

Host Story: Richard and Rana Florida throw an intimate dinner party for their interesting friends

Richard and Rana Florida have a swish party pad, a sense of whimsy and interesting friends. But their best dinner-party trick may be keeping their cool in chaos

By Victoria Webster | Photography by Joseph and Jaime



Richard and Rana Florida are such seasoned travellers that they've cut their packing time down to zero. Stashed in a hall closet in their Rosedale house are two Tumi bags full of toiletries, phone chargers and various other necessities, so they can hop on a plane at a moment's notice. Because of the hectic schedule, Richard, a professor of business and creativity at U of T's Rotman School of Management, and Rana, the CEO of Creative Class Group, the couple's

consulting company, consider staying at home something of a treat. And when they're in town, they're always entertaining friends.

THE MENU

Poolside drinks and hors d'oeuvre

[Moët & Chandon champagne](#) with raspberries and mint

Skewers of fresh bocconcini, tomato and basil

[White bean bruschetta](#) by Mario Batali ([see recipe](#)). The Manhattan-based chef is an old friend of Richard's; they met at Rutgers university, where Batali studied.

The Barefoot Contessa's [Middle Eastern vegetable salad](#) ([see recipe](#))

Dinner

[Grilled lamb chops with mint and olive oil Salmon, halibut, fennel and pepper kebabs](#)

Dipping sauce of Greek yogurt mixed with shredded cucumber, lots of fresh dill, lemon, sea salt and cracked pepper

Quinoa with toasted pine nuts

Dessert

[Baklava](#) served with vanilla gelato and grilled figs and topped with pistachios and sprigs of mint

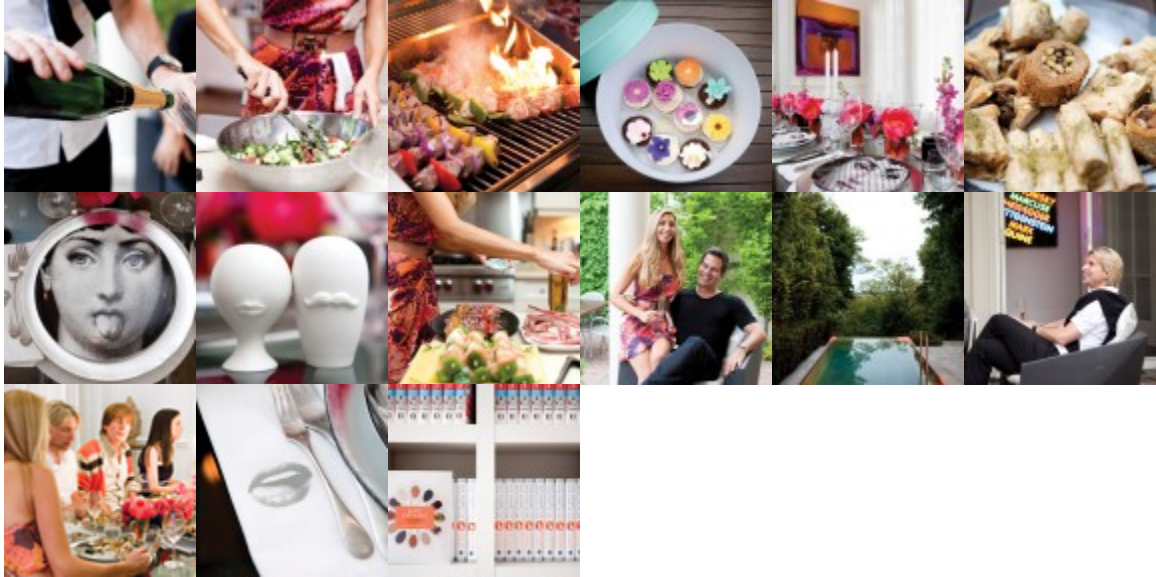
Blossom-topped Belgian chocolate [cupcakes](#) from Eat My Words

The Floridas' party hub, weather permitting, is their renovated backyard, where a new pool is set against the backdrop of lush ravine trees. On this particular night, there was a gathering of eight: Frank Toskan, co-founder of MAC cosmetics, and his partner, hairstylist Darren Zakreski; society maven Lynda Prince and her husband, Jonas, chairman of the Realstar Group; Victoria Jackman, executive director of the Hal Jackman Foundation; the Floridas and me.

Rana stocked the poolside cabana with fresh fruits, Belgian chocolates, rock candy and marshmallows from Summerhill Market, and she put out about a dozen whiskies, from Glenlivet to Tyrconnell (Richard is a devout duty-free shopper). Obsessed when it comes to the details, Rana runs an evening with the precision of a drill sergeant and the energy of a racehorse. But she also knows that good parties need relaxed hosts: "If you're not having fun, then neither are the guests," she says.

Growing up as one of six children of first-generation Jordanians in a Michigan suburb, Rana was schooled in the art of dealing with chaos: at any given time, friends and family members might drop by unannounced. There were no crashers at the gate this Saturday night, but the hosts did field a few curveballs. One couple got the time wrong and arrived an hour early (just as Rana was getting changed), and another was held up and came almost an hour late. During this interval, corks popped on bottles of Moët (served with a sprig of mint and raspberry in the glass), while, inside, disaster struck.

It was a new server's first time at the house. Rana's usual guy, Eliano, hired from the local events company Spinradius, was out for his birthday that night. The novice helper started a kitchen fire while toasting bread for the bruschetta. After Rana and the server threw the engulfed tray in the sink, she implored him to take the edge off with a drink. He declined, but the guests drank a toast to the (burnt) toast.





Mario Batali's white bean bruschetta

Ingredients

1 ¼ cups dried cannellini or other white beans
1 carrot, halved
1 red onion, halved
1 celery rib, halved
4 garlic cloves, smashed and peeled
1 bay leaf, preferably fresh
1 sprig each fresh Italian parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil, or more to taste
1 tbsp finely chopped fresh thyme
Sea salt
Coarsely ground black pepper

1. Soak dried beans for 12 to 24 hours in cold water. Transfer the beans and liquid to a medium pot, add enough water to cover by 2 inches and bring to a simmer, skimming off the foam. Add the vegetables, garlic, bay leaf and herb sprigs, reduce heat and simmer until the beans are tender, 35 to 40 minutes. Season with salt to taste.

2. Drain the beans, reserving $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of the cooking liquid. Remove the vegetables and spread them on a platter or baking sheet to cool slightly. Transfer the beans and garlic to a medium bowl (discard the bay leaf and other herbs).

3. Coarsely chop the vegetables and add to the beans. Add $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of the reserved cooking liquid, then add the oil, stirring gently. Sprinkle with the chopped thyme and season with [salt and pepper](#). 4. Spoon onto 1-inch-thick slices of Italian peasant bread, drizzled with high-quality extra-virgin olive oil and grilled.

Serves 6.

Recipe from *Molto Gusto: Easy Italian Cooking*.



The Barefoot Contessa's Middle Eastern vegetable salad

Ingredients

- 10 scallions, white and green parts, thinly sliced
- 1 pound ripe tomatoes, seeded, cored and diced into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces
- 1 English cucumber, halved lengthwise and cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch dice
- 1 can or jar (12 to 16 oz.) chickpeas, rinsed and drained
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup chopped fresh parsley
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup chopped fresh mint leaves

1/3 cup julienned fresh basil leaves
1/2 cup freshly squeezed lemon juice (4 lemons)
1 tbsp minced garlic (3 cloves)
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
1/2 cup good olive oil
8 oz. good feta cheese, diced Toasted pita bread, for serving

1. Place the scallions, tomatoes, cucumber, chickpeas, parsley, mint and basil in a large salad bowl and toss to combine.

2. In a small bowl or measuring cup, whisk together the lemon juice, garlic, 2 teaspoons salt and 1 teaspoon pepper. Slowly whisk in the olive oil to make an emulsion. Pour the dressing over the salad, tossing gently to coat all the vegetables. Add the feta, sprinkle with [salt and pepper](#) and toss gently.

3. Serve the salad with the toasted pita bread.

Serves 4 to 6.

Recipe from *Barefoot Contessa: How Easy is That?* Courtesy of Clarkson Potter/Random House of Canada

by [Victoria Webster](#) June 11, 2012 at 2:00 pm