

## Dining in Your Own Backyard A Guide to East End Caterers

By Rachel Blatt, Alea Doolittle,  
and Elizabeth Fasolino

(07/10/2007) Simon Sheridan, the owner and founder of Exquisite Food, had a eureka moment while talking with a friend eight years ago. “We said baby boomers are going to be inheriting a lot of money and entertaining at home,” he said at lunch last month at La Fondita in Amagansett. “They’ve got these big houses, we said, and they’re going to show them off.”

He was right.

Okay, here’s the math. Consumer spending increased 6.9 percent in 2006. It was the biggest increase since 2000 according to the Commerce Department’s Bureau of Economic Analysis. And the government’s latest Consumer Expenditure Survey — stick with me on this — shows that spending by the most affluent households increased 8.1 percent, much more than any other income group. And what did they spend their money on? Fast cars, big houses, and good food and wine.

Mr. Sheridan’s prescience helped him go from being a line cook at a restaurant in Litchfield, Conn., circa 1998, to owning one of the East End’s most sought-after catering companies. But it’s a crowded field and success is all based “on word of mouth,” Mr. Sheridan said.

Catering isn’t just for big groups anymore, it’s also for busy people, and people who just prefer to eat at home instead of at a restaurant.

It’s not too late to arrange for some of the area’s best chefs to come to your house. Whatever your catering budget, here are a handful of the East End’s best.

### Art of Eating

The husband and wife team of John Kowalenko and Cheryl Stair, who own and operate Art of Eating and Hampton Event Management International on Montauk Highway in Amagansett, have been finely



Quail Hill, Durell Godfrey

tuning their full-service planning partnership for over 20 years. They have catered parties for scores of celebrities including Billy Joel and Martha Stewart, and are the event managers for the Ross School’s upcoming concert series.

Art of Eating has a staff of expert chefs, party planners, and trained waiters, prepared to run events for anywhere from 10 to 2,500 guests. “We’re not only there to help pick the right menu for your cocktail or dinner party, we can help you devise a budget or set

ticket prices and sponsorship options if it's a fundraiser," Mr. Kowalenko said.

Ms. Stair, who is the executive chef for Art of Eating, is a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, a former executive chef at the Laundry restaurant, and an aficionado of local and organic produce. Her culinary influences range from Brazilian, Portuguese, and Cuban, to Moroccan, Mediterranean, and Thai cooking. "We like to keep our menus diverse," Mr. Kowalenko said, "But we really make an effort to support the local economy, the farmers, the fisherman, and even the cheese makers."

Though Art of Eating is open off-season, Ms. Stair and Mr. Kowalenko make a special overseas trip every winter in search of new recipe ideas. This year the couple plans to comb Greece and Italy for inspiration. More information is available online at [www.hamptonartofeating.com](http://www.hamptonartofeating.com)

## **Claws on Wheels**

Kyle Richbourg, Will Lincoln, and Paige Richbourg watched as John Messinger, a teacher from the Ross School and a cook at Claws on Wheels, prepped lobster at a "classic clambake" on Atlantic Avenue Beach in Amagansett.

"My father-in-law started Claws 30 years ago," Sarah Minardi, the catering and event coordinator, said of the East End's oldest company specializing in casual clambakes and lobster cookouts on the beach.

Tony Minardi, the founder, a marine biologist and a science teacher in East Hampton schools, was doing research in the Boston area and saw how the cookouts were organized in New England and brought the idea back to the East End. He began by selling lobsters from a blue truck along the highway to Montauk. "Tony's still here," Ms. Minardi said, but the business was sold last fall to Bruce Sasso of Stuart's Seafood in Amagansett and Michael Bunce, who worked for Claws on Wheels in the summers and also ran B&B Clambakes.

"Ninety percent of the dinners we serve now are cooked, but in the old days people would just pick up the pot and cook it themselves," Ms. Minardi said. "We've known a lot of our clients for years, and we arrange everything, taking care of town permits for parties over 50, and making sure the beaches aren't booked for other events."

A classic clambake from Claws on Wheels begins with clams and mussels, followed by lobster, corn, and potatoes. Dessert favorites are Key lime pie and s'mores. "S'mores are a pretty big deal around here," Ms. Minardi said.

Claws on Wheels has a 25-person minimum for a catered event, but their seafood, salads, and desserts are available for takeout from their headquarters on Race Lane in East Hampton.

## **Cook With Class**

Cook With Class, founded in 2004 by Rob Endelman, a chef, brings healthful living and gourmet cooking into people's homes through hands-on group instruction. Dinner hosts and guests create their meal from scratch, while Mr. Endelman instructs them on everything from how to buy fresh produce, to how to hold a knife correctly.

"We don't do this in a facility," Mr. Endelman said, "It's about showing people how easy it is to prepare quick, healthy, and delicious meals in the comfort of their own kitchens."

Peeking out from a husk tomato patch on the two EECO Farm plots in East Hampton where he grows many of the ingredients for his interactive dinner parties, Mr. Endelman said he'd like to think his work is part of a new movement in food. "It's a macro-revolution to get people to live better, eat better, and make the planet better. If I get one person a year to stop drinking Coca-Cola and start eating cherry tomatoes, this world's a better place because of it."

After a 10-year bout as a trader with Merrill Lynch, Mr. Endelman left Wall Street in 2003 and enrolled at the Institute of Culinary Arts. He trained at the four-star Jean Georges on Manhattan's Upper West Side and now splits his time between East Hampton and New York City.

Cook With Class offers instructive four-course gourmet meals for groups of 8 to 15, as well as private cooking instruction, all in the laid-back setting of the host's kitchen. Clients decide the menu and the chef supplies cookware and utensils, and handles the shopping, which he supplements with produce from his garden.

A description of services and online testimonials are available at [www.cookwithclass.net](http://www.cookwithclass.net).

## **Distinctive Catering**

Cynthia Battaglia was once a student of painting and drawing at the San Francisco Art Institute, but now, in her 15th year as a caterer, the self-taught chef says her favorite artistic medium is food.

Ms. Battaglia works year round, dreaming up ideas out of a cozy kitchen located in the heart of Bridgehampton village. She handles event planning, weddings, brunches, lunches, small or large dinner parties for 8 to 400 people, cocktail parties, fundraisers, and more.

Ms. Battaglia shops locally for seafood and organic produce and scours food magazines and Web sites for new ideas and cooking trends. "It's my way of ensuring that my catering will be interesting and fresh all the time."

Though Ms. Battaglia's menus change with each season, some of her specialties include antipastos of roasted garlic and sun-dried tomato, assorted cheeses and tapenades, Caribbean buffets, Tuscan feasts, colorful desserts, and other dishes inspired by her Italian grandmother and her own travels through Europe.

Ms. Battaglia needs at least two weeks' notice before an event, but in the summer, she said, earlier is better. She has several cooks, party chefs, and servers on staff, and she personally cooks for parties for all first-time clients.

In addition to providing the food, she manages the securing of tents, rentals, flowers, music, decorating, and additional party staffing, and she ensures compliance with county codes and permits. A sampling of menus is available at [www.cynthiabattaglia.com](http://www.cynthiabattaglia.com).

## **Exquisite Food**

"Exquisite Food has gone to a new level this year," Mr. Sheridan said. "I was an arrogant greenhorn when I arrived here. I thought I could make \$1,000 a day. I was an idiot, but then I went to Food and Co. and I got into private chefing."

Mr. Sheridan credits his big break to a 20th-anniversary party he was hired to execute for a husband and wife. The additional guests included their child, a friend, and the child's nanny.

The cost was \$25,000 and the event took place on a beach in Montauk. What did he serve? Deviled eggs, baby back ribs, veal chops, barbecued chicken, New York shell steak, grilled Chilean sea bass, chopped Israeli-style salad, Cristal champagne, and strawberry and banana daiquiris.

"It was an unbelievable amount of protein," Mr. Sheridan said, "But they were on the Atkins diet." During the party an airplane flew overhead trailing a banner that proclaimed the couple's love.

Mr. Sheridan said that he's known for his weddings, but that he does lots of smaller events, and has even started a new home delivery service. The idea for the delivery service expands on work he's done for a client who has 18 to 20 guests for dinner for 10 days in a row every summer. Mr. Sheridan provides the staff and food for dinner each evening.

Clients are choosing simpler, fresh, stylish cuisine with less pretension these days, Mr. Sheridan said.

"One of the things people love most is fresh Vietnamese summer rolls wrapped in lettuce," he said. Other favorites are roasted corn and tomatoes with garlic, herbs, and butter inside a portobello mushroom cap, and bread pudding with bourbon sauce. "Basically," he said without any modesty, "you could serve that sauce with cardboard and it would taste great."

Mr. Sheridan also writes a food column for New England Bride magazine. Mr. Sheridan's Web site is [www.hamptonsexquisitefood.com](http://www.hamptonsexquisitefood.com).

## **Robbins Wolfe Eventeurs**

Chris Robbins, a co-founder of Robbins Wolfe Eventeurs with Ken Wolfe, is a busy man, especially with the East End's social season in full swing, and with offices in New York City, Locust Valley, and Bridgehampton.

The catering company, headquartered on Butter Lane, is a step up from the early days when Mr. Robbins had to pre-prepare East End parties in Manhattan during the week, and then transport everything out here for the weekend events. But these days, despite a growing roster of clients and a busy calendar, the Butter Lane location can handle it all.

Mr. Robbins said many Saturdays are already booked, but there are still openings available for smaller events. Three weeks is optimal for planning private parties and dinners. Months of planning are required for major events that his company helms, such as the Hampton Classic Horse Show.

Some of the most requested items on the caterer's menu are the corn pudding, cheese straws, cold salmon plate, cold gazpacho, sweet pea vichyssoise with a mint creme fraiche, and grilled leg of lamb with a fresh mint pesto, Mr. Robbins said.

Most of the company's clients value the consistency and convenience that come from working with a single event planner for parties in New York City as well as on the East End. "As many as 50 to 60 percent of our clients use us for events in both locations," Mr. Robbins said.

More information is available at [www.robbinswolfe.com](http://www.robbinswolfe.com).