




The Party of the Year

Be our guest at the **ULTIMATE** dinner party. Friends and supporters of the Naples Children & Education Foundation were treated to a feast to remember by *Top Chef*'s Tom Colicchio, the finest wines from around the world, a private serenade from Grammy Award winner LeAnn Rimes and more.

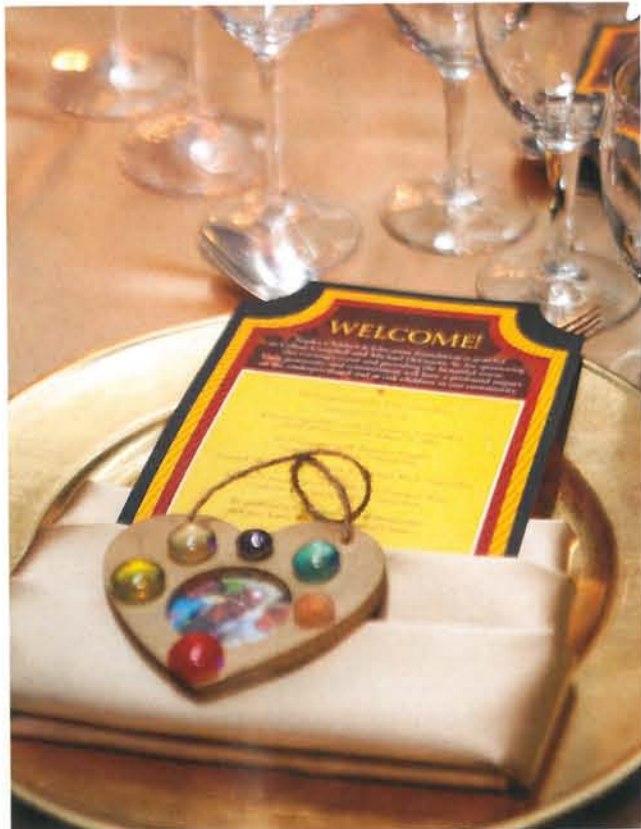
BY DOROTHEA HUNTER SÖNNE | PHOTOGRAPHY BY VANESSA ROGERS



A crystal-clear tent allowed for breathtaking views of the Gulf. Chandeliers and candlelight cast an intimate glow over the 19 tables bedecked with orange calla lilies, coral roses and golden accents. At the opposite end was a custom-built stage and dance floor.



Sophisticated decor with playful elements reminded people of what brought them together. The night's favors were handmade ornaments at each place setting created by children in NCEF programs, and menus, shaped like tickets, read, "It's All For The Kids!"



Anyone passing by the beachside home of Michael DeGroot Sr. and Gillian Campbell on November 10 knew something important was going on. Massive trucks, security cars and golf carts were causing the normal Port Royal traffic to slow to a crawl, and people craned their necks to catch sight of what could possibly be unfolding.

The party—undoubtedly the most talked about soiree this season—was one for the history books. Of course there were the obvious awe factors defining it, starting with the lavishly decorated backyard tent the size of a football field right beside the Gulf. Entertainment from singer LeAnn Rimes and up-and-coming British vocal group Blake, plus a heavenly five-course sit-down meal prepared by Tom Colicchio (a James Beard Award winner and head judge of the lauded cooking competition series *Top Chef*) established the level of gravitas the night carried before the festivities even got under way.

But the reason prompting DeGroot and Campbell, along with Bob and Joan Clifford, their co-hosts that evening, to plan such an extravaganza for 152 friends was what took the party from good to great.

As trustees of the **Naples Children & Education Foundation** (NCEF)—the nonprofit that raises money to help local underprivileged children by means of its annual three-day weekend of fun, the **Naples Winter Wine Festival** (NWWF) with its capstone live auction—the Cliffords, who chaired the festival in 2012, sought to put together an auction item that would simply be irresistible for people to pass up, such as a star-studded party. And DeGroot, an honorary



MENU

PREPARED BY
TOM COLICCHIO

FIRST COURSE

Hamachi and Caviar with Smoked
Crème Fraîche

PASTA

Ricotta Agnolotti with Jerusalem
Artichokes, Wild Mushrooms and
White Truffle

FISH

Red Snapper with Roasted Pepper,
Eggplant and Lemon Vinaigrette

MEAT

Braised Short Ribs with Farro and
Roasted Root Vegetables

SWEET FINALE

Cream Cheese Panna Cotta,
Port-Poached Pear, Graham Cracker
and Sicilian Pistachio

Celebrity chef Tom Colicchio flew in the freshest market ingredients for the affair. This artful plate of hamachi crudo with caviar, beets and delicate greens opened the sit-down meal.

Ricotta agnolotti with Jerusalem artichokes, wild mushrooms and white truffle.

Colicchio (*far right*) worked his magic in the catering tent—a separate structure erected 100 yards from the main venue. That night he whipped up 760 plates of food spread over five courses.



Red snapper with roasted pepper, eggplant and lemon vinaigrette.

Opposite page: Cream cheese panna cotta, port-poached pear, graham cracker and Sicilian pistachio.



trustee for his dedicated service to the foundation, had another thing on his mind. He could see a milestone for the group was within grasp at that festival, and he wanted to do something to help ensure and also celebrate it. “It was Michael’s dream to provide a party to honor the festival raising more than \$100 million for Collier County children since its inception. The very first party ever held for the NCEF and NWWF was at this home 11 years ago,” Campbell says.

DeGroot adds, “I like a challenge, and I am so proud of what the NCEF has done.”

Before long DeGroot, Campbell and the Cliffords were planning the now-famous Auction Lot 14, a modified Dutch auction. Each festival attendee last year was handed a golden ticket that listed the details for the night and what donation amounts would buy (the higher your bid, the closer to the stage you’d be and the more raffle tickets you’d get—but more on those later).

Needless to say, Lot 14 was a smashing success. In the end 152 friends turned in their golden tickets for a night none of them will ever forget. The party was the highest-grossing auction item that year, raking in \$1.2 million alone, and the NWWF made \$12.2 million and brought the lifetime donation total to \$106 million.

Naturally, based on the group’s collective bacchanal savoir faire (they are, after all, trustees and patrons of the world’s largest philanthropic wine festival), the fete in the DeGroot yard this past



Colicchio and the five members of his team from New York City were nothing short of spectacular in the kitchen.



Tom Colicchio's Naples connection.

No stranger to our town, Colicchio has been coming here since the Naples Winter Wine Festival's debut more than a decade ago. He was honored to be back cooking for a cause. "I could give my time every day of the week—and I often do. It's hard to say no," he says. Another cause near and dear to him is helping raise awareness about hunger in the United States. His wife, Lori Silverbush, co-directed and produced a documentary with him, *A Place at the Table*, that is in theaters and on iTunes now. Says Colicchio, "Food insecurity is a systemic issue. I would love to see a day when we wouldn't need to host fundraisers."

Find out more and read the full interview with Colicchio on naplesillustrated.com.

LeAnn Rimes and British group Blake lifted people to their feet.

The organizers of the party knew the surefire way to get as many of their friends to come was to give them something out of the ordinary. Back-to-back private concerts post-dinner held much allure and delivered beyond what they expected.

LeAnn Rimes arrived early that weekend to tour local charities receiving NCEF funds, like the Naples Equestrian Challenge (NEC). Philanthropy has always been important to her, and of her stop at NEC, she says, "It was great to go and meet the kids today. It was very intimate, and they were so sweet!" Another thing she has been up to and is thrilled about is her latest album, *Spitfire*, being released this month. Rimes, who became a household name at the tender age of 14 when she won a Grammy Award for Best New Artist, confessed the recording experience was cathartic. "This is my most personal album yet. It's a lot about my life, my friends," she says. "I feel like I'm starting over with this record. I've embraced my past, and I'm moving on to the future with something new."

Blake, first-time visitors to the Paradise Coast, also have a new album out, *Start Over* (a March release in the United Kingdom), and they couldn't get enough of our town. Famous in their native Britain, the guys—now a trio since member Jules Knight left in January to join the cast of a BBC show—hope to tour the United States in the coming year. Of this particular gig, member Humphrey Berney says, "We've performed at a lot of private events and have even sung for the queen, and I can honestly say this was amazing. We've never sound checked with dolphins before. A whole school of them were in the waves just beyond the tent. We could easily get used to that."



The country pop star rocked the house. Within minutes of crooning her hit songs, the entire crowd was up on the dance floor—and didn't stop moving until she left the stage.



The dapper gents of Blake (from left, pictured with guest Wanda Zaiser)—Stephen Bowman, Humphrey Berney, Ollie Baines and Jules Knight—an award-winning British vocal act, set the mood with a mix of arias, pop songs and sultry ballads.

Read the full interviews with Rimes and Blake on naplesillustrated.com.

November featured the best of the best vintages. Wines were paired and poured with chef Colicchio's five sit-down courses, such as the exclusive 2008 Domaine de la Romanée-Conti Vosne-Romanée with the short ribs. An enormous tasting table was set up in the back of the tent as well. All bottles for the table were donated by past festival vintners (winemakers who provide vino for the weekend's festivities), and Lamar Cheatham, hotel sommelier for The Ritz-Carlton, Naples, presided over the wine service.

The pairings were set in advance, but Cheatham didn't know what was being delivered for the tasting table until that morning. When the refrigerated truck arrived, he surveyed its precious cargo. "For a wine geek like myself, opening those boxes felt like Christmas," he says. "No, it was better than Christmas!"

Meanwhile Colicchio—the author of three cookbooks and holder of an Emmy and five James Beard Awards—and the five members of

his team from New York City were nothing short of spectacular in the kitchen. They prepared a mix of old favorites and innovative new dishes, with several from Colicchio & Sons, one of his latest restaurants. The hamachi is currently on its menu, and Colicchio says he hopes to soon add the agnolotti. "This is the first time I've served it, and I wanted to do a dish with luxury items like those truffles," he says. Guests unanimously agreed it was one they could order again and again, and they also oohed and aahed over the rest.

On the heels of dinner, the handsome men of Blake took the stage, wowing the crowd with their booming vocals. During a rendition of Joe Cocker and Jennifer Warnes' "Up Where We Belong," people swayed in their seats, and in a stirring display of emotion, one man hoisted his wife high in the air for everyone to see. Credit for signing the charming Brits—who hung out after their act finished with guests like Wanda Zaiser (pictured)—goes to Campbell.



Guests lingered to continue their revelry. No one wanted the night to end. Says Stayer, "This was a Hollywood-style party in Naples. People will be talking about it for a long time."



Clockwise from right: co-hosts Michael DeGroot Sr. and Gillian Campbell with Maria Cristina Buccellati; 2014 NWWF co-chair Linda Malone with friend Shelly Stayer; Campbell with Blake's Berney; Provident Jewelry's Rob Samuels and the Buccellati team flank raffle winners Ann and Bill Bain.



Bob Clifford, one of the night's hosts, stands with LeAnn Rimes on stage at the close of the party to announce who won the one-of-a-kind Buccellati cuff.

She had been at a benefit in London where they performed, and she bid on a set of concert tickets that same day thinking they could be perfect for her own party. "Michael and I and a group of friends went to see them in Bermuda, and that sealed the deal. We were so impressed with their show," she says.

Kicking things up a notch, Rimes entered the tent and the crowd's energy exploded. The country pop star rocked the house. Within minutes of crooning her hit songs—halfway through the second song exactly—the entire crowd was up on the dance floor and didn't stop moving until she left the stage. She belted out numbers from her new album, including the title single *Spitfire*, and everyone went wild when she gave them her chart-topper *Can't Fight the Moonlight*. Part of why Rimes was approached to perform was because she's the Cliffords' favorite singer. Rimes says, "I love the fact that there are real fans here."

Circling back to the root cause of what brought the friends together that night, when the Cliffords, Campbell and DeGroot were organizing the fete before the 2012 auction, they wanted to add in an element of fun and philanthropy. They approached the local Provident Jewelry about partnering with Buccellati (a centuries-old Italian jewelry house known for its luxurious, handcrafted pieces). Buccellati agreed to donate a one-of-a-kind cuff to raffle at the party, and the owners of both companies set up a boutique under the tent to sell their exquisite gems. Ten percent of the proceeds went back to the NCEF. "We wanted to maintain the focus on the children whom we are serving," Bob Clifford remarks. "Since 2001, we have helped more than 150,000 kids."

Capping the festivities, Clifford and Rimes announced the winners, NCEF trustees Ann and Bill Bain. Guests lingered to continue their revelry. No one wanted the night to end. Festival patron Shelly Stayer chatted and reflected with Linda Malone, co-chair of the 2014 NWWF. Says Stayer, "This was a Hollywood-style party in Naples. People will be talking about it for a long time." ♦