

The Blood Sport of Competitive Table Setting

Competition for the most remarkably chic table setting is savage, especially in rarefied pockets of society. Here, one obsessed player takes us inside.

By

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On the author's table, one of her triumphs: a cone-shaped tumbler with glass-flower appliques, sourced in Rome. Photo: Ross Whitaker

If you're a strong-looking dude and I'm flirting with you in an airplane aisle, it's not what you think. I cannot lift my rolling bag into the overhead compartment and I require your brawn. Inside my carry on: a bounty of ceramic platters, plates and hefty pitchers—all cushioned by mushed-up pajamas.

Those like me who battle fiercely in the competitive art of table setting abide by certain rules. It's not how much money you spend; it's how much you don't spend. We set out unique painted plates, found objets and colored glasses unearthed in back alleys and market fairs here and abroad.

It's a sport scored on originality and style. All over this country, among people of various incomes and backgrounds, you'll find a breed of sweaty table-setting freaks like myself who get a tad too excited about unique finds. No traditional Wedgwood labels on our tables. Whether by placing antique jars on vintage cloths in the countryside or divine violet Venetian glasses on a snooty urban tablescape, the feeling we aim to project is, I'm cooler than you. The goal on Manhattan's Upper East Side, where I live: Mix and match a cohesive still life on your dining table that would stop Henri Matisse in his tracks.

You can't walk into the seventh-floor housewares department at Bergdorf's, fondle the napkins of a highly curated tablescape and say, "I'm late for my blowout. Just send me everything on that table. Sixteen of each." That's cheating. On so many tragic levels.

The stakes always rise around major holidays. Easter is just around the corner, and one champion Fifth Avenue friend has already had the florist put patches of sod into her husband's Yale and Andover sailing regatta chalices on tables around her home. You shake your head in disbelief as you take in little colonies of Herend china bunnies and painted eggs from Hungary she has set afloat grass strands. She's a Ph.D-level table setter with honorary degrees from all seven Ivies.

My treasures include place cards that are 3-inch shards of dark-gray slate, each with a bit of weathered twine to loop around a napkin, and white chalk for writing names. Or, sourced at a shop in Rome, cone-shaped water tumblers with little glass flowers stuck to the sides. You want your rapacious competitors to ask, "Where did you find these?" Then you can answer, "Oh, some island off Croatia." The more far-flung the location, the more you piss them off.



Gray slate place cards, one of the author's prized pieces. Photo: Ross Whitaker

I would say I hold a solid high-school equivalency degree in tablescapes. (My discerning gay best friend reading this has just spit out his Diet Coke; he'd say fourth grade, and remedial group at that.) I still maintain I have a flair for heavy plates and napkins in colors you can't quite pronounce, such as coquelicot; it's the put-it-all-together thing that often trips me up.

My most recent whiffle: I imagined my mismatched wineglass collection together on one table glittering like a far-off town of uneven roof tops. It became clear it translated as junky shop table when the owlish Upper East Side guest who inspected it looked like she'd just sucked on a lemon.

"Even if all the plates have a pattern, the way we set the table has to have some sort of improvisation. Cut some branches and pile clementines in a dish if you haven't got flowers. Imagine Renaissance paintings with garlands of figs," advised table-setting style-meister Carolina Irving, of Carolina Irving and Daughters, her textile and tabletop brand. "Candles are essential. A warm mood transpires in a table collected over the years. It's the feeling of 'Time is going to stand still, and we are going to have this wonderful time and conversation.'"

For an example of the most unhinged table setters of our time, look no further than my dear friend the jewelry designer Joan Hornig. A woman who never repeats a table twice, she creates a huge reveal for her dinner guests and rents storage bins (yes, plural) for her plates and glasses.

When I told Joan about the bunnies-in-the-grass lady, she answered, “That doesn’t sound like Ph.D level sh–t to me. I get real stuff. You know, those [egg-shaped ecospheres](#) with live shrimp in them that last for two years?”

No, Joan, I don’t, but please go on.

“Put miniature lady apples in piles,” Joan said. “Replant long vines temporarily in wine glasses, artichokes in shot glasses so they stay straight, Brussels sprouts laid out, but only if still on long stems.” Where the hell do you buy them still attached to stems? Joan’s go-to is unusual fruit and vegetables, in groupings of three. Never the same flower arrangements, even if the same vases are on the table. (And by the way, days after our interview Joan was still texting me her favorites.)

Perhaps, like for me, real life limits your ability to express your decor talents and energies. For true table champions, it’s uncouth to sweat it too much. So, my apartment doesn’t carry an aroma of fresh-cut grass around Easter. My outfits and hairdos on airplanes project the care and flair of a hockey mom at 5 a.m. rink time.

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But friends leave my dinners smiling, and my flirting does the trick when I need a hand with luggage. When it comes to my table settings, I care, but not so much that it loses the fun.

The author’s go-to tablescape sources

Nashville-based Reed Smythe exhibits artisans from the South and beyond. The unusual shape of the [Glazed Terra Cotta Pomegranate](#) vase, below left, makes it a dapper choice. *From \$55*

British brand Mrs. Alice sells entire tablescapes by themes, such as “Rattan Meadow,” and pieces a la carte, like the melamine [Green Swirl Outdoor Glasses](#), below right. *\$89 for six*



The 13-inch [Hand-Painted Oval Iron Tray](#) below left typifies the diverse offerings of English purveyor Courthouse. By Turkish-design-inspired brand Les Ottomans, it's made of durable iron. *\$110*

Greenrow, a division of [Williams Sonoma](#) Inc., is an easy American go-to for casual-setting pieces such as the vintage-like [Narcissus Linen Ruffle Napkins](#) below right. *\$79 for four*



An international brand created by a nostalgic expat now living outside Portugal, Luisa Paixao sells well-priced ceramics such as the [Coimbra Ceramic 9-Inch Salad Bowl](#) below left. \$109

London-based Carolina Irving and Daughters specializes in products from family-owned ateliers that re-imagine ancient motifs—as does the Greek-inspired, nearly 5-inch tall [Mini Attica Vase](#) below right. \$30

