

THE RESTAURANT ISSUE

Philadelphia

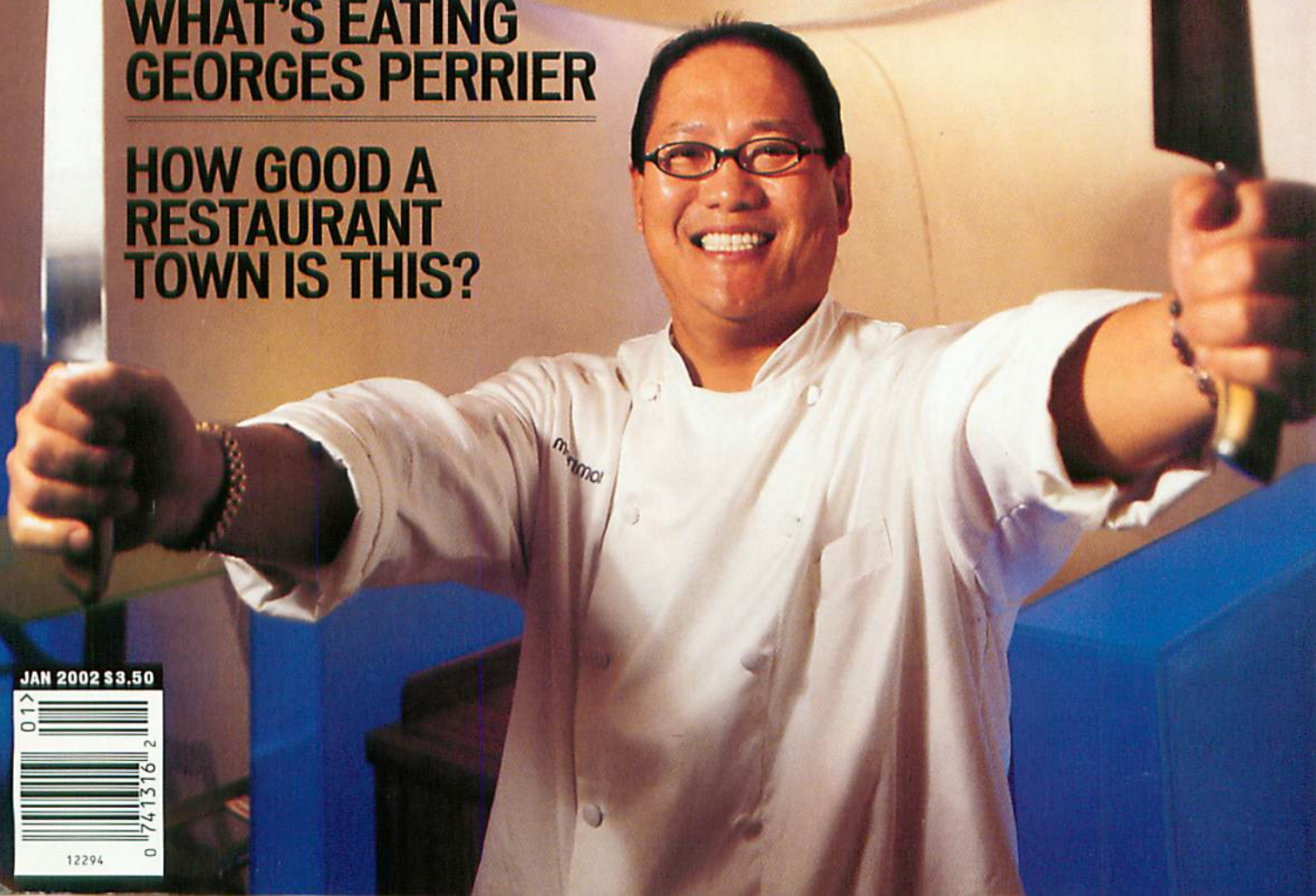
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(Farm) House of Style

Fashion designer Josephine Sasso and caterer Peter Callahan met at a wedding at her family's 135-acre Chester County farm. One year later, they tied the knot and began making the place their own

BY MEG COHEN RAGAS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY AUGUSTUS BUTERA

FOR CATERER PETER CALLAHAN AND fashion designer Josephine Sasso, it was love at first bite.

Callahan was overseeing the sushi chefs at Sasso's brother's 1996 wedding at her family's Chester County farm when Sasso sailed glamorously into his cook tent. "She looked fabulous," recalls Callahan. "She was wearing an original Sasso, of course. Not often does a beautiful woman walk into my cook tent."

The two had actually met before, in New York in the early '80s, when they traveled in the same social circles. Callahan remembers a fashion show Sasso staged at the newly opened Limelight disco in 1985, when she had just launched her fashion business; he and his buddies were lured by the rumor that socialite Cornelia Guest would appear bare-breasted on the runway.

"Hey, I was only 25," Callahan offers in his defense.

"There was one shirt that was see-through," recalls Sasso, "but I don't think anyone bared her breasts."

The courtship, like their banter, was off and running. The couple began dating shortly after the cook-tent encounter, when a family friend of Sasso's stepped in as matchmaker. Their first outing was to the Brandywine Museum's annual Halloween ball. Sasso went as Catwoman, and Callahan as a South American dictator. It took them less than a year to make it to their next costume party: their wedding.

As their home reflects, it was a match made in style heaven. Callahan, 41, caters parties for the social elite in Philadelphia and New York; past triumphs have included George and Susan Soros's opulent 350-person lobster-and-caviar Millennium dinner and Pia Getty's Tarzan-and-Jane party in



BASTING TIME: Right, Peter Callahan roasts pheasant in the walk-in stone fireplace in his kitchen, where framed portraits of family and friends decorate the walls; above, the hilltop farmhouse, framed by black walnut trees.

Southampton, where Callahan served pu pu platters. For the Republican National Convention in 2000, Callahan Catering scored the Team 100 Reception for the RNC's top donors at the exquisite Andalusia estate. Sasso, who's in her 30s, dresses the *Social Register* crowd, and her designs have appeared in magazines from *InStyle* to *Town & Country*.

But Callahan and Sasso attribute their connection to something more: parallel business lives. "We both started our companies with no formal training," says Sasso. "We didn't work for anyone else; we just jumped right in." And that's the way the couple approached designing Sasso's family farmhouse, where they moved in 1997.

WHEN CALLAHAN AND SASSO BECAME ENGAGED, he was living on the Main Line, on the verge of opening a New York office; she was in the process of moving her business from New York to the Philadelphia area. So the big question was, where to put down roots? An obvious choice was Sasso's childhood home, the 135-acre farm in Chester County where she and Callahan had become reacquainted in the cook tent. (Sasso and her siblings inherited the farm from their parents in the mid-'80s; one of her brothers uses a cottage on the property as a weekend place.)

"I had wonderful memories of the house as a child," says Sasso, "of running down the hill to the springhouse and playing in the gardens. It's a magical place for me." The picturesque stone farmhouse, built in 1713 and added onto in 1803, still retains its storybook charm. Perched on a hilltop and framed by black walnut trees, it's reached by a winding road that allows visitors to absorb its quiet magnificence slowly. To the right of the house, across the driveway, are several outbuildings, including a barn, a blacksmith shop (converted into a cottage), and the property's original summer kitchen; the springhouse sits just below the farmhouse on the hill. Sasso's family hadn't lived there for 20 years, but for Josephine, returning to the house was a homecoming.

They moved in 30 days before their wedding. "The house was totally empty, and we wanted to have it completely done for our friends and family," says Callahan; to make things as challenging as possible, the overachieving couple had decided to throw the wedding at the farm. "We had one month to furnish the place and fix up the grounds." They planned an elaborate weekend for 300: a rehearsal dinner under the stars, a small ceremony down at the springhouse, cocktails in the barn courtyard and surrounding gardens, and dinner under a tent. It was a wedding worthy of Martha Stewart—so much so that it appeared in the pages of the lifestyle queen's magazine. "We decided to go all out," says Sasso. "We had to meet expectations, right?"

Sasso had planned a black-and-white dance floor for the event, but a week before the big day, she decided she wanted the *entire* tent floor painted like a checkerboard. "We stretched old-fashioned canvas over the floor of the tent and hired students from the University of the Arts to hand-paint black and white squares," explains Callahan. But when it came to indulging his whim, Sasso put her foot down. "I only wanted one thing at our wedding, and Josephine fought me tooth and nail over it," Callahan says of his vision for a cigar-and-grappa bar where he and his buddies could hang out. He eventually got his way ("She caved"), transforming a slat-sided corncrib next to the dining tent into a smoking and drinking lair.



DOMESTIC BLISS: Clockwise from above, Josephine Sasso fits a gown on a dress form in her home studio; the dining room is set for entertaining; Juliet peeks out of the living room window while perched atop a piano bench salvaged by Mom and Dad from a thrift shop; the master bedroom is a vision in toile; Juliet's closet is stocked with stuffed animals and Sasso originals.

While Callahan fine-tuned the menu ("At the last minute, Josephine changed her mind and said she wanted all vegan hors d'oeuvres. It was like, 'Torture the caterer because he's your fiancé.'"), Sasso designed the wedding party's dresses, including her own. And they moved bits and pieces of furniture into the house—a lot from Sasso's family, and some from Callahan's. "We took everything out of storage and threw it together so we had an instant, fabulous house," says Callahan. "It looked great, but it was a temporary fix."

It was temporary because the two were anxious to put their own stamp on the place, one that reflected their combined tastes and sensibilities. Both are known for their creativity, their ability to turn anything into something. "A house is a work in progress," says Sasso. "I hate the idea of an insta-house, because it looks like an insta-house. It's so much more personal when you slowly piece it together." And that's exactly what they've done in the years since the wedding, furnishing their house one piece at a time, gradually replacing (continued on page 108)

