

dining A fresh approach to setting the table OUTSIDE the **box**

By Nan Kavanaugh | Photography by Michael LeGrand

When interior designer Robyn Branch entertains at her home on Amelia Island, she usually starts with the menu. She and her sweetheart John plan the meal around the guests themselves. "It all depends on who is coming over. If it is more of a barbecue crowd, then our table will reflect that," she says. "If I am throwing a cocktail party, the vibe is going to be different."

Regardless of who she is having over, the luxury of being able to eat outside almost year round on the First Coast is something she celebrates. Branch is a big proponent of bringing the inside of a home outside. Since her house is not set up for dining in large groups, often she stages parties in her backyard. "We live in a state that makes dining outside easy. I don't have a problem pulling my furniture from inside my house to the outside just for an evening," she says. "It is a labor of love to give a great dinner party, and you have to put some effort into it."

We asked Branch to provide us some inspiration for dining outdoors, as we brave these last dog days of summer in anticipation for the cooler fall weather to settle in. "Setting up for the mood, adding a little bit of whimsy, and not being afraid to mix-match at the table will provide a lot of conversation... which always makes for a great party," she says. "Just make it easy and work with what you have. That is the old rule of thumb, so just take a look around your home and see what you have to play with outside of the kitchen."



Cocktail Lounge

“ If your table is boring, then the chances are the conversation will be boring. If it feels happy, it helps things stay on a roll. Using texture is great for conversation. The table here is made of recycled wood, and is nothing but texture. The tabletop pineapple pillows, coral beaded napkin rings, and napkins are all from Dransfield and Ross. They all bring literally a great feel to the party. Texture is that thing you use to pull it all together when you have either too much color, or not enough. ”

Dransfield and Ross coral napkin rings \$30.00; Ibolili wooden candle holders, set of 3 \$104.00; Scents and Feel blankets \$52.00-\$97.00; Dransfield and Ross pineapple pillows \$130.00

“ Throwing down some pillows around a coffee table makes people feel immediately comfortable. Think about it. If you are watching a ball game with a group of friends, or opening gifts at a party, there is always someone sitting on the floor. As a host, you are always trying to find enough seating for your guests. For a casual gathering, this is just perfect. ”

“ You can use almost anything for a silverware caddy. Get creative with it. The caddy should match the general feel of the table. Here we used a woven caddy by Ibolili, because the tabletop has a lot of natural elements to it. ”



Styling for Self Serve

“ Buffets are different, because there isn't a lot of direction from the host. Using little chalkboards is great, because people are shy about diving in. The signs give a little something for the host to point to when trying to get things started. While people are mingling, you don't have to direct traffic. The signs do it for you. ”

“ When you are outside, using a larger napkin just feels more comfortable. I like a cotton napkin with a little weight to it. It will lay across your lap better. Nobody wants to wipe their mouth on something that has fallen on the ground. ”



Ladies who Lunch

“ I like to add levels of height to my table. I used to be a choreographer, and one of the most important things about that art is to understand the importance of levels. A dance should never be flat, and neither should your table setting. I think it is really important to make a table interesting, and varying heights is an easy way to do that. Using varying heights to display food, like these Lucite blocks, glasses of various heights and different size candles creates dimension. It creates elegance. ”

Scents and Feel large napkins \$22.00
Clear chairs \$160.00 each
Zodax Silver candle holders \$41.50 and \$52.00
Tozai Squid dish \$195.00

A lot of people use a conversation starter as their centerpiece, but I think that gets overdone. Using something different to actually display your food is great. Think outside the box and use interesting pieces from around your house. Take this squid bowl by Tozai. Its everyday use could be a candle holder, but on the table it could be a salt pillar for sea salt, or a great caviar bowl if you were to place it in a glass ice bucket. Working in natural elements is also great for conversation.



Wine and Dine

“ I designed this table myself using Lucite formed by HStudio and a live edge top made by Clayton Oxford. The ebony wood is so dark, and the white bone china really pops against the wood. A sort of ebony and ivory pairing, and of course the orange. Orange is a color that just makes me happy. It is a color that scares a lot of people, but you just have to find a way to tone it down. Whenever you use a bright color like that, you need to look to the opposite side of the color wheel. I used cobalt blue here, because I love the way water looks in it. There is nothing prettier than water in a cobalt blue glass. So fresh! ”



“ A cake stand is great to use for anything. You can use it to pile seashells, flowers, herbs, fruit, candles, or just use it to display a gorgeous cake or pie. There are so many ways to use it as a centerpiece. Add a doily underneath it, and it can be really fabulous. Fresh edible flowers work well, too. ”



“ We live in one of the most beautiful states in the nation because of our coast. It is a part of life here, and it works well in design. You can keep coastal chic by using just a touch of coastal décor, and then work in colors to compliment it. Take the scallop shells here. They are great to use as an appetizer plate. Watching guests hold them is wonderful to see and makes for fantastic photos. ”



Beach Souvenir Shop scallop shell dishes \$3.00 each
Pier One cobalt blue glasses \$6.00 per stem
Starfish napkin rings, set of 8 \$164.00
Designer's collection, plain white bone china by Lennox