



# A VERY GAGA EVENING

With the help of The Breakers' Jeff Fowler, Michelle and Peter Farmer host an intimate dinner at their Hamptons home.

BY PAIGE BOWERS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIC STRIFFLER

Michelle and Peter Farmer wanted to christen their newly renovated Hamptons home and celebrate July Fourth by hosting an intimate dinner party with their closest friends. The couple envisioned a beautiful evening in their backyard, something that wasn't too fussy or overdone. So they enlisted The Breakers' event planner Jeff "Gaga" Fowler, a man who isn't exactly known for planning low-key affairs.

"Jeff and I have done parties together before," says Michelle, owner of Michelle Farmer Fine Jewelry. "I know that he does things that are crazy and over the top, but I also know that he's from Connecticut, so he





Clockwise from above: Peter and Michelle Farmer; Michelle helps Jeff Fowler prepare dinner. Opposite page: Michelle and friend select flowers for the simple yet elegant table-cape.

has a conservative side. When he and I sat down to plan our July Fourth party, it started off being a dinner for 20, and then it turned into a party for 200 with Cirque du Soleil performers and an ice cream truck in the backyard.”

At the height of that brainstorming session, Fowler recalls that Peter “eventually threw his hands up in the air and cried, ‘Enough!’ So then it went back to being a dinner party for 20. Peter is always the voice of reason.”

And that’s not to say the party the Farmers hosted was any less dazzling than the 200-person bash Fowler threatened to throw. Ask any guest and they’ll tell you that their hosts welcomed them warmly for an evening of great food and simple elegance. That alone was no small feat. Workmen were putting the finishing touches on the Farmers’ Provencal-

style home up until the day before the party, Michelle says, making for a hectic few days in the typically laid-back Hamptons.

“Up here, there are generally bonfires on the beach and dinners in the backyard and everything has a low-key and elegant feel,” Michelle says. “Nothing is over-prepared. There are no butlers passing hors d’oeuvres. No one’s wearing fancy gowns.”

As workmen installed a bathroom sink, Michelle and Fowler scoured local farm stands for fresh produce and found perfect wine pairings at local vineyards. They picked fresh herbs from the Farmers’ garden and found smooth, gray beach stones to use for place cards. The stones—with guests’ names written in red ink—were placed on a long, Tuscan-style wooden table that was arranged under an elm tree in the hosts’ backyard. Instead of hiring a florist, Michelle picked blue and lavender hydrangeas from her garden and arranged them in small aluminum buckets, interspersing them with cream-colored candles along a burlap runner that stretched the length of the table. Then, she arranged the place settings: red and white floral-patterned Spode plates on sterling chargers, white linen napkins tied with pearl and leather necklaces that Michelle designed, flower petals scattered just so.

Lighting designer and dinner guest Helen Gifford designed lights that were strung in the tree, evoking “a little fairy wonderland scene” as soon as the sun set and fireflies began to sparkle, Michelle says. “The key is to have everything that you work with—food, plates and flowers—be beautiful, but to not go overboard,” Michelle says.

The same rule held true for the food.

“We both love food and that was the basis for this dinner,” Fowler says. “We didn’t want it to be contrived. We wanted it to be stuff we loved, like homemade shortcake biscuits and things that were really homey and yummy and delicious.”

Guests arrived at dusk wearing low-key linen dresses or jeans, depositing gifts of Champagne (or in photographer Elena Lusenti’s case, one of her large, framed portraits) with the hostess before ambling out to the back porch for cocktails. Among the invitees: Lusenti, Gifford, publicist Shamin Abas, polo player Yvonne Morabito, Susan and Jack Whitmore, personal trainer Meagen Springer, wine dealer Michael Cinque and architect Paul Rogers, who redesigned the Farmers’ home. Together, guests sipped grapefruit martinis (or “Gagatinis”) and Chateau d’Esclans Whispering Angel Rosé (which Fowler jokes is the “water of the Hamptons”)





The Farmers' Spode dinnerware looked perfectly at ease with rustic touches like burlap runners. Latin guitarists played during dinner.

and nibbled on Bloody Mary oyster shooters, "Gaga" flatbread with caramelized onion and fennel, and citrus vinaigrette on wonton chips. Latin guitarists from Elan Artists provided the background music.

Then, a dinner bell signaled the main event. Once guests took their spot underneath the great elm tree, the plates of food started arriving: beet tarts, rocket salad with fresh herbs, beef tenderloin salad, grilled vegetables, grilled Maine lobster tails with mango barbecue sauce and watermelon carpaccio, roasted fingerling potatoes, a brown tomato and onion salad with Asiago cheese, and grilled corn on the cob. Amagansett Wines flowed freely.

"Peter got up and did a beautiful toast, thanking everyone who was responsible for the house being perfect and for the perfect night," Michelle says. "Of course, we had Gaga, who did all the cooking and who made everything fabulous."

Fowler raced back and forth between his seat at the table and the kitchen, checking plates and whipping cream as guests savored the special night.

"It was such a great mix of people," Fowler says. "The big thing about a dinner party is how you seat people. And people were placed so that they could meet new people and make new bonds and friendships. I've already gotten a few Facebook friend requests since that night."



Bloody Mary shooters



Lighting designer Helen Gifford set the mood by stringing lights through the trees. The party went on to the wee hours of the morning.

Fowler got other keepsakes too. “When I travel anywhere for an event, I start a journal,” he says. “And the journal has all my inspiration and ideas and paperwork in it. I got so much information and inspiration for this party, the journal just evolved into this list of the awesome things I did in the Hamptons since I arrived. So at the end of the night, I passed it around the party and everyone signed something in it.”

The Farmers also got their share of mementoes. Michelle has a vintage California Job Case—a tray that was once used to hold hot type for printers—and often asks guests to place something in it before they leave.

“People added their beach rocks, flowers, business cards, wine corks and little notes tied in twine,” Michelle says. “My husband added a dead beetle.”

After dinner, guests circled around a fire

pit for espresso, more cocktails and dessert from a shortcake bar that was on the other side of the elm tree. As guests topped shortcake with sugared strawberries, blueberries and blackberries and dollops of vanilla bean and chocolate whipped cream, DJ Adam Lipson played music, which enticed people to dance.

“We hung out until 2 a.m.,” Michelle laughs, adding that a handful of polo players showed up for the post-dinner fun. “Everyone was talking and singing and with the fire going, it was really nice.”

The morning after, the remaining few were treated to homemade blueberry pancakes for brunch before heading off for a day at the beach. Although there were no fireworks from the night before, there didn’t need to be.

“Everything was just bright and beautiful and perfect,” Michelle says. ♦

