

A Brookline hostess prides herself on her parties

By Jane Dornbusch | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT DECEMBER 25, 2012



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Ann Marchette hosts social get-togethers that mix food, chat, and a guest speaker. Among the bites are pigs in a blanket.

BROOKLINE — Ann Marchette isn't exactly Gertrude Stein, but she does like to run a salon for her friends and enjoys her role as hostess. She modestly claims, "I love entertaining, and I think I do it well."

But don't take her word for it. Friends and family are eager to sing her praises. Says Robin Gorenberg: "She's the kind of person who can make a special occasion out of nothing." Janet Slovin, Marchette's sister: "She's a wonderful hostess and a good

cook.” Diane Schuster: “Only Ann could do this.” And Dottie Feinzig: “Every party is amazing. She’s” — wait for it — “the hostess with the mostess,” a reference that originally referred to 1950s Washington, D.C., socialite Perle Mesta.

The occasion for this outpouring is a session of City Salon: Boston, the latest in a long string of Marchette brainstorms. As Marchette, 70, tells the story, a year ago, she had surgery and lost her job. “I was hanging around the house, lying on the couch. My sister said, ‘You should combine your talents; how about starting a salon?’ ”

Yes, a salon, defined by Webster as “a fashionable assemblage of notables . . . held by custom at the home of a prominent person” — a sparkling intellectual affair, popular in 17th-century Paris, 18th-century London, and, if Marchette has her way, 21st-century Brookline. Meetings of City Salon: Boston are held in Marchette’s Brookline apartment.

“At first, I laughed,” says Marchette. “I said, ‘What am I going to do, invite people to the house and have them pay to eat?’ ” In fact, that’s exactly how it’s played out. For \$25 a head, Marchette, a former restaurant owner, serves what she calls a “lovely light supper, with wine people can drink from real glasses.” Each of the meetings features a speaker and, it is hoped, the kind of lively conversation that made Paris’ Hotel de Rambouillet such a hot spot in the 1600s.

On this evening, held pre-election, the theme is “Policy Advice to the President,” proffered by Barry Bluestone, a professor of political economy at Northeastern University. Michael Dukakis is a colleague of Bluestone’s and a onetime employer of Marchette’s sister, and Marchette had earlier secured assurances that the former governor would be stopping by at some point.

Marchette likes to gear the food and decor to the evening’s theme. When a recent speaker addressed the topic of Jewish influence in America, it was “mini bagels with a



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Ann Marchette is a former restaurant owner who has created a business of hosting "salons" where about 25 paying customers come to eat a meal prepared by Marchette, listen to a guest speaker, and engage in lively discussion.

shmeared with cream cheese,” she says. For this salon’s political slant, she picked up campaign materials from both candidates to scatter around the table. The menu was loosely based on the idea of Americana: mini hamburgers, pigs in blankets, macaroni and cheese (an Ina Garten recipe), crackers smeared with peanut butter and jelly, salad, and chocolate cake.

Guests milled and chatted as Marchette finished up in the kitchen — tossing bagged salad into a bowl, pulling burgers from the oven, pouring herself a glass of Pinot Grigio. The atmosphere was relaxed, but Marchette likes to keep things moving on schedule, and after half an hour, she called the room to order and introduced the speaker. It’s probably not exactly how the 19th-century socialite Juliette Recamier would have done it — but she never had to compete with trays of pigs-in-blankets and sliders.

The genial Bluestone spoke for half an hour or so on the significance of the then-upcoming election. Afterward, attendees — there were about 30 crammed into Marchette’s spacious, but not palatial, living room — asked questions of the speaker. The discussion was as lively as a meeting of the like-minded can be; if there were any Republicans in the crowd, they kept it to themselves.

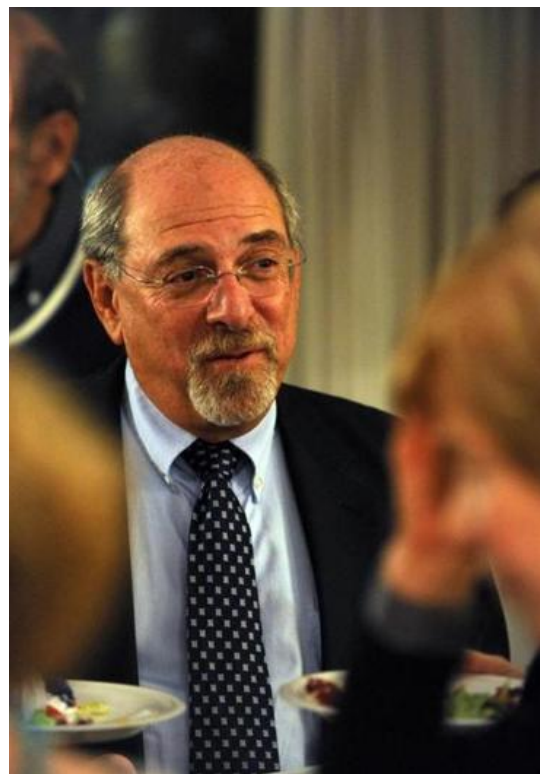
Marchette kept one anxious eye on the door; Dukakis had said he’d show up by 8 p.m. As the question and answer portion of the evening wound down, the guests began to mingle again, and soon the scene was as lively as any salon hostess could wish.

Attendees continued to pour accolades on Marchette: “She knows how to make everyone



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Mini burgers served by guest Marilyn Riseberg.



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Northeastern professor Barry Bluestone was a guest speaker.

feel special,” said Sharon Bloomenthal. “And the speakers [in the salon series] have been incredible. There’s been give and take, and there’s some sophistication about it, too.”

Few had made any move toward leaving when Dukakis and his wife, Kitty, finally showed up at 8:45. “Everyone sit down — everyone sit for the governor!” Marchette called out over the crowd. But no one was listening; they were having too good a time.

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