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Yes, Even Fashionistas Have to Eat

By Julia Chaplin May 25, 2012



Elizabeth Lippman for The New York Times
FOOD TO DÉCOR Phil Winser, at left, and Ben Towill, whose farm-to-table canapés and eco-minded décor lure the stylish.

“It’s been a crazy week,” Mr. Winser said, his shoulder-length hair pulled tight into a samurai ponytail atop his head. He arrived just as family-style trays of fruit crumble with organic whipped cream were being served. “I won’t see the inside of my apartment very much and I doubt my bag will get unpacked for a while.”

From glitzy society galas, to downtown fashion dinners and jet-setting music festivals, the two guys behind the Fat Radish seem to be everywhere chic these days, taking their scruffy brand of farm-to-table catering and design to a social circuit once reserved for penguin suits and rubber chicken. For an elite segment of New York’s art and fashion party crowd, they have become the caterers du jour: a hipper, younger, eco-minded version of Glorious Foods, the catering firm that once dominated the city’s charity balls.

“Their vibe is a bit posh but also Eton boys gone rogue,” said Mazdack Rassi, the founder of Milk Studios, who says the Fat Radish is his first call when planning a party. “They bring in their culture and really infect you with it. They build an ecosystem.”

That the two behind the Fat Radish (both 27 and with British accents no less) are ruggedly handsome with the tossed-together good looks of a Burberry model certainly hasn’t hurt.

They appear regularly in party and style blogs. At the Frieze Art Fair earlier this month, they served kale Caesar salad to a blue-chip crowd. Fashion labels like Cole Haan and Gant shower them with free clothing. And luxury brands like Bentley pay them respectable sums to appear in promotional videos.

Without really trying, they have become representatives for a manly breed of stylish locavores (equal parts Jamie Oliver, David de Rothschild and the Mast brothers) who wear designer jeans, spend weekends with organic farmers and hop between art fairs and fashion weeks.

“They’re eco and sustainable, but not granola-bar Birkenstock,” said Doreen Remen, a founder of the Art Production Fund. “They feel like the new standard. Anything else feels archaic.”

Their rise from nowhere is, in many ways, a classic New York tale. But it’s a rapid ascent that seems possible only in the glamorous and fickle bubble of New York night life.

Mr. Towill and Mr. Winser met as classmates at the Marlborough College, the boarding school in Wiltshire, England, attended by Kate Middleton and Princess Eugenie of York. Both men say that their backgrounds were not as privileged as their classmates and that they had to work during vacations.

Mr. Towill, who oversees the food, is the behind-the-scenes guy who gets lost on poetic tangents about milk co-ops and biodynamic wines. He dropped out of Marlborough because of chronic fatigue syndrome and pursued becoming a chef. In 2005, he moved to New York as a sous-chef at Gordon Ramsay’s Midtown restaurant, the London NYC.

THE artist John Currin was mid-speech at the Art Production Fund gala last month when platters of roasted Norwich Meadows Farm heirloom carrots and barbecued Piedmontese beef brisket suddenly appeared from behind a white wall, carried by a brigade of artisanally handsome L-train-esque waiters.

Collectors and artists including Eli Broad, Jeff Koons and Kiki Smith were smushed together at long picnic tables, trying to guess who was behind this conceptual take on white-trash barbecue.

“Fat Radish?” echoed Michael Stipe, the semiretired rock star, who goes to his share of benefit parties. “I’ve heard of them.”

At that moment, Phil Winser, who with Ben Towill started the Fat Radish, was in a taxi speeding to the site, a SoHo warehouse that had been transformed into an “urban hoedown,” complete with lanterns, wildflowers and an electric bull. Mr. Winser had just flown in from the

Mr. Winser handles design and marketing, and is a natural charmer who resembles an aristocratic polo player slumming in bluejeans. In fact, he played polo at the Beaufort Polo Club where Prince Harry is a member. Mr. Winser, an inveterate traveler, was on a soul-searching trip in India when he decided to join his childhood friend in New York.

In the fall of 2008, just as the financial markets crashed, the pair started a catering business called Silkstone that delivered organic homemade lunches. The food was prepared in the tiny sixth-floor walk-up apartment on West 13th Street they shared with two friends from England and Mr. Towill's brother. (The catering company is still called Silkstone, but everyone refers to it as Fat Radish.)

There was one bed, one sofa and an oven they used for shoe storage. "If you slept on the sofa, then your feet went over the end and there were no pillows because they had to be used by someone else to sleep on," Mr. Winser recalled.

To drum up business, the two went door-to-door to downtown boutiques, hair salons, photo studios and any establishment that might appreciate a roast chicken, apple and a clothbound Cheddar sandwich delivered by two English lads on Kmart bicycles.

While Mr. Winser and a roommate took orders, Mr. Towill would bike to the Union Square Greenmarket, and zip back home to cook. Within a month they were selling 60 lunches a day, to the stylish staffs of Calypso, Marc Jacobs and Ralph Lauren.

Their first big break came when Edris, a salon in the meatpacking district, asked them to cater an event. Soon, word spread about the two fresh-faced British guys and their baskets of egg muffins with prosciutto and arugula, legs of lamb with couscous, and quinoa and roasted sunflower-seed tabbouleh.

"We're not your normal delivery boys," Mr. Winser deadpanned. Mr. Towill added, "We'd chat with everyone and they'd be like 'Oh, it's you two guys.'"

Soon they were catering photo shoots for Aveda, Terry Richardson and the fashion photographers Inez van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin. That led to gigs with Marc Jacobs and Louis Vuitton.

By the time New York Fashion Week rolled around in February 2009 (just four months after the Fat Radish started), Mr. Towill and Mr. Winser were backstage catering shows for Rodarte, Phillip Lim and Alexander Wang. Fashion models loved the organic low-calorie salads like cumin-roasted carrots with hijiki and avocado. The two lived on leftovers. "Phil still can't eat it to this day," Mr. Towill said.

By the following Fashion Week six months later, they seemed to be the unofficial caterers for the downtown fashion tribe. Meanwhile, they fantasized about opening a restaurant and had fallen in love with an old sausage factory on a forlorn stretch of Orchard Street on the Lower East Side. But they were still broke. They went out for a sushi dinner. "We just looked at each other, we were exhausted and we're thinking this just isn't working," Mr. Towill said.

But luck reared again. During dinner, an e-mail arrived from a high-tech entrepreneur, Jos White, hiring them for his 40th birthday party: an extravagant TriBeCa celebration modeled after a 1920s gambling den. They would clear about \$15,000, just enough for a deposit on the restaurant space. Friends and a few investors would chip in the rest.

During the day they ran the catering firm, and at night the two men built out the restaurant: Mr. Winser on a ladder with a sponge and water scrubbing layers of paint and grime off the old bricks, making light fixtures out of plumbing pipes sold down the street. "We had more debt than two 26-year-olds should have," Mr. Winser said.

When the Fat Radish opened in October 2010, it became an instant scene. Buzzing with fashion insiders, it was a cool clubhouse for well-dressed organic-fed scenesters — a post-Keith McNally generation who prefer fiddlehead ferns over steak frites. The New York Times, which gave the Fat Radish one star, described the crowd as "good-looking youngsters on their third jobs and second apartments, single and raging, with summertime Montauk shares and memories of Belize and Gstaad."

The restaurant also raised the pair's profile considerably, attracting patrons like Daphne Guinness and Carine Roitfeld. "There was a strong buzz about them," said Jefferson Hack, who gave a party there for Another Magazine last September.

The momentum kept building. As the Montauk scene heated up last summer, they were tapped to oversee the kitchen at Ruschmeyer's. Shortly after, they were flown out to the Burning Man festival in Nevada by the Zoo Camp, a clique of European festivalgoers, to cater a three-course seated dinner for 200. (Photographs of the dinner taken by Krug, the Champagne sponsor, surfaced recently and have landed the Fat Radish in hot water, with festival organizers saying that it violated Burning Man's noncommercial spirit.)

DESPITE the restaurant's popularity, catering and event design are still its roots. Mr. Winser and Mr. Towill charge anywhere from \$5,000 to six figures. In January, the Fat Radish expanded into an airy loft on nearby East Broadway. It doubles as a cozy catering hall, with tin ceilings, exposed brick and noire-esque views of Chinatown and the Manhattan Bridge. In addition to farm-fresh canapés, the two conceptualize décor and music, and employ two videographers who film everything as content for social media.

“It’s not just about having 200 people in a room for two hours,” said Chad Kaydo, editor in chief of BizBash, a party planning magazine. “It’s about how do you get them to be active brand ambassadors for you. It’s smart of Fat Radish to think as marketers and not just food purveyors.”

That market-savvy thinking was on display several Tuesdays ago, when the raw loft was transformed into a homey dinner for Mr. Lim. The designer wanted an earthy feel, so the gray plywood floor was left bare and Mr. Winser’s old Schwinn bicycle was plopped in the middle of the room. A long wooden table, where employees sit during the day, was cleared of computers and decorated with a craggy log of driftwood found in Montauk, clumps of moss and pink stalks of cherry blossoms. The foliage, needless to say, was locally sourced.

The crowd included Mr. Rassi and his wife, Zanna, a fashion editor and TV personality; Cole Haan’s creative director Chidi Achara; and Mr. Winser’s girlfriend, Dree Hemingway, an actress and a great-granddaughter of Ernest Hemingway.

Mr. Towill, in a striped blue apron and black wayfarer glasses, held court in the kitchen, topping off bite-size tarts with dollops of crushed New Jersey spring peas and paddlefish caviar. “The peas have just come into season,” he said, beaming, offering nibbles to guests.

Mr. Lim stood near a safari tent, which had been pitched indoors and furnished with knotty bookshelves, gas lanterns, a typewriter and a dog-eared copy of “Lonely Planet Thailand.” The tent is Mr. Winser’s office and his work-in-progress mood board.

Mr. Lim took in the scene, pleased not to see the usual plasma screens and blue drinks. “Don’t you just love it?” he said, smiling. “It feels so real.”