

FALL HOME & DESIGN

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## THE *FINER* THINGS

My family poured love and joy into entertaining. Now it's my turn.

BY ALEXIS E. BARTON

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# THE *FINER* THINGS

My family poured  
love and joy into  
entertaining.  
Now it's my turn.

STORY BY ALEXIS E. BARTON  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDI RICE

**My grandmother Mamie never gave me the exact recipe for her peach cobbler. ¶ Instead, each summer, I watched her flit and waltz about her galley kitchen in Whistler, Ala., wearing a caftan and stirring simmering pots of bright, sweet peaches until they bubbled. In watching, I learned. ¶ Later — after she’d passed away, when the longing for her presence, advice and the lilt of her voice became acute — muscle memory called the cobbler forth. So many peaches, so much sugar and flour, the crust massaged, flattened and pressed. Simmered until it bubbled. ¶**

**It was the presentation that mattered most.**



What I remember now is the dessert’s golden goodness scooped into Grandmama’s precious wedding china, set down on her embroidered Madeira tablecloth. What I remember is the way she taught my cousins and me to lightly starch, then pleat, then press, then tuck, then fan the cloth — just so — into her crystal. What I remember is the way the pristine linen stood at elegant attention in her water goblets.

“Ooooh, that’s it! You’ve *got* it, dearheart,” she’d exclaim, her voice a melody. As if you’d conquered the world.

I don’t remember my paternal grandmother Dorothy’s recipe for deviled peas. I knew better than to ask.

Instead, I remember carefully spooning the warm soup at her table: tender spring peas and mushrooms swimming in rich cream, slivers of boiled egg floating on the surface. What I remember is the cornbread, thick slices of tomatoes slathered with mayonnaise, the chicken thighs and drumsticks fried to perfection in platters at the table’s center. For all of her decorum, I also remember her bare feet, electric blue pedicure, her cherished silver anklet accented with a thin dime.

“Doris!” “Dee!” “Mama!” “Big Mama!” we’d squeal in delight over her food, also knowing better than to gobble or slurp. What was her secret?

“I put my big toe in it,” she’d say in her throaty voice, making

Opposite page: Alexis E. Barton’s peach cobbler, a family recipe inspired by her grandmother, alongside a piece from Barton’s set of Wedgwood china plates. Previous pages: Barton at Juniper restaurant in Birmingham, Ala.

us wonder if she had, in fact, dipped her toe into the dish.

I remember: These beautifully complex and vastly undervalued women. Their Opium, Chanel No. 5 and Youth Dew, their pearls and diamonds, their Daniel Green open-toe slippers (beige or black for everyday wear, gold for occasions at home). Their insistence on ceremony; on immaculate homes and manners; on the silverware, crystal, flowers and fine china that made a lady’s dinner table a much-desired destination.

Thank you, Lord, I remember: washing and drying — by hand — a seemingly endless parade of precious Noritake plates, bowls, teacups and saucers after my parents entertained at home in Brewton, Ala. When I placed them back into their positions in my mother’s china cabinet, I imagined selecting my own formal china one day. I imagined having a table to sit at the head of; dressed in

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something chic; serving something mouthwatering; encircled by love; admired for my hospitality, like my mother and father, like my grandparents.

My family sees entertaining — and accessories that go with it — as an indication of taste, of hospitality, of manners, of respect and esteem. It is their use that makes them an instrument and vehicle for joy. Any hour can become a party and every guest is a star, one of a chosen few invited to gather in the circle. In my family, the tiniest moments become momentous occasions because of how much intention goes into planning, presenting and plating the details. It's why I invested in a set of Sheila Bridges's Harlem Toile de Jouy-patterned Wedgwood china for entertaining.

**I**f my grandmothers had been born in a different time: Maybe Mamie Davis would have headlined the Fillmore as a professional soprano instead of leading summer singalongs with her grandchildren.

Maybe Dorothy Hill would have founded and ruled an empire instead of her women's group (the Sentimental Club) and a household on Fleming Lane.

Instead, they poured their style, their creativity, their love and their subverted dreams into their families, their faith, their homes. Mixed them into their food, and its presentation.

Outside their circles they might not have been recognized as extraordinary, but in the domestic realm, they were queens. They taught me that homekeeping, entertaining and feeding others

From top: An undated photo of Barton with her grandmother Mamie J. Crawford at a family celebration in Atlanta. Elaborate tablescapes such as this at Crawford's home in Alabama sometimes featured pieces on loan from family members.

can be where creativity flourishes, unimpeded by the outside world's shortsightedness, small-mindedness, racism and judgment. For them, it had to: Bearing the gifts that their ancestors gave, they were raising children in the Jim Crow South's belly.

*See?* their grasp of an aesthetic that has no hashtag seemed to say.

*We do this, too.*

*We are this, too.*

*We deserve this, too.*

My grandmothers' insistence on doing common things in uncommon ways became recipes they passed to my parents and then to me, ones that I am still mastering: for creating, curating and sharing joy.

Buying the accoutrements that accessorized this lifestyle appeared to be a secret language of the affianced and their personal trousseaus. My hometown home goods store, the Treasure Chest, displayed its fine-china place settings at a grand table in the shop's center. Would I be a Wedgwood wife, I wondered? Or maybe a Lenox lady, I thought, as I peered at the



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Barton uses pieces from her Wedgwood Sheila Bridges collection.

tiny cards announcing local brides and their wedding dates. If this was a tradition one waited their proper turn for, I held my breath in hungry anticipation.

I continued to make GrandMamie's peach cobbler, Big Mama's silky deviled peas, Aunt Inez's Creole oyster dressing, Tee Meriel's decadent chocolate cake, Paw Paw's party punch — and each time, these much-loved ones who have passed away spring back to life. Paper plates might make the cleanup convenient afterward, but they don't quite cut it. Those meals deserve more, I decided. I deserve more.

I'd been shortchanging myself, stuffing my hopes into an imaginary hope chest for "someday" and settling for what was practical. I longed to sit at a table worthy of my grandmothers' approval — with or without a husband. What exactly was I waiting for? If I survived the pandemic, I wanted to do so in style.

In a fit of pique, I bought my first set of fine china. That pattern, Harlem Toile de Jouy, was designed by acclaimed interior designer Sheila Bridges.

Bridges knows something about intentional design as well as incorporating cherished traditions. The women in her family collected Wedgwood Jasperware, she says during our Zoom conversation, and she started collecting too.

"We would complement each other's collections," Bridges says. "It was a way of sharing this joy of collecting. And it was a connection that my mother and I had, even though we weren't in the same city."

This year, Bridges collaborated with Wedgwood to release a collection of Harlem Toile de Jouy bone china. The pattern, which she created 17 years ago and has appeared on wallpaper, upholstery fabric, clothing and other accessories, reimagines traditional French toile with people of color, *in color*.

"I loved French toiles. I love the storytelling aspect of them, but I couldn't connect with all of the toiles that I constantly saw when shopping for clients or looking for my own home," she says. "So I decided to create something more reflective of my own point of view and my politics, my interests."

The collection serves up an almost subversive counternarrative, boldly cen-

tering and celebrating Black hair, food, beauty and athleticism.

Inside a soup bowl, for instance, a jaunty rooster and watermelon appear, challenging stereotypes used to demean Black people (and serving as a nod to the farm and watermelon-eating chickens Bridges once owned).

“When I’m designing wallpaper or china, I get a chance to share a very different perspective and tell a different story. Not many people are telling our stories, or if they are being told, they’re told from a lens that is very different than our own,” Bridges says. “I think particularly as Black women, it’s important for us to share our own stories. And so for me, that’s part of the legacy.”

“So much of it also has to do with the iconography of what we’re used to seeing,” she says. “None of us really think about how it affects Black people to continually see the same images over and over again, particularly when we’re not represented in those images or not represented in a positive way.”

"We frolic, too," Bridges says. But, we agree, that narrative has been missing from the conversation.

**M**y grandparents are long gone now. Only in adulthood did I learn they swallowed disappointments, reinvented themselves despite their own regrets, and rebounded from mistakes. Retaining their hold on happiness helped them to survive, then thrive. Lipstick, earrings, how to set a proper table — these niceties were not respectability politics. Maybe those routines were their armor, those rituals their weapons in a world that often renders Black people — particularly Black women — invisible and defenseless.

Maybe it was a way of redirecting their righteous indignation at the world they inhabited.

They didn't speak of babies buried. Of promises broken. Of secrets locked in their hope chests, of dreams folded away in tissue paper with other souvenirs. Of who they might have been. Of suffering that could not be made palatable.

They instructed me, instead, to make the very best of whatever life served me, down to teaching me how to hand-dye fabric and perfect my walk.

"Do you know how to stroll?" Grandma asked, her eyes twinkling, the summer I wanted to be beautiful.

"If you stay ready, you don't have to get ready," Big Mama warned on my way to college.



Sheila Bridges says she loved French toiles but couldn't connect with them. "So I decided to create something more reflective of my own point of view and my politics, my interests."

They'd loved, they'd lost, they'd lived and overcome. In Lower Alabama parlance: They got where they wanted to go without driving, they knew when something in the milk wasn't clean, and they knew more than one way to break a dog from sucking eggs. No matter what, their souls would not be broken; their existence kneaded my sensibilities like pie dough.

They taught me to invest in joy — to let it radiate from my pores and inform everything I do — because they knew I'd need the strength it imparts to fight battles of my own. An hour at their table, a weekend with them, surrounded by light, laughter, love and lots of good food, gave us all strength to face whatever waited for us outside their embrace.

**F**or me, investing in this china — while, yes, a bit of indulgent retail therapy — was also a way to unapologetically celebrate myself even when society doesn't. My parents, who reared me to do that, approved.

“It shows facets to your personality that maybe you don’t realize are there. It’s bold and makes a statement about life,” my mother says. “You don’t have to sit back and wait for someone to do something for you. You can do it yourself.”

On my yellow Harlem Toile teacup, a bald, lithe, finely dressed Black woman high-kicks over a log. She simultaneously outruns and hurdles over obstacles while challenging conventional beauty standards. Like me. Like every woman in my family, maybe like every Black woman I've ever known.

“One of the challenges of being a Black person, a Black woman, an entrepreneur, is I always feel I have to prove myself all over again,” Bridges tells me. If only she worked hard and long enough, she believed, eventually she could “coast.” But that hasn’t happened.

“Kicking over the log and outpacing the horse was very much my life for decades,” she says. “It’s important for us, first of all, to experience joy and to take care of ourselves so we can take care of each other.”

"That's been a really hard thing to learn how to do over the years. And I think so many of us are just used to just kicking that log and we don't take the time to experience the joy that we really deserve. So I'm trying very hard now," Bridges says.

**I**f the pandemic ever really ends, I'll serve supper for a chosen few. I want them to revel in the hard-won joy served, immaculately, at each place setting. I want to sop up conversation and laughter.

I want candlelight to set my guests' faces aglow. I want the flowers and food to be eclectic and Southern, a riot of flawless flavor and color. I want the tableware to make the distinct music only my elegant Harlem Toile de Jouy china and silverware make. I want the linen to stand at starched attention in my crystal. I want the peach cobbler to make guests hum and rock with joy.

"Ooooh, that's it! You've *always had it*, dearheart," I wish my Grandmama would say.

And I want y'all to wonder how in the world I could possibly have made deviled peas so delicious.

But don't dare ask. 

Alexis E. Barton is a journalist in Birmingham, Ala.



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