

Lunch at the Lake

Local caterer Christine Nunn welcomes friends to her country cabin



COUNTRY COMFORTS Christine Nunn (center, in plaid pants) and her guests enjoy a glass of wine in a field near her cabin. (Opposite, left) Artisanal cheeses are an easy appetizer; friends Lisa Nicolaou and Bibi Prival catch up over lunch; despite the rustic setting, Nunn sets the table with candles and seasonal flowers. (Far right) Conrad Wells and Nick Nicolaou head for a paddle on Lake Wallkill.

BY SUSAN LEIGH SHERRILL

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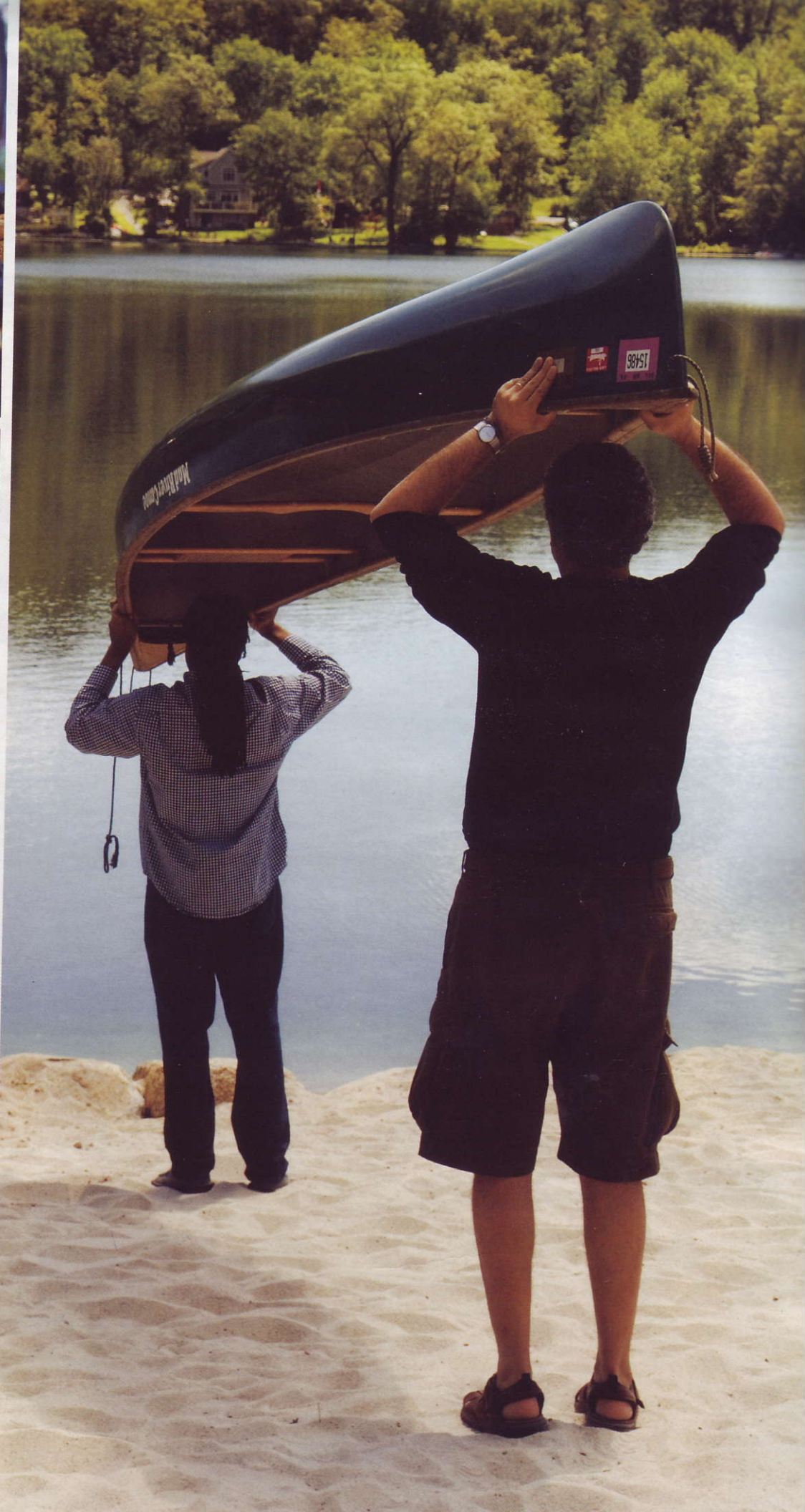
Most weekends, chef Christine Nunn is hard at work making sure her clients' parties proceed without a hitch. The busy proprietor of two off-premise catering operations – Picnic in Emerson and Epicure in Midland Park – Nunn is known for her creative

takes on classical French cuisine. A graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, she was named top student chef in the country by *Food & Wine* magazine during her tenure there. And Picnic's take-out lunch offerings have received rave reviews in *New Jersey Monthly* and *The New York Times*. The acclaim keeps Nunn, a former restaurant critic for *The Record*, booked far in advance.

But this glorious fall Saturday, the Fair Lawn resident has invited a group of her

closest friends to her "country house" getaway, a log cabin in Lake Wallkill. The Sussex County lakeside community, where just a few of the original cabins remain unchanged, is a rustic throwback to another era. Nunn spent her childhood summers there, and says she bought her 1920s cottage 11 years ago "on a whim." A display of trophies on a dresser is evidence that Nunn carries on – and wins – Lake Wallkill's campy tradition, "Regatta," a weekend of hilarity that includes canoe







aces, a pet parade and over-the-top cabin decorating (one year, she wrapped the entire exterior in aluminum foil).

Furnished with funky, estate-sale finds, the cabin features a breezy screened porch, where Nunn and her husband, Javi Ordonez, host casual meals. While the old-fashioned kitchen is spacious, most of the cooking is done outdoors on a classic Weber kettle grill.

To allow Nunn plenty of time to relax with her guests, she and Ordonez, who is also a chef, prepared much of the menu in her Picnic kitchen. An assortment of cheeses, crackers and dried fruit is arranged on pieces of slate for guests to nibble as they wander in and out of the cabin. A short walk up the lane is an open field with stunning pastoral views – Nunn and Ordonez’s favorite place to sip a cocktail or a glass of wine. More energetic guests might take the canoe for a paddle on the lake, but the hammock also beckons.

Lunch begins with a rich pear and parsnip soup, ladled into chunky pottery bowls. The buffet-style feast that follows features hearty fall flavors: green salad with blood oranges, yellow and purple beets, Coach Farm goat cheese croutons and toasted pumpkin seeds; butternut squash lasagna (the pasta handmade by Ordonez); slow-braised pork belly with white beans, and sweet potato gratin with Tillamook cheddar cheese.

To make the luscious pork belly, Nunn has braised the meat for six hours, then rubbed it with cumin, coriander, cinnamon and brown sugar and smoked it on the Weber grill over apple wood. “An apple tree had fallen in my yard and we cut it down and I aged it for two years,” she explains. “I’ve been using it to smoke meat all summer.”

Since Lake Wallkill is so close to Bergen County – just under an hour’s drive – guests are encouraged to linger after lunch for another glass of wine or a walk in the fading sunlight, before heading home. All too soon, the water will be turned off at the cabins, and the idyllic spot will close until next May. As if anticipating this turn of the season, Nunn and Ordonez’s guests are reluctant to say their goodbyes.

“Time stands still here,” Nunn says. “It’s Pleasantville.” ■

RURAL RETREAT (Top) Nunn and her husband, Javi Ordonez, relax in their lakeside back yard. (Center) The hearty lunch menu includes sweet potato gratin and butternut squash lasagna; vintage pennants are part of the cabin’s funky décor. (Bottom) A guest’s plate, piled with Nunn’s savory specialties. (Opposite) Nunn, right foreground, and her friends offer a toast.

