

Quakers in the Kitchen

Penn alumni offer tips on how to relax and host great parties, eat well without harming the environment, and dine like a gourmet on the cheap.

“You can always tell the pioneers,” Steve Poses C’69 is saying. “They’re the ones with the arrows in their backs.”

He says it wryly, knowing that he doesn’t really fit the traditional image of the High Chaparral pioneer. We’re talking about his new synergistic home-entertainment trinity, which consists of a book (*At Home by Steve Poses: A Caterer’s Guide to Cooking & Entertaining*), a blog (AtHomeByStevePoses.wordpress.com), and a website (athomebysteveposes.com). While none of them is, by itself, wildly pioneering, their collective trail cuts through some uncharted entrepreneurial territory—especially in light of his rather unusual goal, which we’ll get to in a minute.

Poses does know a thing or two about pioneering. When he opened Frög, his small Center City storefront restaurant, back in 1973—just four years out of Penn and after a crash course in upscale restauranting at La Panatière—he was out on the frontier of Philadelphia’s then-parched culinary landscape. Frög quickly became an icon of the city’s restaurant renaissance (the umlaut was a visual pun, suggesting froggy eyes, not some obscure Euro-pronunciation), and unlike some of the other early trendsetters it was reliably enjoyable as well as imaginative. When it finally closed in 1987, the restaurant received the sort of respectful obsequies usually reserved for major abstract expressionists and heads of state.

The Home Entertainer

Frög was just the beginning for Poses, who opened a series of other restaurants, ranging from the innovative and successful (The Commissary) to the innovative and disastrous (City Bites). Along the way he launched the Frög Commissary Catering Company, still going strong in

its 34th year, and in his spare time he turned out *The Frög Commissary Cookbook*, which sold more than 150,000 copies. And while he no longer runs a restaurant, and doesn’t spend a lot of time thinking about the old days, a line in his new book says volumes about his personality, drive, and chosen profession: “The rush of line cooking on a busy night is a sublime combination of art, teamwork, and athleticism.”

But don’t get the wrong idea. That whole pressure-cooker atmosphere, he says, “is at the exact opposite extreme of what I’d recommend for the home entertainer.”

What he recommends now is: *Relax. Have Fun. You’re already a good-enough entertainer.* With a little guidance—like, say, the kind provided by his *At Home* troika—you can ratchet up the home-entertaining a notch or two, both in the quality of the offerings and presentation and in the number of times you entertain.

Which brings us back to that publicly stated goal of his: to increase home-entertaining by 10 percent. And by *home-entertaining* he does not mean hiring a certain catering company for your next party. Poses wants to teach you how to serve fish, not sell you a fish dinner.



“My focus now is that food is a vehicle to bring people together,” he explains. “I’ve always seen part of my job as being a teacher. I do enjoy that aspect of it. It’s a combination of believing you can help people build a community and ‘Here’s a way to do it.’”

The details of doing it, along with more than 400 recipes, are carefully and attractively laid out in the book and the blog. In order to access most of the website and blog you have to buy the book, which comes with a key-code. Book owners also receive emailed blog entries. The website functions as something of a gateway where you can sample the concept and maybe buy the book, which is self-published and not available in bookstores or the usual Internet channels.

“The book is one piece of a three-legged stool: book, website, blog,” says Poses. “Each one performs part of the task of coaching people, inspiring people, to entertain more.”

While the 10 percent goal may sound somewhat idealistic, it is not, in his mind, improbable.

“I actually think it’s quite realistic,” he says. “If you entertained twice a year in the past, one more time would make it a 50 percent increase. So 10 percent is not that high.”

Hence the subtitle: *A Caterer’s Guide to Cooking and Entertaining*. Most cookbooks are written by restaurateurs or chefs, and Poses has his full share of experience in that line. But it’s not the approach he wants to share.

“Caterers look at things in a different way that can help people who cook at home,” he says. “Most cookbooks are written from the restaurateur’s point of view, where the restaurant chef thinks of that wonderful sauté dish he did—good luck doing that for eight people. Caterers tend to think in terms of the whole event.”

Part 1 (“Plan to Entertain”) walks you through the planning and organizing stages: shopping, arranging your space, organizing your cooking, beverages, décor, cleanup. There are checklists, worksheets, suggestions about what to make beforehand—even an illustrated guide to performing the Heimlich maneuver.

Part 2 is “Recipes, Notes & Tips,” all of which can be accessed (by members/book-buyers) and printed at the website. The list of ingredients in his recipes begins with items needing significant pre-preparation, such as chopping, and the instructions clearly indicate when you can pause or stop without undermining what you’ve already done. He also offers a smorgasbord of stories, ruminations, thumbnail sketches, and the like (see box below), drawn from his decades of experience. That includes guest etiquette—don’t show up early on Thanksgiving; don’t come into the kitchen and talk to the cook when he or she is trying to concentrate.

Highs, Lows, and Rules for Entertaining

Moving Out of the Dorms

I arrived at the University of Pennsylvania in 1964 wanting to be an architect or city planner. Several things altered my path. The first two years I lived in the dorms and ate dorm food. In my junior year I moved to a tiny house in Center City Philadelphia—with my first kitchen. Guided by Julia Child and the Time-Life series of international cookbooks, I began cooking, and I loved it. Meanwhile, the late-’60s was an era of great social turmoil. I was heavily influenced by iconoclast Jane Jacobs’ writings, especially her book *Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Jacobs wrote of the role

played by the neighborhood store—a place otherwise anonymous people would cross paths and become friends and neighbors. As I learned to cook, I thought more about how food could bring people together. It has occurred to me since then that I’ve had far more influence on the life of Philadelphia as a restaurateur and caterer than I ever would have had as an architect or city planner.

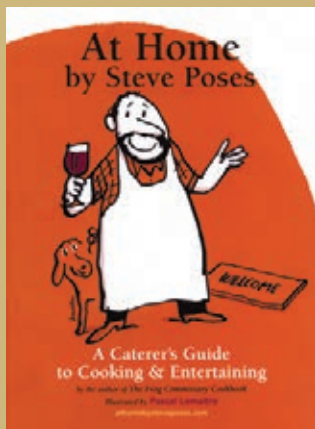
A Frog is Born

On the evening of April 4, 1973, my little Frog was born. It would be years before I’d actually place a sign on the building. Instead, we were “the place on 16th Street with all the plants in the front window.” Highlights of Frog’s opening-night menu included onion soup, calf’s liver with mustard sauce and rack of lamb lifted from La Panetière. Our paella and cannelloni recipes came from a Time-Life book. My mother made a batch of her stuffed cabbage.

The wine list included bottles of Mateus and Mouton Cadet, plus several selections by the glass—a Philadelphia first. On other nights we offered quiche, brochette of beef and Thai chicken curry, a blend of spices and French béchamel. It was the birth of what became known as fusion. By today’s standards, it wasn’t much. But served by energetic kids anxious to please, the food at Frog, and the restaurant itself, was something new, a soldier on the front lines of a restaurant revolution. Versions of Frog would appear in cities across America.

A Frog is Born Again

Our storefront Frog of hanging plants and mismatched chairs was wearing thin as tastes changed from the blue-jeans of the ’70s to the designer jeans of the ’80s. In addition, our evolving culinary ambition had long since outgrown its tiny kitchen. Around the corner was a slightly derelict four-story townhouse of great potential. I bought it. Our goal was to grow our 97-seat restaurant into 150 seats. Figuring out how to create a tastefully welcoming ambience in a grander setting was going to be a challenge. To situate a bar complete with a baby grand piano



The whole thing is surprisingly easy on the eyes, and the puckish illustrations by Pascal Lemaître add to the relaxing effect. According to Poses, the response to his easy-going philosophy has been a collective sigh of relief.

“People tend to bite off more than they can chew in home-entertaining, and then they get discouraged,” he says. “I’m all about setting the bar low.”

The whole process of writing *At Home* has made him a “more thoughtful, organized, and disciplined home entertainer,” he explained in a recent blog entry. While he was already well organized and disciplined in a work setting, he didn’t always apply his professional principles at home. As a result, his home entertaining “has often been more harried with too much time in the kitchen and not enough time with guests.”

“Home entertaining is about creating a sense of welcome, warmth, and hospitality for your guests,” he writes. “It’s not about how good the food is or how beautifully the table is set. It’s not the Culinary Olympics or Iron Chef meets Main Street. It’s about human connection and good conversation.”

If you find yourself raising an eyebrow at such lofty sentiments from a successful entrepreneur, you should know that the communitarian impulse has been with Poses since his Penn days. It was shaped in part by a book he read back when he still thought he’d have a career in architecture or city plan-

ning: Jane Jacobs’ classic *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. As a sixties’ activist interested in building communities, Poses was particularly struck by her image of the neighborhood candy store, and how it could, in a small but vital way, serve as the locus of a vibrant neighborhood.

“Jacobs recognized how a local candy store defined a community in an otherwise large and anonymous city,” he writes. “The idea thrilled me: If a candy store could do that, I thought, imagine what a neighborhood restaurant could do. I put Jacobs’ idea into action when I opened Frög, my first neighborhood restaurant, and creating a community has been an important aspect of all I’ve done since ...”

The whole *At Home* project is both a continuation of that community-building and an active process.

“The website felt like the little storefront restaurant I opened in 1973,” he says. “I didn’t know a lot, and I spent a lot of time in the early phase learning about the process. I also learned about writing a blog, and I’m very, very excited about it. It’s a whole new chapter in my life.

“It felt like I ran a marathon in writing that book,” he adds. “It was an intense effort. With the other components there it feels like a whole other thing I have to figure out. I’ve created something that sometimes feels like a Frankenstein monster—*It’s alive!* Now what do I do with it?”—*Samuel Hughes*

below grade, we had to lower the level of the basement a foot by shoring up the foundation and removing tons of dirt. The ground level housed the entry, two dining rooms and the dishwasher. Up a flight of stairs were a larger dining room and the kitchen. At the top level were a small private dining room and an office. Walls and niches were filled with edgy and museum-worthy paintings and crafts. We commissioned handmade ceramic vases for each table and filled them with orchids. When we opened in 1984, Ed Bronstein’s contemporary design with Asian overtones and rich

colors helped to establish a new vernacular, which landed Frog on the cover of *Restaurant Design* magazine. In the new Frog’s kitchen was Philadelphia’s first hardwood charcoal grill. Some customers preferred the old Frog’s ambience, but everyone appreciated the new Frog’s food. Years later, in a 25th anniversary issue, *Philadelphia* magazine named Frog the best restaurant of the previous 25 years.

City Bites

Philadelphia in the mid-’80s was socially conservative and risk-averse. A large failed restaurant called City Lights offered growth at a discount. With careful marshaling of resources, I could afford a new venture, which I

dubbed City Bites. Never having experienced failure, I believed that if I built it, they would come. Some months before, I’d read a magazine article about “Attitude,” an emerging consciousness with edgy and deconstructionist overtones that mashed retro and modern with a sense of humor. It struck a chord. City Bites became an Attitude showcase. Ed Bronstein conceived of a space with chain-link fence, parachute fabric, and individualized dining areas. Next to floor-to-ceiling windows we set triangular tables for two facing out. We found exuberant art in New York’s East Village, including a Jenny Holzer moving message board. (In a few years Holzer would represent the United States at the Venice Biennale.)

Interior Design magazine featured the space on its cover. Custom soundtracks juxtaposed pop classics with show tunes and spliced jazz with Woody Allen monologues. A big bar offered a nightly romp of live local rock. City Bites was all over the place and way ahead of the curve. Some Philadelphians loved it and most couldn’t figure it out. Within a few years City Bites stripped me of all the money I’d made from years of work and put the entire organization at risk.

RULES FOR BEING A GOOD HOST

- Be ready on time.
- No whining.
- Provide a warm welcome and make your guests feel at ease.
- Don’t apologize for anything.
- Be appreciative of any gifts.
- Arrange any flowers brought by a guest and give them a place of honor, even if they can’t be the centerpiece.
- Serve wine brought as a gift unless it’s absolutely not right for the meal.
- Accept modest assistance.
- Send your guests off with a little wrapped chocolate for the road.

RULES FOR BEING A GOOD GUEST

- Arrive on time or a few minutes late, but never early.
- Bring a modest gift that’s in proportion to the event — never something that would embarrass your host.
- Be gracious in accepting your host’s gift of hospitality.
- Compliment your host, but don’t be obsequious.
- Offer to assist.
- Don’t overstay your welcome.

Louisa Shafia C'92's lifelong dream of becoming an actress was coming true in all the wrong ways.

She had dressed up as the daughter of a 19th-century gentleman to give museum tours in Yonkers. She'd performed a bilingual version of *Don Quixote* in high-school auditoriums across the land. And now she was being "victimized by a witch" in a low-budget horror flick in upstate New York.

"It was a really wonderful learning experience," she says a decade later. "But as Rilke says, 'If you ask yourself in the dead of night, *Must I do this, or die?*' the answer was no."

Shafia had already reached that verdict once, after several years working in public radio at WHYY in Philadelphia, where she'd ended up as an editor on *Fresh Air*, NPR's flagship interview show. The Spanish and women's studies major needed a new direction.

She found it in a yoga studio. A sign on the wall advertised a job opening for a vegetarian cook at a yoga retreat in Maine.

"I realized that I'd always loved to cook," Shafia remembers. What's more, she'd been doing it for years. "My mom recruited my sister and me, starting at about age seven, to be her sous chefs for cocktail parties and dinner parties," she says. "So I decided to explore that."

The pay was low: room and board, plus free yoga lessons. But Shafia got hooked. Her boss had a lot of relatives in the area, who'd drop by with things like rhubarb and leeks. There were roadside stands packed with garden-fresh goodies—and cardboard boxes to put your money in, on the honor system. The farm-to-table ethos had never seemed so immediate, or so right.

Soon after summer's end, she enrolled at the Natural Gourmet Institute in New York. NGI's "plant-based curriculum" served as a springboard to San Francisco's Millennium restaurant, which specialized in vegan cuisine. Shafia's stint in that environmentally enlightened kitchen, where vegetable scraps landed in compost bins rather than garbage cans, made a big impression. In many ways, it would serve as a model for *Lucid Food*, the catering company she started after moving back to Brooklyn.

The business got going in the right place at the right time. Food journalist Michael Pollan had begun preaching the gospel of local, organic, and small-scale farming in *The New York Times Magazine*, and Shafia was coming from the movement's West Coast vanguard. "Lucid Foods got really popular, really fast," she says. "Basically, people discovered they could get this beautiful, elegant food, with four-star-quality hors d'oeuvres—but everything's fresh from the farmer's market, everything's local, things are being composted, everything's coming in recycled containers, there's not much tinfoil or paper bags being used ... And companies would say, 'Hey, we want to use this to represent the image of our company, to advertise that we're eco-friendly too.'"

"So I just kind of fell into a trend that was happening, where companies were really trying to green their image. As

well as a lot of individuals who were excited to find someone who could prepare food in accordance with their own environmental ideals. And even though this stuff was a given in northern California, and maybe Portland, Oregon, nobody was really doing it in New York yet."

In the past five years, Shafia has catered to clients ranging from Isabella Rossellini to *Men's Health* magazine to *The Colbert Report*.

("It was a blast," she says of the last, citing "snarky, hilarious comments" from the show's writers about her eco-sensitive menu.) She occasionally cuts loose from the high church of Serious Food by way of performance-art events called "Masked Meals," in which blindfolded participants open their mouths and minds to taste things and combinations their eyes might never lead them to try. "The first menu we did, we gave people lychees, chocolate, ginger juice, and it culminated in Pop Rocks on the tongue," Shafia recalls.

Lately she has shifted her focus to food writing and consulting. She blogs for RachelRay.com, and recently began writing for *ReadyMade* magazine. Last November saw the publication of her debut cookbook, *Lucid Food: Cooking for an Eco-Conscious Life*.

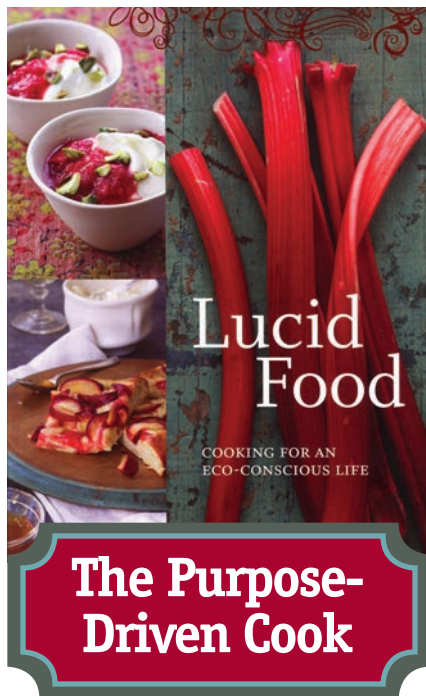
The book tackles the modern omnivore's dilemma in calendrical fashion, grouping recipes by season along with occasional advice on things like composting and win-

dowsill gardening. The very first recipe leaves little doubt about Shafia's commitment to a diet that's healthful for eater and earth alike; it's for an elderberry cold tincture. "Elderberries *really* are a seasonal thing," she says. "They blast through farmers markets for about two weeks in early fall. And if you're lucky to get them then, you just have this wonderful treat. [The tincture] is so easy and inexpensive, and it's a really great way to maintain your health."

Elderberries aren't the only boutique ingredient in *Lucid Food*. Stinging nettles also make an appearance, as does carob, a domestically grown edible seed pod that "doesn't have to make the same long, fuel-guzzling trip to us that its tropical nemesis chocolate does." But Shafia also has a yen for comfort food that draws compellingly from her father's native Iran, like her rustic Persian New Year's Soup, whose cargo of dried beans and fresh herbs exemplifies the wholesomeness and economy of traditional peasant cuisine. Shafia's new dream is to travel through Iran, collecting material for another cookbook.

And what about her old one? Would she go back to acting if Hollywood came along with a role that didn't involve screaming her way through the woods, *Blair Witch* style?

"Only if there was, like, a great food scene involved," the kitchen convert laughs. "No, I love working with food. The wonderful thing about it is that you can keep evolving and never get bored. So far I've been a restaurant cook, a caterer, a food writer, a food performance artist, and a cooking teacher. So I feel like I have so many wonderful things to choose from, I'm going to be absorbed with this for the rest of my life." —Trey Popp



If you're trying to find the Two Fat Als on Sunday afternoon, the Upper West Side-dwelling duo better known as Alanna Kaufman C'o8 and Alex Small C'o8 are scouring the Fairway farmers market and Whole Foods, weekly meal plan in hand. What's on the menu?

"Bone-in chicken breasts with roasted grapes and shallots, from Epicurious; broccoli rabe with chicken sausage over pasta; open-faced poached egg sandwiches with mushrooms and roasted asparagus; lemon gnocchi with spinach and peas and a tomato-barley dish," Kaufman rattles off. Meal planning, she adds, "actually is something that we started this year, and it is our best money and time-saving trick yet."

Together, Kaufman and Small—the couple became engaged in October—write a blog (www.twofatals.com) that was spun off in August into *The Frugal Foodie Cookbook: 200 Gourmet Recipes for Any Budget* (Adams Media). So when either Fat Al shares a money-saving trick, look alive. All the ingredients for the aforementioned meals—excluding pantry essentials like salt and olive oil—add up to a total of "about \$7 per night for each of us."

Kaufman and Small hail from Bethesda, Maryland and Easton, Connecticut respectively, and met as sophomores while working at *The Daily Pennsylvanian*. Kaufman, a double major in English and political science, was city news editor. Small, who was on the biological basis of behavior track with a minor in chemistry, was the photo editor at the *DP* and *34th Street*.

"Alex cooked for me on our first date," Kaufman remembers. "He came over to my apartment with bags of groceries and cooked salmon with mango salsa, a pear and Roquefort salad, and bananas flambé for dessert. I was so shocked that he was so young and such an amazing cook."

"It was not as effortless as Alanna makes it sound," laughs Small, who was put to work in the kitchen from an early age by his half-Colombian, half-Jewish "Jewtino" family. "For a week before the dinner, I was calling friends and family, researching online, and running through cookbooks trying to figure out something perfect to make. I brought over all of my own pots and pans and knives and cutting boards to Alanna's ill-equipped kitchen."

The bananas flambé—"an old family trick that we use to impress people," according to Small—must have worked, because the couple began dating. "When our terms as *DP* editors ended in our junior year," says Kaufman, "we started cooking together with all of our free time. We were also having lots of friends over for big dinners, so we decided to start a blog to keep track of our favorite recipes. From there, we got a lot more creative and passionate about the food."

Sandwiched between a treatise on growing mint and a recipe for beer-can chicken, one of their first posts, dated July 24, 2007, sums up their mission: "We wanted to blog because we

know how difficult it can be to cook in a collegiate kitchen. These recipes are meant to be healthy and cheap, and accessible for those preparing in limited environments such as ours."

The recipes accumulated, fueled literally and figuratively by visits to Baltimore Avenue's Green Line Café—medium black coffee for Small, small extra-hot soy latte for Kaufman—on their way to the Clark Park farmers market and field trips to the Italian Market and Reading Terminal. The couple honed their knife skills volunteering for two years at MANNA, a non-profit that does home-delivered meals for people suffering from life-threatening illnesses. "Nothing teaches you how to peel potatoes like having to peel hundreds of them."

Their love of food grew. Together, they catered Small's graduation party by turning it into a *Top Chef* "Wedding Wars"-style all-nighter involving more than 300 cookies and enough chocolate-dipped Rice Krispie treats to build a replica of Huntsman Hall. This past Christmas, they spent three days fabricating a jelly bean-shingled gingerbread house modeled after Mount Vernon. They cooked. They ate. And whether their meals included blueberry-stained focaccia, baba ganoush with from-scratch flatbread, fish tacos inspired by *I Love You Man*, or chocolate babka that would make Jerry Seinfeld swoon, the Two Fat Als kept eating well on a budget—the focus of every recipe posted to their blog.

During graduation week, Kaufman and Small were hosting a big brunch for their friends ("before the Walnut Walk bar crawl," Small remembers) when they received an email from a New York literary agent. "She asked if we were interested in turning the blog into a book," Small says of the *Julie & Julia*-esque encounter. "We did not expect anything to come of it, but three months later, she called us back with an offer

from a publisher! Somehow we managed to assemble the book—all 200 recipes!—during the first year of law and med schools."

The fruit of their labor, *The Frugal Foodie Cookbook*, includes the price per serving of every dish and other tips Kaufman and Small developed trying to finance their foodie habits as undergrads. They advocate starting a garden and freezing herbs with water in ice cube trays for easy access, buying seasonally from farmers' markets, and taking a two-tier approach to ingredients like honey, vinegar, and olive oil. "We have a cheap honey that we use in vinaigrettes and for cooking," explains Kaufman, "and a more expensive one that we use for drizzling or dipping apples. Use high-quality ingredients when it matters most."

Starting your own herb garden is another tip. "In Philadelphia we had a beautiful window garden with cilantro, basil, thyme," Kaufman remembers. They moved to New York after graduation, where they've traded their herb box for a kitchen with a dishwasher. "We miss Philadelphia though," says Kaufman, "so we might sacrifice the dishwasher to go back in the future." But for now it's Columbia for Kaufman, Mount Sinai for Small—and chicken with roasted grapes for dinner. —Adam Erace C'o6

