



FACING PAGE Author and cooking show host Marie Saba serves her happy guests black bean tortas with pico de gallo on a serving dish from Breed & Co.

Let Us Entertain You

Step up to the plate and learn how to throw a knockout party at home.

By Katie Bernstein

Photography by Lesley Nowlin

Event produced by Marie Saba and Kennedy Creative

Something about summer inspires hordes of Austin hosts and hostesses to stay in and throw their own dinner parties, barbecues, and cocktail hours in backyards and on patios across town. Why go out when an in-house to-do is more personal and gives you a chance to show off what you've learned from all those Saturday afternoon Food Network marathons? We chatted with cookbook author and cooking show host Marie Saba (formerly Marie Hejl) and creative director of Kennedy Creative Anne Campbell, who invited us over for an evening of tapas on the terrace overlooking the Westlake hills and gave us some entertaining tips à la carte.

Let's Dish

Marie Saba knows her way around a kitchen. The lovely author of the newly released cookbook *Cooking With Marie: On Any Occasion!* and host of the nationally televised show *Cooking With Marie*, filmed out of her parents' kitchen in Westlake, showed us how to use a home kitchen to prepare festive and easily managed dishes. When choosing a menu, Marie first decides on a theme to set the mood, which also helps to narrow the options and provides ideas for a decorating motif.

Because Marie wanted this event to be less formal than a seated dinner, she chose to make several different small plates to share. "I decided to go with a Latin theme, so I coordinated the drinks to tie in," she says. She also recommends letting the season dictate the menu and using seasonal produce whenever possible. In this case she used watermelons to make *sandia* martinis

and lemons for *limonitas*, even employing the fruit itself as a fun way to serve the frosty cocktails.

The evening's menu also included homemade salsas and pico de gallo served with tortilla chips for guests to snack on when they first arrived. Next came platters of flank steak sliders with caramelized onions and chipotle mayonnaise, black bean tortas, and shrimp ceviche. As a sweet finale, Marie served a sumptuous canella crème brûlée, using a mini blowtorch to brown the sugary top before her admiring guests.

"When cooking for people, it helps to do some things in advance," she says. "I froze the watermelons and lemons, prepared the beef, and made the salsas the day before."

Thinking about the weather may also help you decide what type of food to serve. "It's hot outside and people don't really want warm food for an outdoor party," explains Marie. Choosing foods that don't need to be served hot also alleviates stress for the host. "The sliders can be served room temperature, and the shrimp ceviche can be chilled. This way, you don't have to worry about warming everything up at the same time."

Decor Galore

While Marie got things cooking in the kitchen, the experts at Kennedy Creative took the reins in styling the affair. Kennedy Creative specializes in custom event design and production, taking care of everything from the planning and scheduling to the styling and staging of events for their clients. Keeping it local for this



Flank Steak Sliders with Caramelized Onions and Chipotle Mayonnaise

Makes 10 small sandwiches

Ingredients

- 1 (1 1/2 pounds) flank steak
- 1 bottle store-bought hickory marinade
- 2-4 tablespoons light olive oil
- 2 large yellow or white onions, thinly sliced
- Salt and pepper for seasoning
- 1 cup reduced-fat mayonnaise
- 2 tablespoons minced canned chipotle pepper in adobo
- 2 teaspoons fresh lime juice
- 3 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro
- 10 small rolls, halved horizontally

Garnishes

- Jalapeño peppers
- Cilantro sprigs
- Lime wedges

Instructions

Place the flank steak (lying flat) in a large ovenproof dish with two-inch sides. Spoon half of the hickory marinade over one side of the steak. Flip the steak and spoon remaining marinade over the other side. Marinate for 30-60 minutes at room temperature.

In a large skillet or saucepan, heat 2 tablespoons olive oil over medium-high heat for about two minutes. Add onions and stir so that all of the slices are lightly coated with oil. If desired, add remaining 2 tablespoons of oil and stir again. Season onions with a small amount of salt and pepper. Stir the onions every three or four minutes, cooking for about 10 minutes or until onions are soft and translucent. Then stir the onions every one or two minutes for about five minutes, or until they are brown around the edges. (If onions begin to stick to the pan, add 2 tablespoons water and stir vigorously.) Continue stirring onions for about five more minutes, or until all of them are brown, soft, and sweet. Set aside.

Set oven to broil. Place the flank steak on a foil-lined baking sheet. Broil on top rack for six minutes. Remove from the oven and flip steak. Broil second side for six minutes. Let steak rest for 10 minutes.

Make mayonnaise while steak is resting. In a medium bowl, stir together mayonnaise, chipotle pepper, lime juice, and cilantro. Taste. Add 1-2 teaspoons adobo sauce if you want a stronger chipotle flavor, or chipotle pepper if you want more heat.

Using a sharp knife, slice steak against the grain into thin strips. The steak should be medium on the ends and medium-rare in the center. (If you prefer medium-well on the ends and medium in the center, broil steak for an additional 2 minutes per side.)

Place two or three strips of steak on the bottom half of each roll. Place a small mound of caramelized onions on top of the steak. Spread mayonnaise on the underside of the top half of the roll. Arrange finished sandwiches on serving platter and garnish with jalapeño peppers, cilantro sprigs, or lime wedges. Serve immediately.

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From left to right: *Limonitas*, or “lemonade with a kick,” are fun and refreshing cocktails for a get-together; Anne Campbell of Kennedy Creative recommends decorating in odd numbers and layering colors and textures when styling; Black bean tortas served with crema mexicana, tomatillo salsa, queso fresco and pico de gallo, are perfect for a patio party.

gathering, the crew selected place settings and glasses from Breed & Co. Creative director Anne Campbell stresses the importance of color and texture when decorating for an event. “You can mix textures and patterns as long as colors are coordinated,” she says, adding that decorating with pops of white in the summer adds a fresh feel.

Anne selected matching invitations and place cards from Silver Paperie and used the lime green, blue, and white invitations as a starting point for the color scheme, later adding pops of orange with the napkins and flowers. “Sending out invitations dresses up the event, and having a menu printed is a nice touch,” she says.

Including a little gift or memento at each place setting will leave a lasting impression. “We chose candles and small woven bags from B.Chic. Inside you could leave a note that says, ‘We loved having you’ or a small memento, like a wine stopper,” says Anne. She also adds that a succulent or flower at a place setting is an elegant touch; she often uses orchids, which can be left out of water.

The Kennedy Creative team selected bunches of vivid flowers from Westbank Flower Market, and the florists pulled together colorful arrangements using the chosen stems. The turquoise-and-white mosaic canisters were an innovative departure from clear vases and helped to tie the design motif and the color scheme together. “Keep the centerpiece of the table below 14 inches or make it tall and skinny to allow guests across the table to see each other,” Anne advises.

When it comes to presenting the meal, Marie is an expert in the field. “Don’t overcrowd the plate. Less can be more,” she says. “Rustic realness can be nice, and lots of color and texture make the plate more appetizing.” Anne suggests making some drinks ahead of time so you won’t have to spend time mixing a large number of drinks once the guests arrive.

The Hills Are Alive

For Marie, entertaining in the winding Westlake hills where she grew up is a pleasure. “Being in Westlake makes Austin feel like a small town,” she says. “I run into people I know at the grocery store almost every day.” Favorite shops like Breed & Co. and Westbank Flower Market are convenient stop-ins when she’s entertaining.

“A lot of Westlake houses have islands in the kitchen that guests love to crowd around and watch you cook,” says Marie. She also appreciates the incorporation of porches in many of the Westlake hilltop houses; they add a sense of privacy and are ideal for alfresco dining.

“I love having parties at home and getting to make your own dishes and sharing,” she says. “It’s much more casual, you don’t feel rushed, and people can come and go. And it’s more personal than going out.”

Whatever the size or scope of your fiesta, bringing guests into your home doesn’t have to entail months of planning. By cooking and decorating your personal space for friends, you’ll surely create an unforgettable affair.



Sandia Martinis

Makes 2 servings

Ingredients

- 2 (2 to 3 pounds each) "personal" watermelons
- 1 cup Absolut Citron vodka
- 1/3 cup triple sec
- Juice of 2 limes
- 2 to 3 tablespoons superfine sugar
- 1 cup ice cubes
- 6 mint leaves, if desired

Instructions

Using a large knife, slice a 1- to 2-inch piece from the stem end of each watermelon, so that a full circle of pink flesh is exposed. (This will be the top of the martini "glass.") Then slice a small piece off the base of the watermelon, exposing only a bit of the white flesh. (This will be the bottom of the martini "glass.")

Freeze both watermelon martini "glasses" for at least 2 hours and up to 24 hours.

Using a melon baller, scoop pink flesh out of each watermelon. To prevent leakage, leave about 1/2 inch of pink flesh around the sides, and 1 inch on the bottom. Place the watermelon flesh, along with any juice, into the bowl of a food processor. Add sugar and lime juice. Puree until smooth. Place a strainer over a large bowl. Pour the watermelon puree through the strainer and capture the resulting watermelon juice in the bowl.

Transfer watermelon juice to a large pitcher. Add vodka, triple sec, and mint leaves if desired. Stir vigorously. Add ice cubes and stir again. Refrigerate martini mix for at least 30 minutes and up to 24 hours. Stir martini mix again before serving.

Fill frozen watermelon martini "glasses" with the martini mix and serve immediately with a straw.

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WHERE TO BUY Flowers by Westbank Flower Market, Aqua Jar by Fabien Jouvin Paris, \$119 at Westbank Flower Market; Invitation and Placecard by Whitney English at Silver Paperie; Eclectic Gift Pouches by Two's Company, \$12 at B.Chic, Tangerine Napkin by Bodrum, \$7 at Breed & Co.

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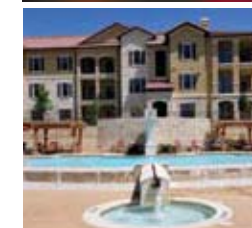
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