

FAST AND

# Festive

Author Erika Lenkert plans a swank holiday soirée in six days



*Long-time friends Brooke Correll and Erika Lenkert toast a seamless party. Erika fashioned the caviar tree, right, from a Christmas tree ornament holder.*



Writers are known to embellish—it's in the blood. But when Napa Valley author and resident Erika Lenkert says she can throw a party together at the *last minute*, she's not exaggerating. Hosting a recent collective *holiday fête* for nine good friends in the food and wine community, Erika pulled out all the stops: *personalized* invitations and menus, professionally-arranged flowers, delicious food and rare wine—all tied in with the wine country world, all touched with trademark *panache*, and all planned and executed in six days. 🍷 Though she often entertains at her own Napa home, for this event Erika chose the stylish *Sonoma* County abode of long-time friends Dave and Brooke Correll, decorated with a combination of modern elegance and vintage whimsy. With its beamed, vaulted ceilings, spacious dining room and unobstructed views of wooded Sonoma hill and vale, the 1950s era single-level home (lauded in *House Beautiful* in 1959 for its "large and bold-scaled space") was an ideal setting for the refined but informal *dinner party* of friends. 🍷 The key to the evening: delegation. While Erika

STORY SUSAN KOSTRZEWA ♦ PHOTOS VICTORIA YEE





*A gathering of friends. Clockwise, from upper left: Hiro Sone and Lissa Doumani put the finishing touches on the meal; Sterling caviar from Sacramento is a new group favorite; Sue Furdek and Lenkert demonstrate caviar body shots—de rigueur at their parties; wine from Lisa Minucci and Brooke Correll is worth celebrating; Brooke and Dave Correll's son Roy joins in; Amgad Wahba sips Domaine Chandon Étoile Brut; persimmons and prosciutto make for a colorful holiday salad; Jerusalem artichoke soup warms a chilly winter night.*



prefers to cook and plan each detail herself when entertaining, she's not afraid to rely on the help of her guests in a pinch. In this case, her think-tank happened to include noted chefs, wine experts and food gurus who were happy to lend a seasoned touch to the festive fun. The result: an easy elegance with an emphasis on seasonal food, vintage wines and family tradition.

"More and more people are planning at the last minute because of busy schedules," explained Lenkert in the few quiet moments before guests arrived. "This type of entertaining is typical. I usually throw most things together the same day. I'm better under pressure."

Lenkert is used to deadlines, having specialized in food, wine, travel and lifestyle features for numerous publications over the last 10 years, including *Wine Country Living*. In this capacity, she befriended industry colleagues like house hostess Brooke Correll, who handles marketing for Napa's Clos Du Val winery and has been Erika's close friend for nine years, as well as the others invited. While Lenkert has honed an appreciation for fine cuisine and wine, she has also gained respect for the artists who make them. "Tonight, everyone is bringing what they excel at," she smiles.

Surveying the décor, it's evident the professional party girl has her own specialty: savvy style. Working with Sonoma floral designer Anne Appleman and Wine Country Party & Events, Lenkert set out a spread worthy of a Dickensian repast. A deep burgundy table linen accented vibrant hues in Appleman's tulip table arrangements, as well as Correll's vintage, 1950s-era floral plates. Personalized menus and place cards (designed by Lenkert with Mountaincow software) added an elegant and intimate touch to the table. Nearby, Appleman's enormous claret and emerald-hued magnolia wreath hung from a stone column, completing the holiday glamour.

*As guests arrived,* it was clear they were accustomed to a combination of collective participation and easygoing fun. Bottles of Domaine Chandon Etoile Brut and Brut Rosé sparkling wine were laid on ice by Chandon winemaker Wayne Donaldson while food stylist and chef David Shalleck took straight to the kitchen to prepare cups of Sterling Royal Caviar on potato with a champagne dressing. Arriving with her husband Amgad Wahba, general manager of Marin's Sushi Ran, Martini House restaurant sommelier Lisa Minucci kicked off her shoes and decanted a three-liter bottle of rare 1980 Clos Du Val Cabernet Sauvignon—a perk from Brooke Correll.

As the group sipped bubbly and admired Lenkert's signature creation of the night, an intricate gold caviar "tree" from which the glasses of caviar hung, they chatted about the modern approach to cuisine. "There are obviously things you need to know about pairing food and wine," commented Donaldson, "but it's really anything goes. You need to have fun."

Sue Furdek, PR director of Chandon, says that sense of fun is much of what makes wine country parties so successful. "There is more permission to get together and entertain here," she explains. "We get together all of the time and try to outdo each other in a fun



## Menu

Sterling Royal Caviar on  
Potato in Creamy Champagne  
Dressing

Oysters on the Half Shell with  
Meyer Lemon Mignonette

Classic Shrimp Cocktail

Domaine Chandon Étoile  
Brut Sparkling Wine

Domaine Chandon Étoile  
Rosé Brut Sparkling Wine



Persimmon and Arugula Salad  
with Prosciutto

Jerusalem Artichoke Soup  
with Goat Cheese Sandwich

Albert Boxler Riesling  
Alsace Reserve 2000



Pan-Roasted Duck Breast with  
Oven-Dried Grapes, Celery  
Root Puree and Cabernet  
Sauvignon Sauce

Clos Du Val Cabernet Sauvignon  
Napa Valley 1980



Pavlova with Vanilla Ice  
Cream, Passion Fruit Sauce  
and Strawberries

Kracher Welschriesling  
Beerenauslese Neusiedlersee  
Cuvée 2002



**The last-minute party girl.**

*Hopeful hosts will learn to plan and execute everything from informal beer bashes to sumptuous sit-down dinners with Erika Lenkert's book about party-giving, **The Last-Minute Party Girl: Fashionable, Fearless, and Foolishly Simple Entertaining**, (McGraw Hill, \$14.95). Napa Valley resident and Wine Country Living contributor Lenkert offers imaginative methods of home entertaining, including whimsical invitations and decorations, essential kitchen equipment and easy-to-follow recipes from some of her favorite urban and wine country chefs.*

— — —  
*From left: Amgad Wahba, Sue Furdek and Wayne Donaldson enjoy a rare 1980 Clos Du Val Cabernet.*

way. Of course, there are certain people who have specialties."

Brooke Correll sums it up simply. "You learn food and wine by osmosis living here," she laughs, taking a sip of champagne. Her point is well carried by Wahba, a native of Alexandria, Egypt. Though his festive fez speaks of exotic climes, he poses happily for photos with his glass of Chandon—the picture of exuberant assimilation.

On the arrival of the owners of Terra restaurant in St. Helena, Hiro Sone and Lissa Doumani (chef and pastry chef), it's a free-for-all in the kitchen. As David, Hiro and Lissa vie for counter space on which to create, the production line begins, and each artist adds his/her trademark touch to plates as they are arranged: Hiro and Lissa discuss the correct cut for the persimmons in the salad, David arranges the goat cheese sandwiches for the artichoke soup with good-humored flair, and Erika makes her rounds.

According to Sone, who planned the soup and principal plate elements of the meal (and helped Lenkert with the salad), the dishes were chosen for their simplicity (a nod to the last-minute nature of the event), and their winter seasonality. For the salad, persimmons added a touch of the holidays, as well as an acidity to whet the appetite. On a cold winter's night, soup, especially creamy artichoke soup with a touch of local goat cheese, is a welcome comfort. And for the main course, local duck raised by Liberty Farms in Sonoma offered the kind of delicious decadence that speaks of a special event.

Guests at the table indulged in the dishes, clearly reveling in the diversity of flavors and personalities that created them. In addition to the Clos Du Val Cabernet, wines like a reserve Riesling from Alsace (chosen by Minucci) were paired to perfection with plate after plate of collective creations.

*Though "anything goes"* was a repeated theme of the evening, the party was laced with homages to family tradition. In tribute to her own Australian connections (and fellow guest Donaldson's as well), Doumani prepared a sumptuous Pavlova drizzled with passion fruit sauce. "It's a family recipe," Doumani reflected. "We always have this for celebrations in my house, and this is the way my grandmother would make it."

Other guests recounted their own holiday traditions—diverse but all about food: the Corrells do an old-fashioned Dec. 24 affair with oysters on the half shell, turkey and roast beef, and—in reference to Brooke's Kentucky connections and David Correll's Virginia upbringing—pecan pie; Hiro and Lissa host about 24 guests for Christmas Eve dinner, including Lenkert and Shalleck; and for Lenkert, it's Thanksgiving with mom, dad, step-mom and "a gaggle of good friends."

As the evening winds down, the table hums with laughter and the close confidences of good friends. Eyes sparkle in the flickering flames of candles; guests relish last sips of wine. Erika relaxes in the glow of a feat well accomplished. Among this group of wine country notables, the emphasis is still very much on the artless appreciation of food, wine and friends. *(please see recipes on page 70)*



**STERLING ROYAL CAVIAR ON POTATO WITH CREAMY CHAMPAGNE DRESSING**

Yields 8 servings

2 large Yukon gold potatoes, peeled and diced into 1/2-inch cubes (about 1-1/2 to 2 cups)

1/2 cup sour cream

1/8 cup sparkling wine

2 tablespoons chives

1/4 teaspoon lemon zest

2 ounces Sterling Royal or other caviar

Salt

1. Make potatoes: Bring a large pot of generously salted water to a boil. Boil the potatoes until just cooked through, about 5 minutes. Drain and cool immediately; set aside.
2. Make dressing: In a mixing bowl combine the sour cream, sparkling wine, chives, and lemon zest.
3. Assemble: Add the well-drained, cooled potatoes to the dressing and gently mix until combined. Fill 8 shot glasses almost to the rim with potato salad. (You can also use 4 martini or other glasses, Chinese soup spoons, or other small containers.) Top with 1/4 ounce of caviar. Serve immediately or keep chilled until service.

COPYRIGHT ERIKA LENKERT 2003

**CREAM OF JERUSALEM ARTICHOKE SOUP AND GOAT CHEESE SANDWICHES**

Yields 4 servings

**FOR OVEN-DRIED TOMATOES FOR SANDWICHES**

1 ripe Roma tomato  
salt and pepper

**FOR THE SOUP**

2 tablespoons butter  
2 teaspoons chopped garlic  
1/3 cup chopped onion  
1 lb. Jerusalem artichokes,  
washed and sliced 1/4 inch thick

2 cups chicken stock

1 cup cream

**FOR THE SANDWICHES**

8 baguette slices (about 2 inches in diameter,  
1/4 inch thick)

2 tablespoons butter

1 medium size basil leaf

4 tablespoons Laura Chenel fresh goat cheese  
salt and pepper, to taste

**FOR THE GARNISH**

1 teaspoon chopped chive

1. Make oven-dried tomatoes for sandwiches: Preheat the oven to 250 degrees. Cut off both ends of the tomato, then slice into 8 discs. Lay tomato slices on a parchment paper-lined cookie sheet. Season with a little salt and pepper and dry in the oven for 30 to 45 minutes, until the skin starts to shrivel, but is still soft. Set aside.
2. Make the soup: Melt the butter in a medium saucepan over high heat, add the garlic and onion, and cook until soft, about 2 minutes. Add the Jerusalem artichokes and sauté about 2 minutes. Add the stock and simmer until the chokes are tender. Add the cream and bring back to a boil. Season with salt and pepper. Puree in a blender until smooth. Strain through fine sieve. Keep warm.
3. Make the sandwiches: Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Melt the butter in a medium sauté pan over medium heat, add the baguette slices, sauté until golden brown, flip over and sauté the other side until golden brown. Set aside.

4. Chop the basil roughly and mix into the cheese. Lay 4 baguette slices on a cookie sheet and top each with a slice of tomato, 1/4 of the cheese mixture, another tomato, and finish with the remaining slices of bread. Gently press them. Put in the oven and warm through.
5. Assemble: While the sandwiches are warming, bring the soup to a boil. Divide the soup to four hot soup bowls. Place the sandwich in the middle, sprinkle with chives, and serve.

COPYRIGHT HIRO SONE 2003

**PAN ROASTED DUCK BREAST WITH OVEN DRIED GRAPES**

Yields 4 servings

**FOR THE GRAPES**

32 seedless red grapes, on the stem

**FOR THE DUCK**

4 duck breasts, silver skin and  
extra skin removed

2 teaspoons soy sauce

2 teaspoons sake

1/8 teaspoons grated ginger

1/8 teaspoons grated garlic

1 tablespoon olive oil

**FOR CELERY ROOT PUREE**

1 celery root, softball size, peeled,  
cut into 1-inch cubes

1 Yukon gold potato, baseball size,  
peeled, cut into 1-inch cubes

2/3 cup milk

2 tablespoons butter

salt and pepper to taste

**FOR THE SAUCE**

1 cup Cabernet Sauvignon

1 cup brown duck stock or brown chicken  
stock

1 teaspoon chopped bittersweet chocolate

1 tablespoon butter

sugar, to taste

1. Make oven dried grapes: Preheat oven to





250 degrees. Lay the grapes on cookie sheet. Put in the oven, dry them about one hour until the skin starts to shrink. Cool. Remove the stem. Set aside.

**2.** Marinate the duck: Score the skin of the duck. In a medium mixing bowl combine the soy sauce, sake, ginger, and garlic. Marinate duck, covered and refrigerated, at least one hour.

**3.** Make the puree: Put the celery root and potatoes in a medium sauce pot, cover with water, add one tablespoon of salt, put on high heat, bring to a boil then simmer until the vegetable are soft. Drain the water very well. Add the milk and butter, bring back to a boil. Remove from the heat, season with salt and pepper. Pass through a food mill and keep warm.

**4.** Cook the duck: Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Season the duck with salt and pepper. Heat a sauté pan with the olive oil over high heat, add the duck skin-side down, lower the heat to medium, and cook until the skin is crispy and golden brown. Turn over, put the duck in the oven and roast about three minutes. Transfer to a warm plate and cover with an upside-down mixing bowl. Discard the grease.

**5.** To make the sauce: In the same sauté pan used for roasting reduce the wine to one tablespoon over high heat. Add the stock and reduce to half cup. Turn the heat to low and whisk in the chocolate and butter. Season with salt, pepper, and sugar (if the sauce is too acidic, use some sugar to balance the taste).

**6.** Put the duck and grapes in the sauce. Warm them up over low heat. Divide and mound the celery root puree on the center of four hot plates. Slice the each duck breast to six pieces and arrange them around the puree, skin side up. Arrange the grapes around the duck. Spoon the sauce over the duck. Serve.

COPYRIGHT HIRO SONE 2003

**PAVLOVA WITH VANILLA ICE CREAM,  
PASSION FRUIT SAUCE,  
AND STRAWBERRIES**

Yields 6 servings

**FOR PAVLOVA**

- 3 tablespoons cornstarch
- 2 tablespoons plus 3/4 cup sugar
- 1 teaspoon distilled white vinegar
- 1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 3 ounces egg whites (about 2 1/2 eggs),  
at room temperature
- 1/8 teaspoon cream of tartar

**FOR PASSION FRUIT SAUCE**

- 6 passion fruit
- 1 tablespoon granulated sugar
- 2 tablespoons water

**FOR STRAWBERRIES**

- 4 cups strawberries, stems removed
- 1/4 cup sugar
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 2 tablespoons Grand Marnier or  
Cointreau (optional)

**FOR ICE CREAM**

- 1 quart Häagen Dazs vanilla ice cream  
or other ice cream

**1.** Prepare the pavlova: Preheat the oven to 250 degrees. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper and dust it with 1/2 tablespoon of the cornstarch.

**2.** Mix 1 tablespoon of sugar with remaining 2 1/2 tablespoons cornstarch and set aside.

**3.** Mix together the vinegar and vanilla; set aside.

**4.** In a heavy-duty mixer fitted with the whip attachment, beat the egg whites and cream of tartar on a low speed until foamy, then increase speed to medium and beat until soft peaks form. Turn the speed up to high and slowly beat in the remaining 1 tablespoon plus 3/4 cup sugar, no more than 2 tablespoons at a time,

waiting a minute between additions, until stiff, glossy peaks form, about 7 minutes. (Take your time.) Quickly add the cornstarch and sugar mixture and beat on low speed. Beat in the vinegar and vanilla. Mound the egg white mixture onto the parchment paper into a slightly concaved disc approximately 10 inches in diameter. (To hold the ice cream and sauce.)

**5.** Place the pan in the oven and immediately decrease the oven temperature to 225 degrees. Bake for 1 1/4 to 1 1/2 hours, or until the meringue is dry and hollow sounding when you tap it on the bottom. It will color very slightly but should be close to white; if it starts to brown, decrease the oven temperature to 200 degrees. Cool to room temperature.

**6.** Strawberries: Quarter the strawberries; if they're large, cut them smaller, into 1/6ths. In a mixing bowl combine the strawberries, sugar, lemon juice, and liqueur. Set aside for at least 1 or 2 hours.

**7.** Passion fruit sauce: Cut each passion fruit in half and scoop all the pulp and seeds into a small bowl. Add the sugar and water, and mix well. Strain through a fine-mesh sieve into a bowl, pressing against the pulp and seeds with the back of a large spoon to extract all the juice. Refrigerate.

**8.** Assemble: Transfer the pavlova to a 12-inch or larger serving platter. Slice ice cream into 1/2-inch thick slices, and gently place them on top of the pavlova's concaved center. Drizzle passion fruit sauce around the ice cream and the plate. Place the strawberries around the pavlova with a few berries over the ice cream. Slice into wedges and serve immediately with any extra sauce and strawberries on the side.

COPYRIGHT LISSA DOUMANI, TERRA RESTAURANT

**RESOURCES**

Anne Appleman, Floral Designer;  
707.938.3571.

Clos Du Val Winery: 800.993.9463;  
707.259.2200; [www.closduval.com](http://www.closduval.com).

David Shalleck: (Also does recipe  
development, restaurant consulting)  
415.775.8552; [david@volochef.com](mailto:david@volochef.com).

Domaine Chandon: 707.944.2280;  
[www.domainechandon.com](http://www.domainechandon.com).

Martini House: 707.963.2233;  
[www.martinihouse.com](http://www.martinihouse.com).

Mountaincow LLC: 800.797.MCOW;  
401.743.1773; [www.mountaincow.com](http://www.mountaincow.com).

Sterling Caviar: 800.525.0333;  
916.991.4420; [www.sterlingcaviar.com](http://www.sterlingcaviar.com).

Sushi Ran: 415.332.3620;  
[www.sushiran.com](http://www.sushiran.com).

Terra Restaurant: 707.963.8931;  
[www.terrarestaurant.com](http://www.terrarestaurant.com).

Wine Country Party & Events; 707.  
252.0711; [www.winecountryparty.com](http://www.winecountryparty.com).