



Back Alley Affair

An architect's studio transforms into a sophisticated dinner party venue where creative design types meet, mingle, and enjoy great food and conversation

BY WHITNEY BOSSIE

Anarrow alleyway is a most unlikely place for a dinner party. It brings certain adjectives to mind: dark, dirty, maybe even sinister. Chic, elegant, and stylish just don't make the list. However, if it's architect Ruard Veltman's alley, the list doesn't count.



Entertaining

It's early October and the alley behind Veltman's Elizabeth studio has been transformed into an intimate and sophisticated setting for one of his sometimes-biannual, sometimes-quarterly dinner parties. Veltman hosts these events for an always-changing mishmash of design professionals, friends, and clients.

Dinner parties have been a staple at Ruard Veltman Architecture since the firm's 2005 beginning. He sees them as a way to bring together a diverse set of people who have a dovetailing interest in design. As the tradition gained momentum, invitations became a hot commodity.

"People started asking about coming after hearing that the parties are lot of fun," says Veltman. "It's great that our past guests have mentioned the dinners to others, because that means they enjoyed themselves. It's really just a chance to bring people together. It's unexpected, and that makes for a good time."

The small outdoor space behind the studio, located on Baldwin Avenue, houses a long, narrow table set for twenty-five guests. Much like Veltman's classically cool, all-white studio space, the setup is a testament to the elegance of simplicity. Vases of tightly grouped roses, the soft glow of candlelight, and a crisp white tablecloth are the only décor needed while a white awning stretches overhead, providing protection from finicky fall weather.

"We keep the preparation fairly simple," says Veltman. "The awning is put up, Mary Lindsey [Warren, the firm's business and marketing manager] does the flowers, and Porcupine Provisions takes care of everything else."

Which brings us to Porcupine Provisions. Leslie and Bruce Schlernitzauer run the local catering company, and Veltman and his staff cannot praise them enough. "They always do such a wonderful job," says Warren. "We pretty much leave the menu up to them, and we're never disappointed."

And neither are the guests. The seven-course menu features, among other delicious items, a spinach salad with roasted pear, bleu cheese, pumpkin seeds, and a pomegranate vinaigrette; seared scallops; tomato bisque paired with a miniature grilled cheese sandwich; pan-seared venison tenderloin; and a caramelized plum atop a lemon cardamom pound cake.

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The Schlernitzauers carefully pair wines from vineyards across the globe with each course. Several French wines are served, from notable vineyards like Maison Eric Isselée in Cramant, Alex Gambal in Burgundy, and Château Fougères des Montesquieu in Bordeaux.

Veltman organizes the dinner to ensure the conversation flows as easily as the wine. Previously, he says, seating went by alphabetical order: guests sat themselves according to the first letter of their first names. The catch? No place cards. It's an icebreaker of sorts, forcing guests to introduce themselves to one another in order to find their proper seats. Before October's event, though, Veltman and his staff discovered that the alphabetical system wasn't ideal. "Once we knew who was coming, we looked at the way the seating chart would work out and didn't like it," says Veltman. "It wasn't enough of a mix-up."

So instead of the alphabetical system, guests are told to seat themselves any-



Veltman turns to Porcupine Provisions—run by Leslie and Bruce Schlernitzauer, above—to cater all of his boutique dinner parties. On the menu this evening: seared scallops, pan-seared venison tenderloin, a caramelized plum atop a lemon cardamom pound cake, among other delicious items.

where at the table. The only rule is that spouses sit separately. Veltman also encourages guests to switch seats at any point during the meal.

It's a strategy that works quite nicely. By the end of the evening, new acquaintances chat like old friends about home design, décor, the best shows on television. Among those in attendance are interior designer Lisa Sherry and her husband photographer, Ron; Duke Energy CEO Jim Rogers and his wife, Mary Anne; Circa Interiors owner Cindy Smith and her husband, Steve; and furniture and fabric professional Tom Verellen and his wife, Sabine.

"The conversation gets better as the night goes on," says Veltman. "And the night goes on long after dinner is over. Some people stay until 1 or 2 in the morning." 🍷

Whitney Bossie is a Charlotte-based freelance writer.



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