



Summer Formal

The quintessential black-tie affair.

Lee Hefter is a master of the big night. As executive chef of Wolfgang Puck Fine Dining Group, he has been the maestro behind formal events ranging from presidential galas to elegant private dinner parties, from Fortune 100 corporate events to Governors Ball dinners for the Academy Awards.

He is also one of the country's most nuanced chefs, and when he created the menu for our ultimate summer formal, he thought first about the evening's two very different imperatives: "I wanted to make an impression of extravagance, so each dish has one exceptional ingredient, to go with the formal attire and formal feeling of the event," he says. "But the food has to be fun, too, a little looser, because it's summer. It has to talk to your senses."

The solution was to build dishes around iconic summer ingredients—corn, tomatoes, crab, and lobsters—but to do so in a way that leaves their flavors pure, not overshadowed by fussy preparations. The Dungeness crab Louis, for example, is based on Hefter's childhood memory of crab salads at the Jersey shore, made with little more than fresh blue crab meat, mayonnaise, and Old Bay seasoning. He transformed that simple



dish by dressing it in a sprightly rémoulade made with fresh chervil, parsley, and other herbs. Then, thinking of cocktail sauce with its hint of horseradish, he added a cool disk of horseradish panna cotta—which also plays on the creamy mayonnaise texture. A tangle of microgreens and fresh herbs adds complexity and a different consistency—and keeps the dish feeling casual.

“If it’s summer, you have to have corn on the menu,” he says, “but corn by itself is not much. You need an elegant way to serve it.” For Hefter, that means *agnolotti*, one of his signature dishes at Spago in Beverly Hills, Puck’s flagship restaurant. They are made in the true Piedmontese style: tiny, delicate pasta packets filled with sweet corn and cream, and to give a sense of occasion, served with a shaving of black truffles.

After those preludes, it is easy to see the inspiration for the next two courses: butter-poached lobster and sirloin of Kobe-style beef. “The beef reminds me of a cookout,” he says, “and lobster is just a must in summer. Not because it’s the best time of year to eat lobster—it’s softer-shelled now and better in the fall and winter, when it’s more filled out. But it’s very sweet and just something you eat this time of year.” And if Hefter is serving it, you can be sure there will not be an ordinary boiled potato beside it. —M.B.

WINE **Summer Formal**

Kenzo Estate 2007 Rindo

Though its first wines were only released a few years ago, the 4,000-acre Kenzo Estate in the southern portion of Napa Valley has been more than two decades in the making. Winemaker Heidi Peterson Barrett has achieved a sculptural balance of structure and beauty in this blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Cabernet Franc, which is spiced with a touch of Petit Verdot. The wine's heady scent of charred bread, clay, and spiced plum—as well as its flavors of cassis and coffee—meld magically with the bone-marrow flan. (\$100)



SOURCES

Opening pages, left to right: Deborah Rhodes Tonal linen napkin; Saint-Louis Excess goblets; Michael Aram Pear salt and pepper shakers, all from Gearys (www.gearys.com); black truffles from the Cheese Store of Beverly Hills (www.cheesestorebh.com); Haviland and C. Parlon Farahnaz dinnerware; Baccarat Alysse coupe, both from Gearys.