



Let Them Eat Cake—Five Kinds— at a Backyard Wedding in Greenwich

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I WATCHED THE BAREFOOT CONTESSA, AKA INA GARTEN, TAKE A slow, wide turn in her Mercedes sedan on a quiet road in East Hampton, the seagrass off to the side hunched over like fairies bowing to their queen as she heads to a *back-to-basics* cookout on the beach. Her skin had the luster of a hardboiled egg after you’ve peeled the membrane. As she pulled up to the sand as smooth and white as finely ground sea salt, got out of her car, and carried her edibles to the “table” —linens held down on the beach by silver tubs of hydrangeas—I began to question her mission for *eschewing the fancy*. In fact, it is the same feeling I have now as my husband and I drive north on the Merritt Parkway, exiting on Lake Avenue, on our way to a backyard wedding in Greenwich, Connecticut.

The valet takes our car, and we walk to the side of the house where guests are waiting for the ceremony to take place. Rows of elegant folding chairs with perfect satin bows tied around their backs are waiting like so many debutantes. My heels are sinking into the grass because I didn’t follow the flat shoe suggestion on the wedding website. The wait staff is holding trays of champagne, and I wonder if I should start before the ceremony. I do.

I meet a woman in a mint green dress with jewels at her collar and cuffs. She recommends the best Indian restaurants in Manhattan when I’m the one who lives there, and she invites me to her home in Delhi. We detect a similar truth. We are lifelong cooks without formal training like Ina. As we talk, I’m envisioning my new friend in her kitchen taking pinches of ground turmeric,

cumin, and coriander lined up on her counter while I’m on the other side of the world, my scratchy recipes as significant as the Dead Sea Scrolls curled up next to the microwave. How do we know that for us, the methodical process of nourishing our families has become our form of meditation?

We clink our glasses. *We are not fake foodies.*

I am distracted by a presence behind me. I feel a pull, a breeze on my legs, and I turn to look toward the back of the yard near the woods. The sun is in my eyes, but I’m sure I see a sailing cruise ship tethered to two massive oak trees. It’s not a ship; it’s a tent, and I follow the majesty of its form. Its ivory sailcloth rises up into three peaks, and on top of each peak medieval looking pennants are waving.

The justice of the peace asks us to please be seated, and yes we can take photos but do not post during the ceremony.

The bride, our dear friend’s daughter, is extremely tall and lovely. Her gown reminds me of Carolyn Bessette’s simple crepe sheath in the famous photo of Bessette and JFK, Jr. leaving the tiny chapel on Cumberland Island. The famous couple’s wedding becomes real to me—I see a bride and groom almost too big for the spare altar entirely lit by candles, a few worn pews, a cross made of sticks and string. I see a Jesuit priest reading by a kerosene lamp, a gospel singer mesmerizing guests with the hymn, “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?”

Hypnotized by my own visualization I expect to see Bessette’s veil of hand-rolled tulle, her hair gathered by the clip belonging to Jackie Onassis, but I am back in the bright sun, and our bride today is wearing a single flower at the side of her glossy brown chignon.

The couple’s Austrian friend is reading a small excerpt from Ann Patchett’s book of essays, This is “Story of a Happy Marriage,”

where Patchett’s friend poses the question: *Does he make you a better person?* This simple question as years go by in the author’s life proves to work as a reliable guideline.

Does he make you better?

I hand my iPhone to my husband since there are no pockets in my French dress. I don’t feel right taking photos even though it’s permitted. Instead, I look at our ceiling here today. It’s a clean cerulean blue sky as if squeezed from a fresh tube of oils. We are awash, as they say, in pure sunlight. This is a lucky couple. But I have to admit I long for a cool dark church, the smell of incense, a priest I try to believe in, and the threat of a higher power somewhere among us.

As the justice of the peace touches upon the bride and groom’s history in his address, I remember the priest who married my husband and me hosting our premarital meeting, leaning back in his Gothic celebrant chair, asking my then fiancé working in finance, and me, in book publishing, *Do you share the same reverence?* It is cocktail hour and the bride confirms that Carolyn Bessette’s dress was indeed her inspiration. We talk about Ann Patchett’s book of essays, a favorite of ours, and she tells me how the groom zeroed in on my husband during the ceremony. A focal point. I am eating raw tuna in a tiny savory ice cream cone looking at my husband in his Ray Bans that make him better. He looks like a movie star.

I make my way over to the Royal Flush potties, but since I know this home like my own, I choose the bathroom in the main house. I love the sink, how it doesn’t look like a sink at all but a slab of stone glistening with fresh running water. There are slick black and white photographs of musicians on the wall, the subjects illuminated from behind like saints, their faces in shadows. One silhouette, I can tell, is Bob Dylan.

Returning to cocktail hour at poolside, the

tent from this angle hovers like a rectangular mosque, the glasses visible from the open flaps are twinkling like tiny white Christmas lights. I ask so many questions the father of the bride takes me for a tour.

The parquet floors are similar to the ones in my own home. Bistro lighting on solid wood poles are casting a Paris dusk. Could Ina have

his tour because he knows about me. When friends come for parties, they ask, *Who is your caterer?* I don't admit I prepare everything, even the tarts. Why can't I use Ina's comeback: *It's in my DNA.*

Large white bowls are lined up on long pristine tables, the first layer of wild greens and blossoms appear to be sprouting up through



Lucas van Valckenborch,
The Wedding Dance in the Open Air, 1574

created the centerpieces for each table? She says she has trouble balancing colors and textures, so to keep it simple she sticks to one color and uses lots of varieties—sweet peas, ranunculus, hellebores, for example.

The bride's father includes the cook tent in

the china. The staff is immaculate without one stain or rub on their starched white uniforms. They are smiling and calm, welcoming our visit with a slight bow. We head back up to the pool, and I am offered a grass fed cheeseburger on a delicate pastry, the size of a quarter.

The reception is underway, and the band is silent as the speeches begin. I had heard a rumor that this band played at Chelsea Clinton's wedding. The father of the bride is joking that his daughter made her own gown as did his wife. The best man is up. He works for the FBI and seems to be mulling over the evidence as he tries to unravel a speech into the mike. If Ina were here, she might be impatient with his floundering, his inability to nail a best-man-off-the-cuff joke all in good fun.

At every wedding my husband and I attend, I know that at some point during the reception he will take a walk alone. I see him walking along the perimeters of the dance floor, and I know what he is up to. Ann Patchett also wrote, "I can't imagine that there is a right way to be married." Our way has been similar to the yin-yang concept of Chinese philosophy. We are opposites, yet interdependent, like sun and shade.

He's on a mission searching for his weakness that is waiting for him like a lover on a train's platform.

"No luck," he says when he returns.

"It's here," I say, pointing to wedding cake that has been sliced and served by the wait staff without all the bride-cuts-the-cake fanfare.

Was it multi-tiered? Formal? Gold or silver dragees? *Did it set the tone?* They say that anything can be replicated in sugar.

I pick up a dish for each of us, chocolate for him, vanilla for me. He presses his fork into the soft layers, raising the cake to his mouth slowly enough to discreetly sniff the icing.

We both agree. It's the most fabulous wedding cake we have ever had.

Everyone is dancing and my husband takes my hand. We leave the tent and walk up the slight hill toward the house. My heels are sinking in the grass and have become like pegs

keeping me in place. We turn and face the tent, now a perfect replica of the Titanic all lit up and floating in the dark.

The bride and groom come walking toward us with radiant faces. The bride has a slice of pizza in her hand from the 11:30 delivery. I believe I see the reflection of the tent as a spec in her glistening eyes. She jokes that after all these months of planning, she can finally eat.

My husband raves about the cake.

"We tasted both," I say.

"Oh, no," the bride says, waving her half eaten slice. "There are five kinds of cake—Almond Cake with Green Tea Buttercream, Salted Caramel Chocolate Cake with Caramel Chocolate Ganache, White Lemon Cake with Lemon Curd, White Cake with Raspberries, Chocolate Cake with Mint Chocolate Ganache!"

I hear the ping in my head, the one that Ina says she hears when she finds the flavor she is looking for.

"Shall we?" I say to my husband, a venture capitalist with a head for sugar.

We get to the cakes and begin with the White Lemon, closing our eyes as we taste. I am reminded of one of Ina's Food Network episodes when her friends tie a periwinkle blue blindfold around her eyes as they steer her safely into their circle on a Hampton's beach.

With my eyes still closed and the delicate lemon curd in my mouth I recall reading that in any creative act, even in a prayer, plan only to a point, and then let go of all that brainwork so you can enter another state of being, one that I am close to right now. I am being turned in the folds of something as soft as batter, and my husband, I know, is in this very same place as if we are sharing one soul for this one moment. It is the place where we meet, as different as we may be, and there is no room here for anything fancy. Just us, as we truly are. ❖