



THE ART OF AL FRESCO

Designer Elizabeth Markel hosts a dreamy garden dinner party where casual elegance meets thoughtful design.

BY JACI CONRY / PHOTOGRAPHS BY JESSICA JENKINS



THE MENU

Dinner was anchored by two standout dishes from the Nautilus, crafted by chef-owner Liam Mackey: a Peking-inspired whole roasted duck with smoky mayo, confit legs, and blue-crab fried rice—originally created as a way to repurpose leftover sushi rice, now a house favorite. Rounded out with noodle salads, vegetable sides, and lettuce wraps, the menu emphasized flavor, flexibility, and the joys of shared plates.

ON A GOLDEN SUMMER EVENING IN HER NANTUCKET GARDEN, INTERIOR designer Elizabeth Markel gathered a group of design friends for a dinner party that captured everything she loves about outdoor entertaining. It was the kind of evening where guests arrive sun-kissed and smiling, the pace slows naturally, and conversation lingers late into the night under candlelight.

“In the summer, people come as they are—flip-flops, beachy hair, and all,” Markel says. “There’s a relaxed energy that makes hosting feel less formal, more joyful.” Unlike some winter gatherings in the city, “the evening unfolds slowly—golden hour leads into starlight. Guests linger longer. No one’s rushing home to beat traffic.”





THE WINE

Santa Barbara's Lieu Dit wines set the tone with fresh and food-friendly pours. Guests enjoyed a vibrant chenin blanc, a smooth cabernet franc, and blanc de mer, a bright blend of 50 percent chardonnay, 40 percent sauvignon blanc, and 10 percent chenin blanc—each chosen to complement the flavors of the evening and encourage another glass, and another story, as the night lingered on.



ELIZABETH MARKEL'S HOSTING TIPS

Start with the feel, not the food

Before planning a menu, ask yourself: What do I want this night to feel like? Cozy? Elegant? Playful? Think about how you want to set the scene, then build your menu, lighting, and playlist around that.

Do as much as possible in advance

The more I prep ahead—food, drinks, table, even playlists—the more present I am during the party. Set the table the night before, choose a menu with at least one make-ahead dish, prebatch a cocktail, or have wine chilled and ready.

Expect one thing to go slightly wrong

You forget to chill the wine. Someone shows up late. It's going to be okay!



Markel's design background was evident in every detail: a long table set with embroidered linen, vintage flatware, blue-and-white Canton dishes, and an eclectic mix of chairs set the tone, while florals—gathered from her own garden—spilled casually from low arrangements. Held in a small shed on the edge of the garden—built exclusively for Markel's intimate outdoor dinner parties—a soft glow emanated from a vintage chandelier while the scent of the blooming florals created an atmosphere that felt as considered as it was effortless.

The evening's menu took its cue from the Nautilus, a beloved Nantucket restaurant. "Thinking of their obsessively delicious Peking duck, I decided to plan a menu around not just that dish

as a main course, but in general their family-style dining that brings a more shared experience to the evening for my guests," Markel says. "I love that many Asian-inspired dishes invite interaction—whether it's assembling lettuce wraps or sharing from a noodle bowl. It creates a communal, hands-on vibe that brings people together." From a host perspective, the make-ahead-friendly menu of sauces, noodles, and rice dishes can be prepped in advance, giving Markel time to enjoy her guests and just do finishing touches or light cooking when they arrive.

"The whole vibe was easy, open, and unhurried," Markel says. "That's the magic of entertaining outside—everything softens."