooms.

The dish was about ready to leave the kitchen and be circulated among the guests - but not before the final touches by the person who created it: a drizzle of honey, a small tangle of micro-arugula, a few drops of olive oil, a sprinkle of kosher salt.

As she held the squeeze bottle of honey over the plate, Danielle Garonce, a private chef catering a cocktail dinatoire for 12 at the apartment of Montreal interior designer Scott Yetman, explained that she was after a hint of flavour so subtle, so ethereal, that "you want someone to bite into it and go: 'Is that honey?'"

In her inflection was the reaction she clearly hoped the people she was cooking for that evening would have: surprise - and delight. She spoke with the conviction of someone who gets the power of food to provide nourishment and pleasure. The native Montrealer, who trained at the Institut de tourisme et d'hôtellerie du Québec, has been happy in the kitchen as far back as she can remember.

Garonce, a 25-year-old who took her first cooking class when she was 12, works as a private chef and a caterer, teaches cooking classes, maintains a website and blogs about all things related to food and dining.

Yetman hired her after tasting her cooking at a dinner party given by a friend. He actually likes to cook but was wowed, he said, by what Garonce can do with food.

A cocktail dinatoire is dinner, served consecutively in a series of small dishes to guests who are standing and circulating - not sitting at a table. One of the challenges is to serve dishes people can eat as they stand.

Among the items on the menu Garonce designed - and Yetman approved - were pasta shells filled with a mix of crispy rapini and broccoli, Parmigiano Reggiano and sausage removed from its casing, crumbled and cooked: they were served on porcelain spoons.

There were large shrimp, roasted and curled onto the lip of shot glasses holding homemade spicy marinara sauce - Garonce is allergic to shrimp, but makes it part of her menus because it is so popular with guests - and individual portions of chicken teriyaki, served with vegetables on a bed of sticky rice on disposable little bamboo plates.

The eggplant Parmesan bites were rounds of miniature eggplant coated with Parmesan and panko and topped with a spoonful of homemade fresh tomato sauce, a small scoop of fresh Italian ricotta and tiny leaves from a basil plant Garonce transported to Yetman's apartment and placed on his kitchen window sill: crunchy and smooth, fresh and fragrant. They would disappear in a flash.

Lamb chops were flavoured with sage, rosemary and a touch of garlic or else with a rub of cumin and sweet paprika and then, just before they were served, splashed with fresh lemon juice.

The flavours were wonderfully complex, but the dishes were unfussy and fun - like the chef, who favours a uniform of Converse running shoes and a white apron over a white Henley and blue jeans when she's working, and who makes the time to nip out of the kitchen and serve the guests.

"People like to see who's in the kitchen and to talk about the food," she said. "I often explain what I'm cooking - and I love hearing people's reaction to the food. And I love being around people: it gives me a chance to see the party - and to see what I'm adding to."

Hanging out with Garonce the day before and during the event, I learned how her work requires not just imagination and cooking skill, but also organization and list-making, physical strength and stamina: her workday the recent Thursday of the party began at 7:30 in the morning - and it was 11 before she dropped me off at home.

I'd met her the previous morning at 10 at the Atwater Market as, shopping list in hand, she'd gone from store to store, buying what she needed and packing it in cloth bags and in boxes - from Les Douceurs du Marché for dried porcini mushrooms for the risotto, which would be served on porcelain spoons, to Fromagerie du Marché Atwater for fresh ricotta, the goat cheese and prosciutto - she likes San Daniele - to the fruit and vegetable store, and then to the butcher for chicken and Frenched lamb chops. She's a regular at the market, and the merchants know her; sometimes she leaves her packages at the fruit store while she finishes her shopping.

I watched as she carted what looked like her body weight back to her 4-by-4 vehicle, then as she worked the better part of the day into the evening, preparing.

She loves working in her own kitchen, where the walls and cabinets are a soothing cream colour the Benjamin Moore people call Mascarpone. The sun streamed in the window as the iPod played Van Morrison's Astral Weeks album and the Raconteurs, some Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, and Jeff Buckley singing Hallelujah. Sweet.

Still, it's demanding work. Just as it is creative, it can also be hugely time-consuming and labour-intensive. Most of the dishes Garonce prepared for the cocktail dinatoire had several steps and, while some could be done in advance - she filled the pasta shells the day before, for instance, made the tomato sauce for the eggplant, as well as the teriyaki sauce, the marinara sauce, and the apple marmallata, a kind of apple compote, for prosciutto crostini - a lot could be done only at the last minute.

The following morning at 10, she was calm as she prepared to flash grill the lamb chops on her outdoor barbecue; she'd finish them in Yetman's oven just before they were served and the guests would sing their praises. "The food is delicious," Alicia Johnson, one of them, would say. "I think she is charming, in a totally non-pretentious way - a breath of fresh air."

Calm as Garonce might have been that morning, "my stress comes back at about 6:30 tonight," she said.

She grated the Parmesan. Picked up the shrimp and the micro-arugula for the crostini. Methodically packed the equipment she'd need in a carry bag nearly as long as a golf bag and twice as wide: knives, pans, aprons, dishtowels, chopping board, tongs, a jar of salt and her trusty Peugeot pepper mill.

"I go through each menu item and make a list of the tools I'll need," she said. There were also the sauces and other ingredients she'd prepared at home. At Yetman's apartment I helped as Garonce unloaded pan after pan of food from the vehicle's folded-down seats into the building and up in the elevator, with her huge gear bag.

In Yetman's elegant but not exactly spacious kitchen, she tied an apron around her waist, folded a dishtowel into it and got to work: toasting the bread for crostini, setting up prep stations where dishes would be assembled and from where they would be sent out. Put out the sautéed portabellas for the goat cheese crostini, the apple marmallata for the prosciutto crostini. Put rice in the steamer and turned it on. Started to sauté onions for the risotto. Checked her list.

The guests were due at 7, we were there before 5 and the two people helping Garonce were due by 6: she can cook and serve a sit-down dinner for 18 on her own, but not an event like this, with different dishes going out, one after the other, and then again - and, in some cases, yet again - for the better part of two hours. She'd worked with Daniel Bilodeau and Matthieu Des Rochers before, liked them, knew she could count on them to help, and to listen as she made sure they knew what

was in the dishes, in case guests had questions. "They really take pride in what they do," she said.

Her job that night was about way more than cooking: it was about knowing when to heat what and how to use the oven, what dishes should follow which, gauging the crowd and knowing what to send out when. "I'm really on my own," she said.

The crostini required only assembly, no heating or cooking, so sending them out first "buys me a little bit of time."

The risotto would have only a small window once it was ready to be served - risotto doesn't improve - and she had to re-heat or cook five other dishes in quick succession: the shrimp to be roasted; the eggplant rounds to be heated and the bites assembled; the chicken warmed in the oven and then tossed, on the stove, with the teriyaki sauce and vegetables. Garonce instructed Bilodeau to take care in assembling the dish, not to pour too much teriyaki sauce over the rice. "I don't want to have someone's dress ruined."

There were the shells to heat and then the lamb chops, which she wanted to serve last (but still make sure people had room for), to roast. But if Garonce felt stressed, it didn't show: she was cheerful as she worked. By 7:30, most of the guests had arrived and she pronounced herself "officially dans le jus" - a chef's term for when things are really busy in the kitchen. "But I'm feeling pretty cool," she said.

Cool enough, even, to head out of the kitchen for a few minutes with a plate of crostini to serve: apple marmallata, lemony spinach and prosciutto. "Perfect!" she'd exclaimed as she tossed the spinach with olive oil and lemon and tasted. "I love lemon on greens!"

For more about Danielle Garonce's classes, menus and catering, go to www.daniellegaronce.com.

Video: Drawn To food

Danielle Garonce talks to Gazette photographer Phil Carpenter about how she ended up in the catering business, despite a severe food allergy. Watch the video at montrealgazette.com/videos

Stand and Eat: Two Dishes For A Cocktail Dinatoire

Montreal private chef Danielle Garonce uses a blend of imagination, creativity and fresh seasonal ingredients in developing the recipes she uses. Here are recipes for two of the dishes she prepared for a recent cocktail dinatoire at the apartment of Montreal interior designer Scott Yetman.

Eggplant Parmesan Bites with Spicy San Marzano Sauce and Fresh Italian Ricotta

Makes 48 bites

This dish includes several steps, so it's labour-intensive - but totally worth it.

For The Eggplant Rounds:

4 miniature eggplants

Kosher salt

1 cup (250 mL) flour

6 eggs

1/2 cup (125 mL) finely grated Parmigiano Reggiano

4 cups (1 L) panko (Japanese breadcrumbs)

3 cups (750 mL) peanut oil

For The Sauce:

1 28-ounce (796 mL) can San Marzano tomatoes

3 tablespoons (45 mL) olive oil

1 teaspoon (5 mL) crushed chili flakes

2 cloves garlic, crushed

Kosher salt

For Assembly:

1 cup (250 mL) fresh Italian ricotta (see note)

1 fresh basil plant

Cut eggplant into 1/3-inch (8 mm) slices and sprinkle lightly with kosher salt. In one shallow dish, place flour. In another, place beaten eggs, a pinch of salt and grated Parmesan; in a third, place panko crumbs and a pinch of salt. Coat each eggplant round in flour, dip into the egg/cheese mixture, then press firmly into the breadcrumbs, first on one side, then the other. Place on a baking sheet, cover and refrigerate for at least an hour - or, if you're leaving them overnight, freeze so they don't get soggy.

For the sauce, dice tomatoes finely. Pass half through a food mill or else process in a food processor using the pulse feature. Then set diced tomatoes, puréed tomatoes and juice from the can and the olive oil in a frying pan with high sides and reduce to simmer when it begins to bubble. Add chili pepper flakes and crushed garlic and let simmer for 15 minutes. Add salt to taste and cook for another 5 minutes. Remove from heat.

Pour half the peanut oil to a height of about 1/2 inch (1 cm) in a 12-inch (30 cm) sauté pan with edges, and heat until veins form in the oil when a small piece of bread is dropped in. Fry four or five rounds at a time, depending on size, and flip when one side is golden brown. Don't overcrowd the

pan: it will bring down the temperature of the oil. Make sure rounds don't brown too quickly before the eggplant is cooked.

Halfway through frying, change the oil. When rounds are cooked, place on a plate with three layers of paper towel; replace towelling if necessary.

To serve, place a small amount of warm sauce on each round, then a small dollop of fresh ricotta, and top with a small basil leaf.

Note: The texture of fresh Italian ricotta is less watery than ricotta in packaged tubs - and the taste is far superior. Look for it in busy cheese stores such as Fromagerie du Marché Atwater, or Italian grocery stores such as Milano, at 6700 St. Laurent Blvd.

Prosciutto Crostini With Apple Marmallata And Lemony Spinach

Serves 6 to 8

These crostini should be assembled just before serving, although the apple marmallata can be prepared the day before, cooled and refrigerated.

For Marmallata:

2 tablespoons (30 mL) dry mustard (preferably Coleman's)

2 tablespoons (30 mL) black mustard seeds

Kosher salt and pepper

6 medium Empire apples

2 cups (500 mL) water

2/3 cup (150 mL) organic sugar

For Assembly:

Sourdough bread cut into 1/2 -inch (1 cm) slices, roasted at 400 degrees F (200C) for about 4 minutes per side

About 1 pound (500 g) baby spinach

3 tablespoons (45 mL) extra-virgin olive oil

Juice of 1 lemon

1/2 pound (250 g) thinly sliced prosciutto, ideally San Daniele, kept chilled until served

Put dry mustard into a small bowl and add 1/2 teaspoon (2 mL) water to form a paste. Add mustard seeds and a pinch of salt and pepper, and set aside.

Peel three of the six apples. Core and cut all six apples into 1/2-inch (1 cm) wedges. Put water and sugar in a pot and bring to a boil. Add the apples and cook at medium-high heat for 10 minutes. Add mustard mixture, stir well, and leave on medium-high for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally. Remove from heat and let cool.

To serve, spread layer of apple marmallata on toast and cut toast in half. Toss spinach with olive oil and lemon in a bowl, just enough to moisten. Season to taste with kosher salt and cracked pepper and place a small mound of spinach over the marmallata, then fold one or two slices of prosciutto, depending on size, over it. Serve immediately.

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