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TASTE

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HOW TO: MAKE THE PERFECT BELLINI • DRESS UP CHRISTMAS PUDDING

CHERRY BLOSSOMS

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When Maranda Engelbrecht and celebrated stylist Chris van Niekerk were asked to host a reunion breakfast, they took their cue from the traditional Japanese tea ceremony

TEA LEAVES

PHOTOGRAPHS HICKY HOYLE
PRODUCTION SUHIEN BRINK
TEXT NICCI COLLIER



This page: Marigold's sesame-seed
snow sandwiches.
Opposite page: Tea specialist Mingpin
Tsal demonstrates the pouring of tea
into delicate cups for a tasting.



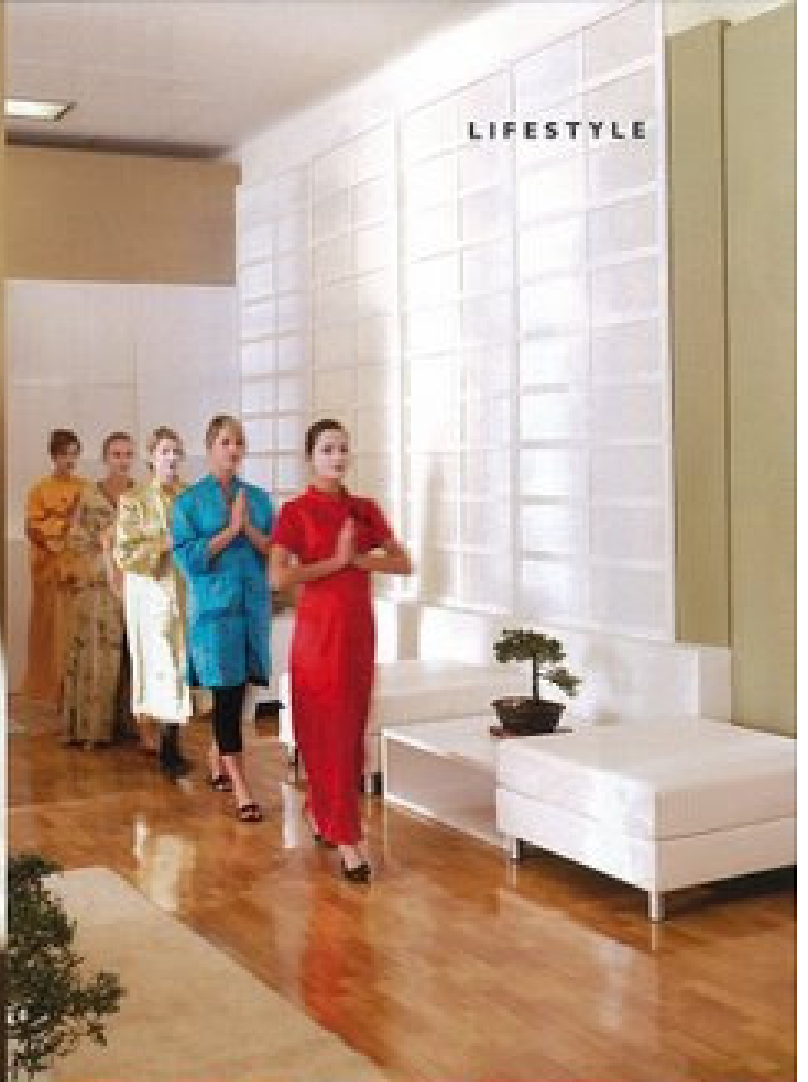
If you thought the Alice of Wonderland was the authority on tea parties, think again. The real connoisseurs are the Japanese. And so, when event sponsor Free World Coatings approached TASTE contributor Maranda Engelbrecht from Manna Epicure and Foci Function Concept's Chris van Niekerk to dream up a morning feast for 340 enthusiastic 'old girls', they steered clear of mad hats and mismatched crockery, opting instead for the order, precision and refinement of a tea party from the East. The occasion? The 40th birthday of Stellenbosch University's Nerina residence. The result? Magnificent.

The original idea for the ladies-only breakfast was an eggs-and-bacon fry-up in Nerina's central courtyard. "When the residence approached me, they had quite a different breakfast in mind," says Maranda. "I wanted to do something more inspirational, something the guests would remember forever. When I walked into the dining room, I was struck by the beautiful floors. And I thought, 'This is it!' Lony loads of partitions and screens, boxes and tables, chic white loungers, orchids, roof-high blossom trees and a wave of Chris' magic wand later and this was, indeed, 'it'.

Chris' goal with the remarkable dining-hall makeover was to create a space in which the residence's former ladies of learning could be inveigled into becoming ladies of leisure. "It was a daytime event so we wanted to keep it informal, but super stylish," he says. "We

This spread, clockwise from top left: Clean lines and a soft, earthy palette transformed an ordinary dining hall; vanilla cupcakes; colourfully dressed "yubohai"-served Champagne and waited on the guests; strawberries with red-bean paste; interesting shapes and textures brought the neutral palette to life; trays of oven-baked apple slices accompanied the Champagne.







“WE WERE AIMING FOR A FEMININE FEEL WITHIN”



90 TASTE





THE BOUNDARIES OF A JAPANESE TEA-PARTY THEME



were aiming for a feminine feel within the boundaries of a Japanese tea-party theme; for the event to feel like a fresh spring morning.

"It was important to allow plenty of natural light into the venue, which we achieved by masking the windows with white rice-paper screens. The effect was magical! Soothing tones of white and green, offset by accents of wood and delicate fauna and flora, captured the serenity of the traditional Japanese tea ceremony.

This time-honoured ritual is a fascinating affair that can last for up to four hours, but, essentially, consists of a host preparing and serving tea according to strict ceremonial procedure. The utmost care is taken with the minutest detail, even down to the hand movements of the participants. The Nerina tea party was far more informal and far more boisterous, and the air was charged with excited anticipation.

Spanning the length of the room was a table decked in an edible patchwork quilt of delights – vanilla cupcakes topped with fresh fig quarters and blueberries, dense chocolate brownies, creamy cheesecakes with white-chocolate shavings, airy meringues and fresh figs with sheer slices of daikon and ginger to be savoured with wedges of ripe Brie. For those who fancied something savoury, trays of Miranda's delicate tea sandwiches were cut into individual rounds, squares and other shapes resembling little snowflakes, and topped with prawns and thin shavings of translucent ginger.

Subtle nods to the Japanese-tea theme were evident throughout – Earl Grey icing on cupcakes, sesame seeds scattered over sandwiches and rounds of Brie peppered with tea leaves and popped rice. Guests were welcomed with Champagne, with swirls of rooibos- or rose-infused syrup, and silver trays of baked apple wafers and sensational summer strawberries with red-bean paste.

The inspiring range of teas that accompanied the breakfast banquet was the handiwork of Mingwei Tsai of Nigiro Specialist Tea Merchants in Cape Town. In partnership with Origin Coffee Roasters, Nigiro imports and blends an astounding range of teas and has set about educating locals on the wonders of this ancient infusion. For this event, Mingwei chose a selection of teas, which, he says, "indicates the possibility of the world of fine tea. I wanted to move away from the ordinary, the routine, the 'big five': Earl Grey, English breakfast, Ceylon, rooibos and chamomile. I thought, let's do something interesting for these ladies...."

"Something interesting" included a Japanese sencha (green tea), a forest-berry infusion, a Kenyan black tea, a rose black tea (with dry pink rose buds), a Chinese-scented oolong, a pineapple-and-citrus flavoured rooibos and an "island breeze" blend of lemon grass, hibiscus and peppermint. "The teas were served in the traditional way," says Mingwei, "with slices of lime, ginger, fresh mint and honey – no milk or sugar. Miranda was very strict about that. She said we could serve milk only in an emergency, because this is the way tea is supposed to be enjoyed."

And, boy, did Nerina's 300-odd "old girls" enjoy it. "You should have seen the table when everyone had left," laughs Miranda. "It looked as if a tsunami had been over it! I was so pleased!"

One guest summed it up perfectly when she walked into Chris's wonderland: "It is flabbergasted!" Miranda did receive one complaint, however, from the residence's principal: "We have a problem," she said. "This young lady just got married. And now she wants to redo it...." W

Previous spread, clockwise from top left: The celebratory welcome drink; tea assistant Lisa Tsai; modern furnishings juxtaposed with Japanese orchids; cucumber-ribbon sandwiches; blossoming trees evoked a spring garden; cheesecake with white-chocolate shavings; repetition for a bold effect; sliced figs with daikon and ginger. **This spread, clockwise from top left:** miniature origami rabbits decorated each teacup; Theresa Sabo adds finishing touches to the gourmet spread; a lone rabbit shared in the proceedings; flawless attention to detail.

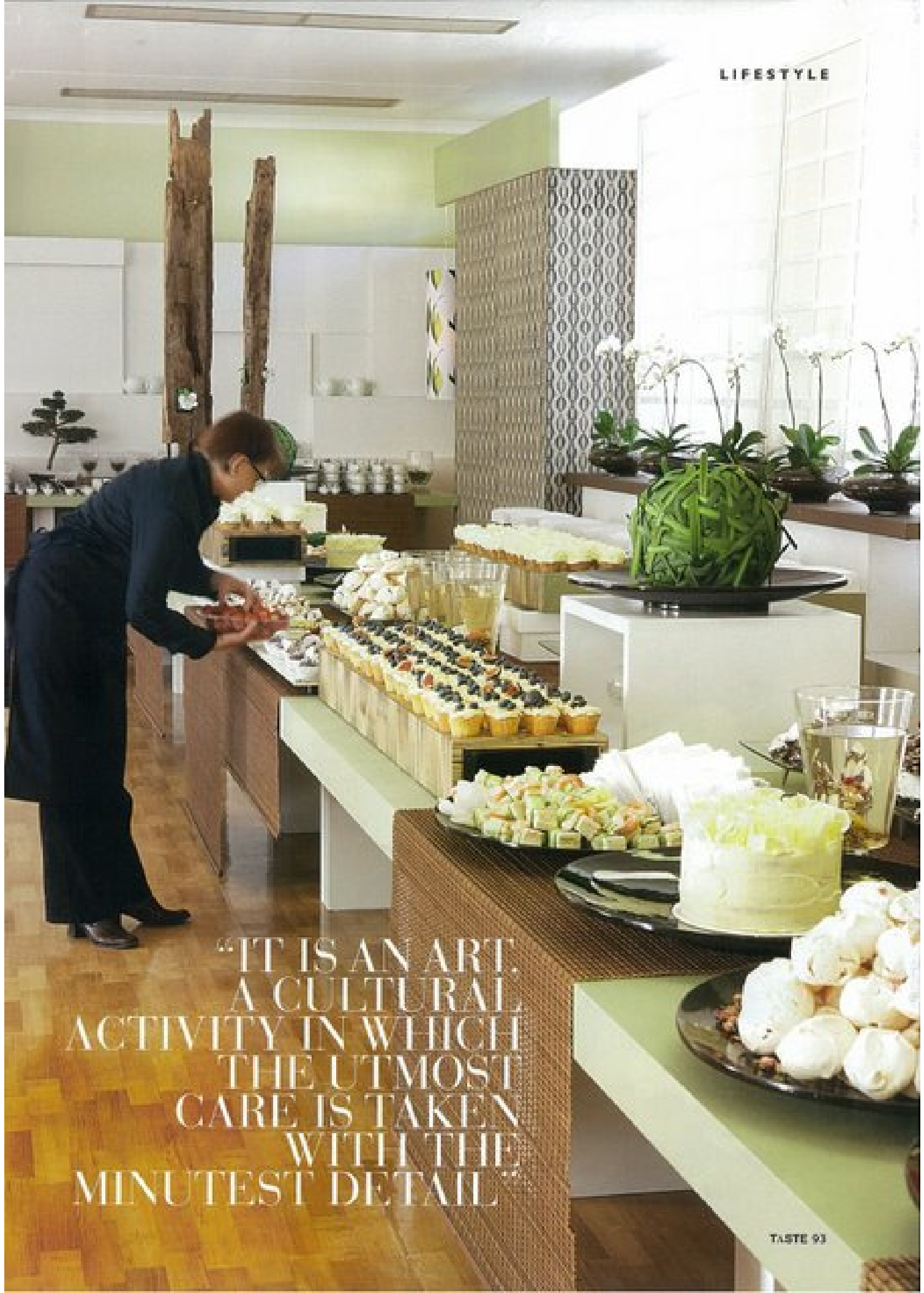
THE LOOK

- Use simple, minimalist decor with straight lines.
- Choose one or two design elements (think white orchids, rice-paper screens or a colour) and repeat them throughout.
- Place large cushions on the floor or create benches by placing painted hardboard doors on low cubes, with soft cushions.
- Buy inexpensive bamboo blinds, cut them into strips and use them to define place settings.
- Use natural materials such as raw wood, bamboo, pebbles and wheat grass.
- For a daytime event, avoid bright colours. Instead, use neutral greens, browns and beiges and choose an accent colour, like magenta, to set them off.

THE FLAVOUR

- An arrival drink, such as iced tea (using green tea with fresh ginger, lemon grass, honey and lime), makes a fitting start to a tea ceremony.
- Prepare sandwiches using a cookie-cutter to create sushi-style shapes. Smear with a little cream cheese and dip in toasted sesame seeds.
- When making cupcakes, replace half the milk or liquid in your cupcake recipe with strong green tea or the tea of your choice. Also add tea to the icing. Top with fresh fruit and sprinkle with tea leaves.
- Add Japanese flavour to your food using sesame seeds, wasabi, daikon, green-tea leaves, rice vinegar, prawns, salmon, pickled ginger, cucumber, mint and red-bean (adzuki) paste.
- Do not serve milk and sugar with the tea. Instead, opt for honey, fresh ginger and mint.





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