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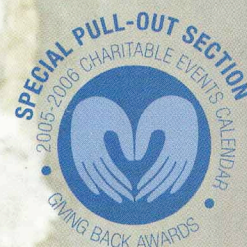
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# Among Friends

*Legendary chef Tom Colicchio pays a personal visit to Kiawah's Vanderhorst Plantation*

BY PATRICIA AGNEW • PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICK MCKEE

Picture the epitome of luxury for a discerning foodie. Whatever you might have imagined, chances are it wouldn't surpass this: having highly acclaimed chef Tom Colicchio of New York's Craft and Gramercy Tavern restaurants prepare an elegant dinner for you and seven of your best friends. But for Anne Darby Parker, founder of the Children's Museum of the Lowcountry, this is a dream about to come true.

While most people consider it a luxury if they even get to dine in one of Colicchio's restaurants, Parker and her husband Scott are going one better by having Colicchio come to them. Together with Doug Blair, executive chef of Voysey's at the exclusive Cassique club, the celebrated culinary



**Man of the Hour:** Chef Tom Colicchio, the talent behind legendary New York restaurants Craft and Gramercy Tavern, puts the final touches to the roasted suckling pig prepared in the cutting-edge kitchen.

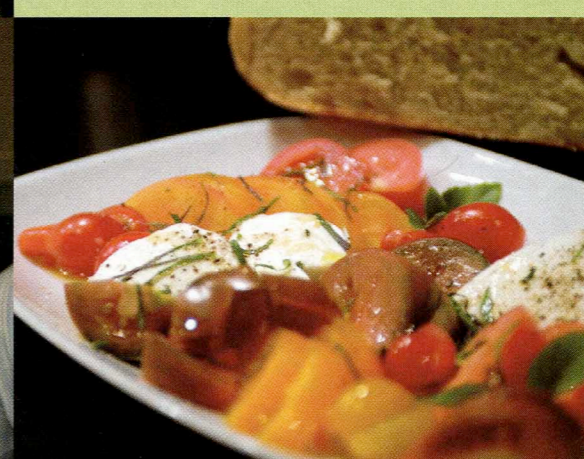
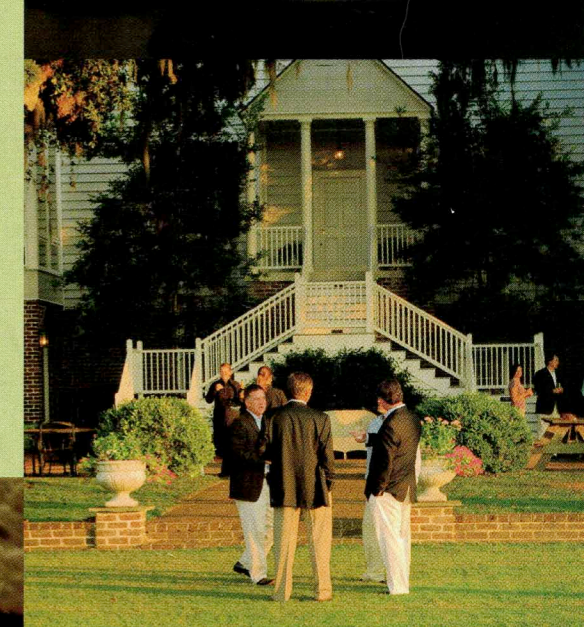
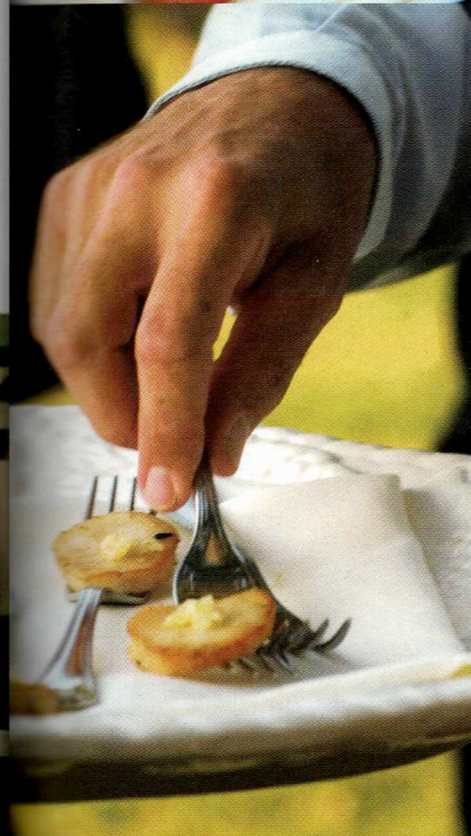
headliner—who has been the consulting chef at Voysey's for three years—is preparing a three-course feast for the Parkers and friends at the Vanderhorst Plantation on Kiawah. Tonight's adventure is in honor of an annual reunion, a tradition that's taken place for more than 10 years.

Anne shares dear memories of Kiawah and its landmark plantation home with her brother Charles P. Darby, III—known to his friends and family as Buddy—and their eight

cousins, all grandchildren of Vanderhorst descendant Alberta Sottile Long. The 10 cousins and their families jointly assumed responsibility for the restoration of the property over a decade ago. The home is an impressive yet comfortable tribute to the island's traditions, affording breathtaking portico views of Vanderhorst Creek and the Kiawah River, while handsomely reflecting its years of history and its quiet beauty.

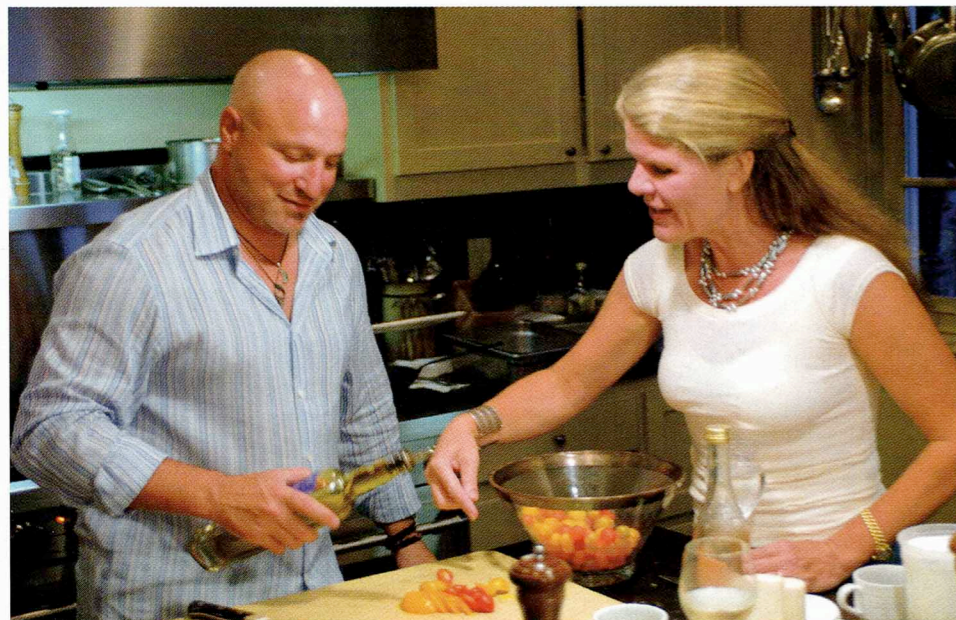


**Some Enchanted Evening:** From left: Heirloom cherry tomatoes stuffed with jonah crab salad make a colorful hors d'oeuvre to be passed to guests during cocktail hour. Delicate pink rhubarb mojitos finished with a twist of lime are the evening's signature drink. As the Lowcountry evening light is as its most beautiful, the friends head out across the lawn of the plantation to enjoy the breezes by the dock. For the vibrant first course, chefs Colicchio and Blair prepare yellowfin tuna quenelles with watermelon ginger gelée, baby spinach salad, and heirloom tomatoes with mozzarella. As dusk falls, the men trade tales and discuss the summer. Voysey's server Corina Adams offers a tray of mouth-watering canapés as the guests raise their glasses to friendship, familiarity, and fantastic food. Though the atmosphere is intense in the kitchen, Chef Doug Blair relishes the time he's able to spend catching up with Colicchio. Seared dayboat scallops with lemon confit, delicately presented atop forks, prove a hit among the guests.



**Fab Five:** The "sistahs"—Mollie Johnson, Lynne Brooke, Anne Darby, and Caroline Finnerty—savor the beautiful Lowcountry evening on the dock with Anne's dad, Dr. Charles Darby, Jr.





**With a Little Help From My Friends:** Left: Tom and Doug run through last minute details in the kitchen before the guests take their seats in the elegant dining room. Top: With candlelight casting an ethereal glow, the long-time friends get to talking about summers past on Kiawah Island. Above: Anne dashes into the kitchen to ask Tom if she can lend a hand—the two chat easily as they prepare the heirloom tomato salad.

This evening, the air is charged with the familiar laughter and excitement of this annual gathering of a group of four special women and their families—"the sistahs" as they've come to call themselves—who've been loyal friends since high school. Each year since its restoration, they've made it a tradition to bring their husbands and children back to the house to celebrate the summers together that have become a very special part of all their lives.

The kitchen in the Vanderhorst Plantation is an expansive display of wood and light with a breakfast porch offering floor-to-ceiling panoramic views of the Kiawah River, the perfect setting for preparation of the seasonal, indigenous foods for which both chefs are well known. They get right to work, beginning to prepare the hors d'oeuvres: foie gras tourchon on brioche with rhubarb chut-



**Compliments to the Chefs:** Charles "Buddy" Darby, III (far left) raises his glass to toast chefs Blair and Colicchio for an evening of impeccable culinary excellence with great friends.

ney, seared scallops with lemon confit, and heirloom cherry tomatoes stuffed with jona crab salad to be passed during the cocktail hour. The food is simply beautiful; delicately seasoned and perfectly delicious.

As things heat up in the kitchen, Mollie Seignious Johnson, daughter of the late Lt. General George M. Seignious, II (Ret.), recalls how the friends first became acquainted. "Anne and I met shortly after my family and I moved to Charleston. She was a great friend and resource when my mother died soon after we moved, and we've been dear friends ever since." She explains that the other two members of the group, Caroline Simons Finnerty and Lynn Burris Brooke, were also high school friends. As she shares their history, Mollie flips through albums chronicling the lives and times of these island reunions.

"We started coming here soon after the house was remodeled. We were all newly married, just beginning our families," she explains, "so it provided the ideal place for returning with our children each year and the perfect venue for vacationing together." At this point the photos seem to come to life

as the real-life children of the longtime friends—the "petite yayas" as their parents call them—race outside en masse to entertain themselves elsewhere.

The sudden quiet reveals the melodic summer chant of cicadas as the sun begins to set over the marsh. As the adults venture outside for fresh rhubarb mojitos and canapés by the creek, the men trade tales. Though the women are the founding members, their husbands provide a great deal of inspiration and lend their own unique personalities to the group dynamic. "We're very fortunate that our husbands genuinely liked each other from the very beginning," grins Lynn, "or it could have been a challenge!" During the cocktail hour, the family patriarch, Dr. Charles P. Darby, Jr. makes a brief appearance. The founder of the MUSC Children's Hospital, Dr. Darby admits to hosting renegade groups of yayas on nearby Cap'n Maynard's Island.

Soon the exquisite aromas and escalating activity in the kitchen reveal that dinner is well underway. As chefs Colicchio and Blair expertly organize their *mise en place*, it's

clear that they share a camaraderie developed through years of working together. They were first introduced at New York's Gramercy Tavern, and it was this association that led to their current partnership. In his role as consultant, Chef Colicchio visits Kiawah often and his relationship with the island is not unlike his philosophy regarding cuisine. "I choose to celebrate the abundance of wealth in food that can be found in this area in the same way as these people can be celebrated," he explains. "They're real people with the true qualities of family and friendship, and I love visiting them here." Tonight, it's not so much about the job as it is about his cherished friendship with the Darbys and their extended families.

The atmosphere in the kitchen is pleasant, yet intense, as Chef Blair expertly arranges the first course—vibrant heirloom tomatoes with fresh buffalo mozzarella, quenelles of yellowfin tuna with watermelon ginger gelée, and baby spinach salad. The group has already gathered in anticipation at the formally set table, and the conversation is animated as the first course is served with rousing success.

As the platters are cleared, Anne ventures into the kitchen and politely asks Colicchio if he needs any more help. He smiles good-naturedly as he prepares to



**How Sweet It Is:** After the final course has been cleared, the staff from Voysey's serve the restaurant's signature sweet delights to those who still have room.

in good taste

serve the next course, roasted suckling pig finished with port mustard seed jus from local provider Tom Chewning of Sweet Bay Acres, and roasted grouper prepared with olive oil, lemon juice, and orange dust. Small platters of braised corn, fresh butter beans, morel and lobster mushrooms, and luscious Wadmalaw mashed potatoes grown by local green grocer Celeste Albers accompany the entrées.

Momentary quiet descends on the dining room as the guests focus on the singular pleasure of enjoying the food. Chef Colicchio takes this brief break to recount how he came to visit the island and why he loves returning as often as he can. "The first time I visited, I fell in love with this place, the people, and the access to such amazing local ingredients," he says. Known for his inventive and bold

American cuisine, Chef Colicchio's style is based upon building flavors naturally without excessive manipulation and by including products from the local seasonal harvest whenever possible. Chef Blair echoes this philosophy, describing his food as "seasonal, simple, and the purest possible," using the unusual varieties of fresh herbs he grows himself to further expand the flavors of the food.

While Colicchio enjoys his visits and feels the locals have truly embraced his food and his family, he shares that it's people like Doug Blair who make his time here easy. "Life on Kiawah is about the marsh, the abundance of life, and the flow and changing of the tides," he remarks. "It's through my partnership with Doug that we're able to find the right local ingredients and products at local farms that make the food unique."

As dessert is served, the chefs are toasted with gusto as Buddy leads the other guests in raising their glasses. Servings of dark chocolate orange tres leche cake, delicate mascarpone cannoli with bing cherry salad, and crowd-pleasing orange "creamsicle" ice cream circulate among the delighted guests. After dessert, Buddy slips back into the kitchen to compliment all those who were involved behind the scenes in the production and service of the amazing meal. "Fantastic job, guys!" he says with a smile.

As the evening ends the petite yayas return from their adventures. Clearly a symbiotic group like their parents, they admit to sharing many secrets collected over their 11 years together as self-proclaimed "Gullah cousins." Several of the oldest agree upon one of the best—they all learned to drive here by the time they were 12 (but not on the main road, of course!) After all, in Caroline Simons Finnerty's words, "This is what the reunion is all about—growing up together." Tonight, it's also about tradition and an evening of celebration in a very special place—with friends, family, and two chefs who truly cook from the heart. ⑥

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