

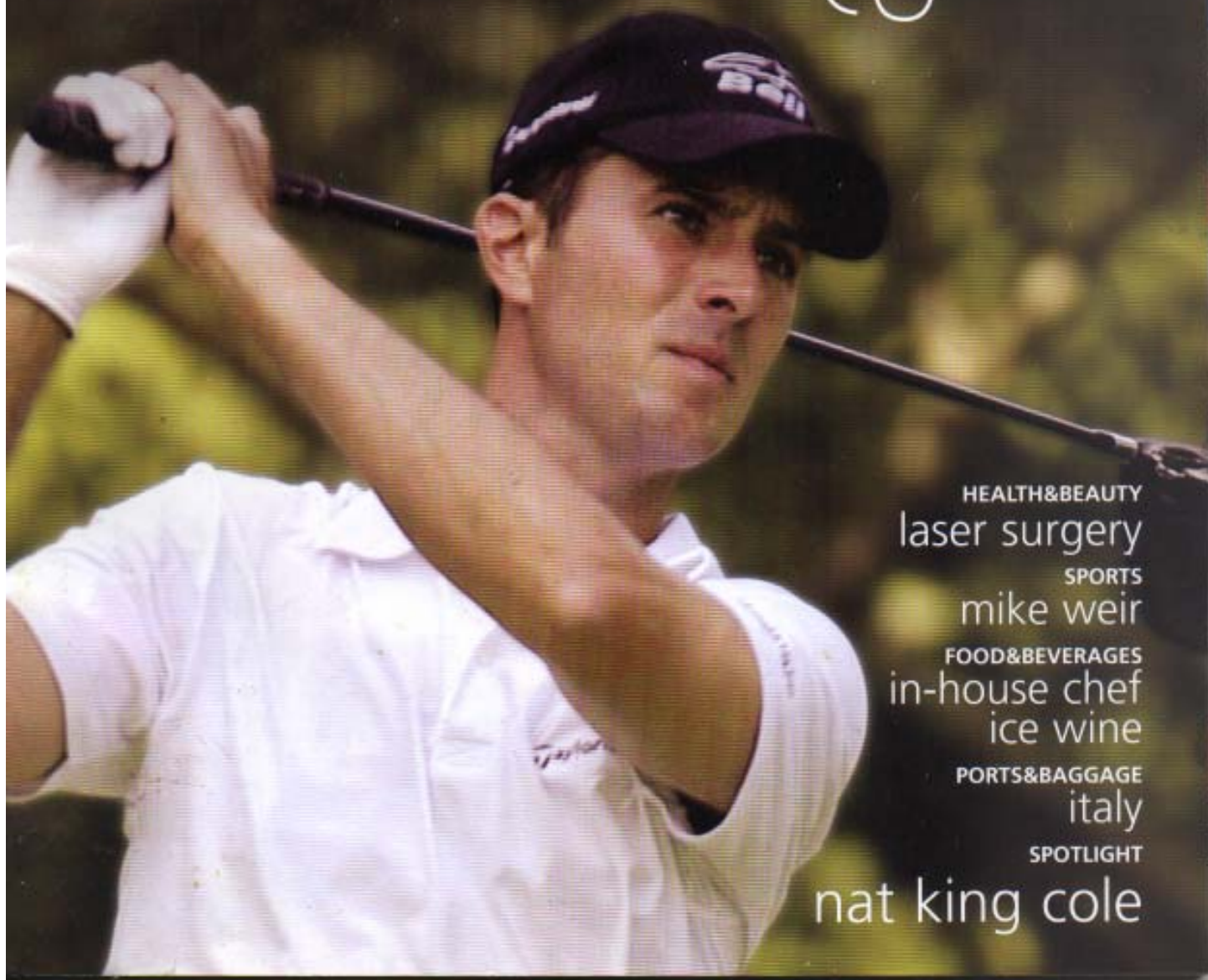
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In-House Chef

by Barbara Ramsay Orr



"The best thing is, all my friends enjoyed themselves, and Rachel and I had a great time too. At the end of the night, we sat back with a cup of coffee and a brandy, and surveyed a perfectly tidy kitchen. Better yet, there were enough leftovers for lunch the next day."

You'd never know that guests are scheduled to arrive in an hour for a dinner party. The hostess, Rachel, is putting the finishing touches on her make-up, while host James is still in the shower. Where's the last-minute rush, the scramble to set the table, the worrisome doubts that the hors-d'oeuvres won't be ready on time? This couple is way too relaxed to be entertaining in style shortly. How did they do it? They didn't do it. It's the newest and trendiest way for busy modern couples to enjoy the pleasure of a meal cooked at home and shared with friends, without giving up a precious Saturday. They've hired a chef.

James and Rachel are representative of today's young professionals. James' job as head of IT for an aeronautical firm is exciting and challenging, but also all-consuming. Rachel is a registered massage therapist with her own clientele and, while she loves her work, it's notoriously physically draining. So, when the weekend arrives, neither of them is interested in the effort needed to plan, execute and clean up after a dinner party.

But here's the contradiction. Both were raised in traditional families who celebrated food. Their ingrained idea of entertaining is not about a restaurant meal, but about friends around the dining room table sharing good real food. "I remember the dinner parties my Mom used to give," says James. "She was famous for them, and she would cook for days. Her table was set with fine china, flowers, silver and candles. Those were magical nights, with great conversation and an intimate style. I want that same experience with my friends, but it's out of the question with our lifestyle."

Enter the chef for hire.

These culinary pros will do your grocery shopping, cook your food, set a fabulous table, serve the meal and leave the delectable leftovers in your fridge. They even clean up the kitchen before they leave. Now that's trouble-free entertaining.

Over the past few years, there's been a boom in the personal chef market. Five years ago, there were about 10 personal chefs across the country. Now, the Canadian Personal Chef Alliance (CPCA), founded by chef Terry Henderson in 2001, has ballooned to 150 members. The CPCA website is a good place to look for a chef for that special dinner party. There are listings for chefs and their contact information from all across North America. Although the personal chef they used is listed on the website, James and Rachel got their chef for hire through word of mouth. Laura McCain, of Creekside Winery in Jordan, frequently used David Paquet for special functions at the winery. She knew he made house calls, and that he was not just an excellent chef, but an engaging personality. She passed his name on to James, and the process of hiring the in-house chef began.

The first step was for David to come to their home for an on-site inspection. "It is essential that I know what kind of space I'm dealing with," says David. "I can cope with anything from a galley kitchen to a barbecue on the deck, but I have to know in advance how to design the meal and what equipment I have to bring with me." He brings all his own cooking utensils, including knives, because it's easier than rummaging around in strange cupboards to find things.

Part of that initial interview process is getting to know each other's entertaining styles. A personal chef has to be able to match the party personality of the client. "I've worked for people who wanted a chef who was virtually invisible, as well as for those who wanted me to be part of the entertainment. It all depends on the mood that the client wants to have for the dinner party."

and the personnel and equipment that needs to be supplied. You can design an evening to fit your pocketbook. And, according to James, it's worth every cent.

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If you're considering a personal chef for your next party, start by consulting the CPCA website (<http://www.canadianpersonalchefalliance.com/>). It's important that you find someone whose personality fits with your style of entertaining. But once you've found that special chef, sit back and relax. There's someone in the kitchen, and it isn't you.



James and Rachel wanted an informal and friendly party, and on the night of the dinner, David was kept busy, not just cooking but telling stories and sharing cooking tips. He was a fundamental part of the ambiance. The menu was decided well in advance, with input from David combined with the client's food preferences. The menu they eventually agreed on began with Tuscan goat cheese crostini with tomato bruschetta, followed by a main course of Paella Valencia, a gorgeous layering of saffron arborio rice with chicken, smoked sausage, shrimp, mussels and fresh artichoke hearts. Then there was a salad of radicchio, pear and endive with lemon olive oil splash, walnuts and stilton cheese, to wake up the palate. The dessert course was individual lemon mousse cheesecakes with fresh fruit.

David shopped for all the ingredients. "Some clients prefer to do the shopping themselves, and that is fine with me too, but I have great sources for the best ingredients – from the farmer who raises the best exotic greens, to the supplier of foie gras." He can supply wait staff, a sommelier, or a bartender. If the client needs china or silver, more chairs, or a fabulous centrepiece – David can arrange it.

While the dinner was expensive, it wasn't exorbitant. The price varies enormously depending on the menu, the number of people to be served,

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