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Perfecting the Art of Entertaining

FRAN BERGER

| BY HELÈNE RAMACKERS

Fran Berger inherited her love for cooking from her dad and her affinity for entertaining from watching both her parents do it effortlessly. She spoke with Upscale Living magazine about perfecting the art of entertaining, and imparts valuable tips on everything from weddings to BBQs and how to host get-togethers at home.

Fran, tell us a bit about yourself.

I grew up all over the US. My father was a real rocket scientist, so we moved with the contracts. My parents were hippies and actually let me major in dance (which I had been doing since the age of six) and minor in ceramics. If I wasn't rehearsing or on stage, then I was knee deep in mud! This was LONG before those subjects were acceptable to major in - my parents were very free-spirited and ahead of their time.

Did you have an influence in your youth that shaped your career path?

My mother was a 'closet creative' - our home was very eclectic (think red silk wallpaper on the ceiling in the living room!) so I think I got my artistic side from her. My parents loved to have friends over and entertain. Dad was the cook - I inherited my love and fascination with food and cooking from him and my desire to entertain from watching both of them do it effortlessly.

What does being a home entertaining designer and consultant entail?

After over two decades owning restaurants, I found that people are afraid to entertain at home, so they

go out. They believe that entertaining is hard and that it requires a lot of special equipment, 'things' to entertain with, work, time and effort - so they just don't do it. I love to show them how all those barriers can be easily removed. I go into my client's homes to edit and assess their collections (items they've either received or purchased over the years). What can they get rid of, what do they need more of, what is missing from their collections so that they can and will entertain with ease. I show them how to use the pieces they already have and love; how to take advantage of items they own but probably aren't using very much, and then I select pieces they can add to make entertaining more memorable and infinitely easier. For example, I've helped newly divorced men who had to start from scratch and had no idea where to begin. They needed their kitchens and entertaining areas to be stocked with the basics and items they will love and, more importantly, use. Once that is accomplished, the confidence is there to spend time with friends and family enjoying their home. When people realize how easy entertaining can be they find the joy in the doing of it.

Where and when did your love for entertaining originate?

My parents started me on that path, and I ran with it - I still have the little recipe box with recipes that I copied onto 3x5 cards that I started in middle school. I cooked dinner for both my Junior and Senior Prom dates. I decided to make a leg of lamb (I had never attempted it) for my Junior Prom date and it came out perfect. Not your typical Junior Prom date activity but cooking for others gave me joy and purpose from such an early age.

How did you become a content creator?

After owning restaurants for 20+ years, it was time to close that chapter in my life but continue doing something. I'd worked since I was 12 and couldn't sit at home and do nothing - it's not in my DNA. My best friend told me, "Fran, you don't know how much you know and how many people want to know it!" Turns out she was right! I have since made it my mission to share what I know, what I've learned and all the wisdom I've gained along the way with other people. It's been so much fun to not only share my fine living advice with



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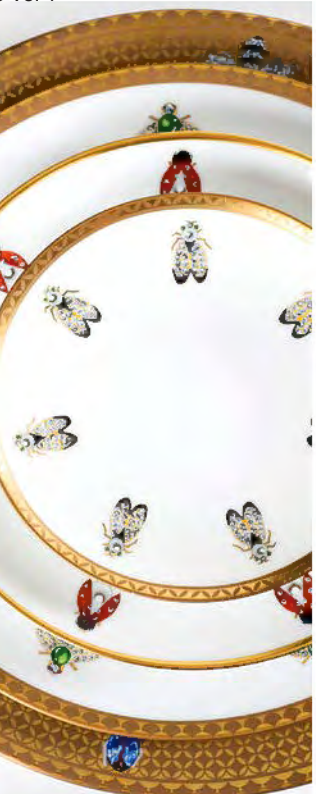
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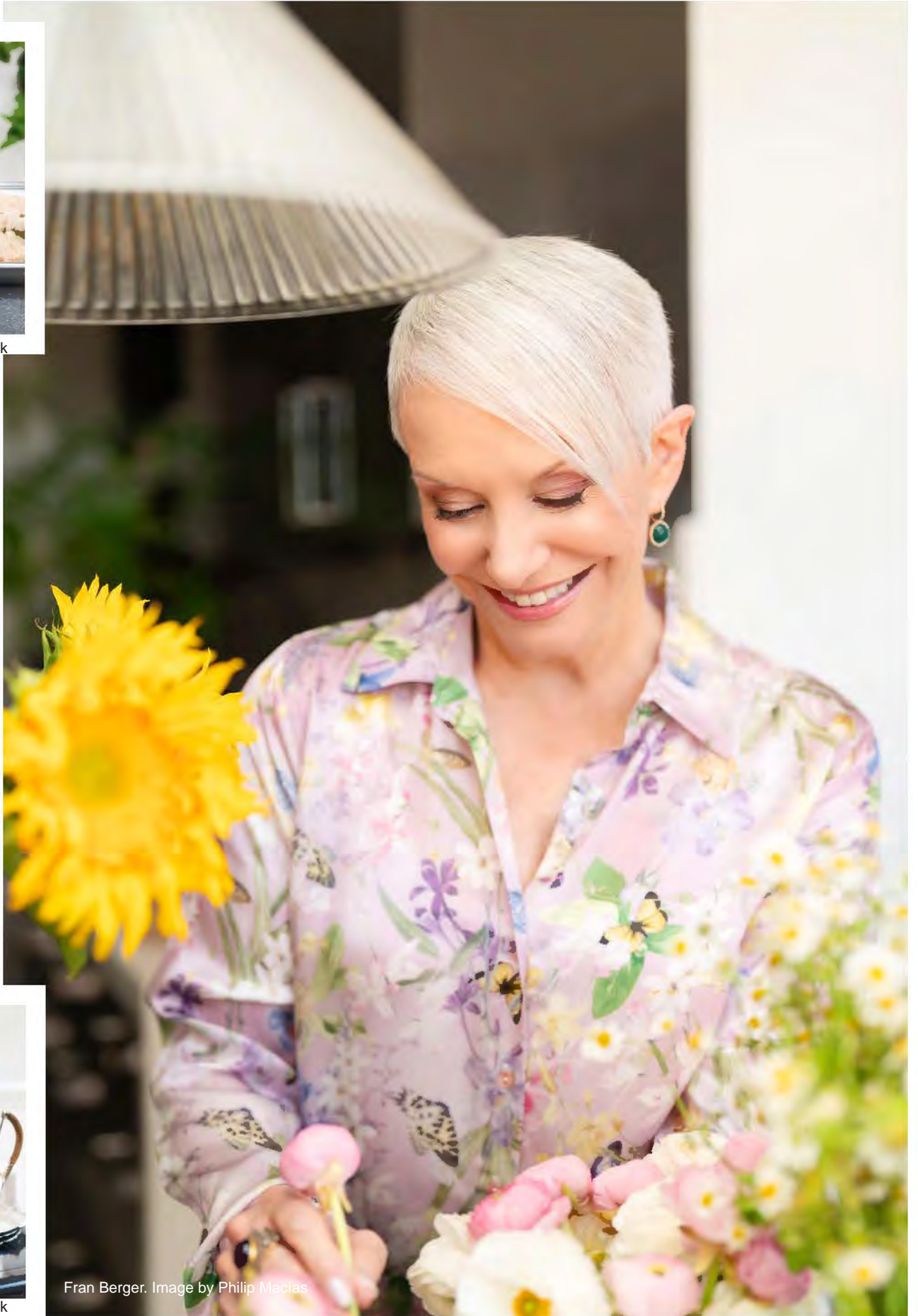
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Fran Berger. Image by Philip Macías

others, but to be able to curate my own e-shop with some of my favorite products and must-haves from trusted brands.

Please share your insights on outfitting your kitchen with the best essentials.

I actually did a blog and video about this. In a nutshell, what I tell people is you don't need a lot but there are certain items every kitchen must have to function properly. And, there are particular items I also advise to invest in, like good knives and pots and pans as you will use them daily. But there are other essential items, like a simple paring knife, that you don't need to spend a lot of money on and just replace it when it becomes dull. I have a list of my 10 Must-Have Kitchen Tools/Essential Tools for Beginner Cooks to the products I personally recommend: A Black Cast Iron Pot, A White Frying Pan, A Chef's Skillet, A 6-inch Chef's Knife, An Edge Grain Board, A 2-Piece Cutting Board Set, 3 Piece Angled Measuring Cup Set, Stainless Steel Measuring Spoons, Stainless Steel Measuring Cups and 9" Tongs with Silicone Heads.

How do hosts go about arranging food & wine pairings.

The first thing to decide is how complicated you want to make the get together. I try to aim for simplicity so that it's not so daunting. You might have a wine you've been curious to try, or a favorite one you want to share, or a 'vertical' - several vintages of the same wine, or even start with a dish or type of food you want to share. From there you can start finding the right pairings.

What pointers can you give for hosting get-togethers at home?

It doesn't have to be fancy or complicated. It doesn't have to be big - it can be just you and a friend or two - the important thing is in the sharing. Sometimes the last minute is the best - be spontaneous! You can pick up everything you want to serve at the store on the way home - like the Italians do for their Aperitivo - and then just re-plate on great looking dishes and you have the ultimate at home get-together. As a restaurant owner for two decades in Beverly Hills, I saw it happen every day ... guests gathered with friends, family members, business associates, romantic interests - anyone they wanted to connect with - to share a meal and a moment. Watching this play out many thousands of times, I realized that everything happens at the table. We laugh, we cry, and we

pass the chips. We shake hands, make plans, and refill the glasses.

Please share some tips on wedding planning and etiquette.

Funny you mention weddings. I have weddings on the brain as one of my sons recently got married. It was incredibly magical. This most recent wedding was over a year and a half in the making and entailed a wedding planner with a big staff, multiple spreadsheets, and a whole lot of planning for over 200 guests! My best advice is start as early as possible - if you have the luxury of time, take it. Hire really great people that come highly recommended - follow your gut when you talk to them. Weddings are stressful enough, the last thing you want is to be butting heads with your wedding planner or vendors the day of. My older son was married a couple of years ago and that one came together in under 45 days and with just 25 guests. Both were beautiful in their own way. Because they are sons and not daughters, I had to be Switzerland and tread lightly! For the shorter time frame wedding, they had a big work trip overseas and had to have their wedding happen before the trip, so they were on a time schedule. Make sure you find a venue that is easy to work with, and that you are comfortable with - my eldest son's wedding was in my old restaurant as it was closed for dinner, which was perfect. Find a place that you love with great food. Don't over complicate the menu - simple is best for a smaller group. If your wedding is a small, more casual affair there's no need to go overboard with the decor as that's not what people will remember - flowers can be purchased at the flower mart and find vases at a dollar store - it's about the flowers not the vessels, and the feeling of love in the room.

It's not always easy finding the perfect gift for one's parents. How does one go about finding the best gifts for Mother's Day and Father's Day?

When shopping for your parents, the gift should not be about extravagance, but rather about thought, meaning and sentimental value. After all, that's what we as parents care about the most. A well-meaning card or gesture goes a long way on Mother's Day and Father's Day. But if you want to give a gift, check out FranBergerLiving.com as we have great ideas (shameless plug!).

With the seasons changing and people gravitating more to outdoor socialization, how

can they host the ideal summer BBQ?

BBQs are great because they can be casual and anything you want them to be. You can keep it simple and ask everyone to bring a dish (keep track so you don't have doubles!) for a fun potluck and you can provide the proteins or vegetables for the actual BBQ/main course. You can cook it all on your own but it's easiest to have most of the side dishes served at room temp and what comes off the grill should be served hot. As always, have plenty of alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks at the ready. It's also a great opportunity to show off your outdoor dinnerware/serveware pieces.

Exciting plans on the horizon?

Exciting for me always includes travel. I'll be up in Napa this fall for a big annual Lobster Boil and prior to that I'll be in NYC for an inspiration trip and hoping to have a trip planned to my favorite place - Italy - before year end. I'm also planning a fabulous cruise from Monaco to Barcelona with girlfriends for 2025. Lots of travel to look forward to. ❖



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