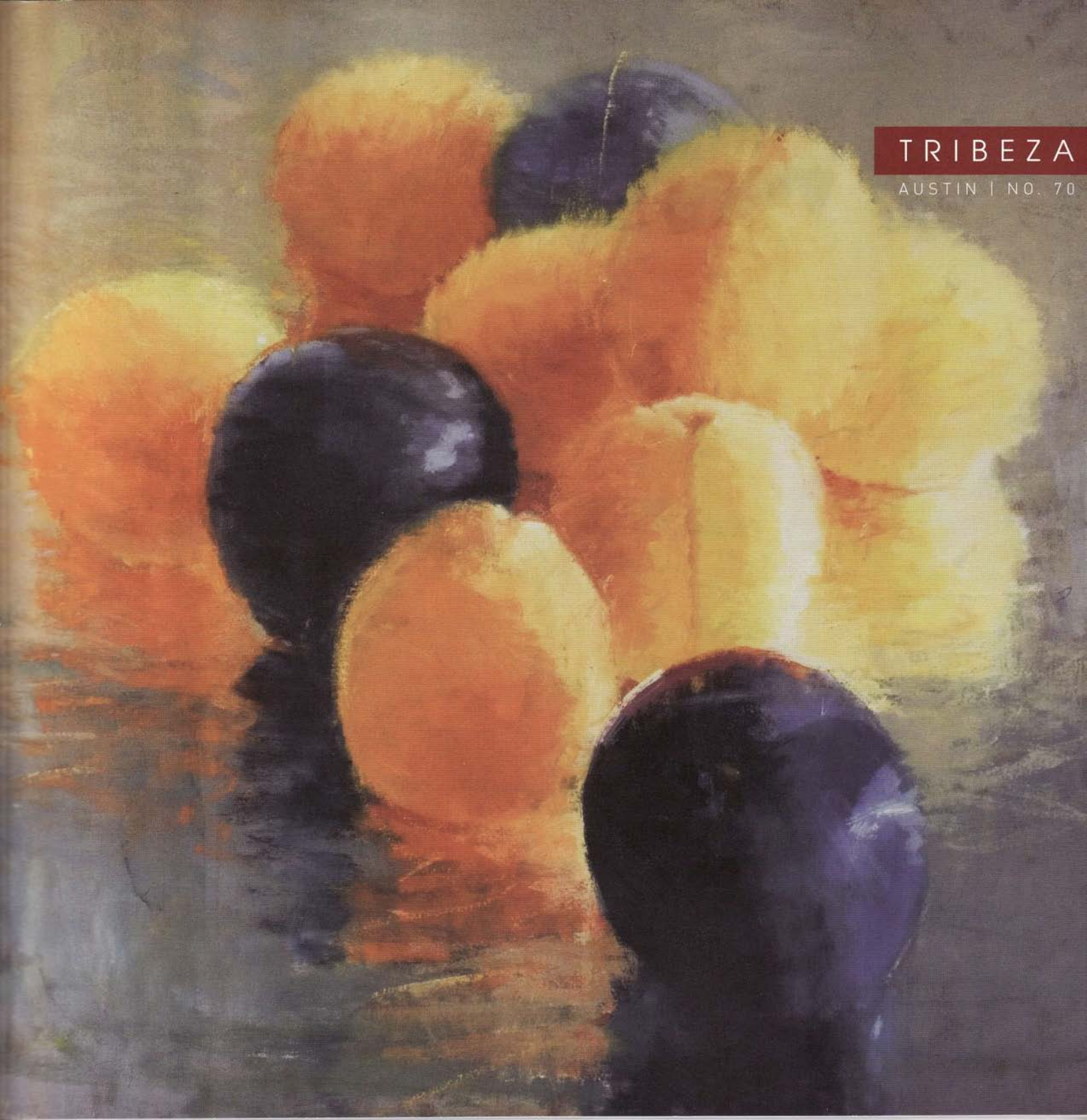


TRIBEZA

AUSTIN | NO. 70

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

Psst! Supper Underground, a clandestine, moveable feast, simmers just under the surface of Austin's foodie scene.

By Sarah Wolf
Photography Jeff Stockton

The din around the table bubbles with lively chatter, clinking glasses, and satisfied "mmm"s. It could be any group of tight-knit friends or an especially close family, but the twenty people at this particular dinner party don't know each other at all. They just met tonight, an hour before gathering around the white-clothed table in the front yard of a north Austin home and sitting down to heirloom tomato salad, smoked salmon tartar, and herbed gnocchi. Yet conversation is flowing as freely as the wine.

"When we walk out to the dining area and people are talking and laughing, having a good time, it's exhilarating. There's no feeling like it," says Hannah Calvert, the hostess of this evening's festivities—the latest meal from Supper Underground. That's the name of the roving dinner party she founded a year ago after reading an article about a similar supper club in Portland, Oregon. Intrigued by the concept (shopping for, cooking, and serving a monthly four-course dinner for strangers who make reservations via e-mail), Hannah, who is a corporate consultant by day and sparkling hostess one Saturday night a month, whipped up her own program and christened it Supper Underground, a name that hints at its mysterious, hip-foodie vibe.

Each month she e-mails close to five hundred people on her mailing list (which grows by twenty to thirty recipients every month), telling everyone the date of the next dinner and asking who wants to reserve a spot at the table. Space is limited to twenty or thirty people, and, says Hannah, "it's always full within a few hours." A day or two before the event, she sends another e-mail with the address of the dinner, which is often a private residence—usually that of a friend or someone who's attended an underground supper in the past and has offered to host a meal. Occasionally, though, the group meets at a local restaurant or business, such as Starlite, the Floribunda nursery, or Whole Foods' Culinary Center. "We love the idea of partnering with local businesses," Hannah says. "It's dual exposure for us and a business we really like."

The four-course menu includes an appetizer and dessert and is kept a secret until guests sit down to the table. Hannah announces each course before it's served, and guests help themselves to water and wine. Once the hubbub of dinner dies down, a bowl is passed around the table and guests have the option of contributing for the food, $40 to $60, depending on the meal. (Alcohol is "a bonus," Hannah says, as they can't charge for it without a liquor license.)

When she first started Supper Underground last April, Hannah treated it like a dinner party for a few friends—you know, doing all the work herself. After planning and preparing two dinners in two months solo ("and not sitting down once!"), she called reinforcements: her friend Tasso Ziebarth, a former professional chef who works in finance. Now partners, the pair split all the duties, from menu planning and grocery shopping to picking up rental chairs and serving each course.

"We're sort of crazy!" Hannah explains about the bustle that precedes a Saturday evening dinner. After

FACING PAGE Candlelight and white linens greet guests at Starlite, the downtown restaurant where Supper Underground hosted its February dinner. SU founder Hannah Calvert hopes to partner with more local businesses—galleries, boutiques, and restaurants—in the future.

work on Thursday, the two shop for groceries, then cook Friday night until 10 or 11 p.m. "And Saturday is a monster," Tasso notes. They usually hover over the stovetop all day, shifting gears around 6 or 7 p.m. to start welcoming guests.

"Some people are regulars," Hannah says of Supper Underground's devotees, "but there are new faces every time." Two such newcomers are Nathan Lipson and Andi Sprague, who were celebrating Andi's twenty-eighth birthday at the March supper. "I had never heard anything about it, but Nathan suggested it," Andi says. "I was expecting something beautiful, interesting, and unlike anything I've experienced—something I couldn't find at a restaurant." Breaking into a wide smile and looking around the candlelit table, she exclaims, "You can't go to a restaurant and talk to ten different couples during dinner! This is outside the box."

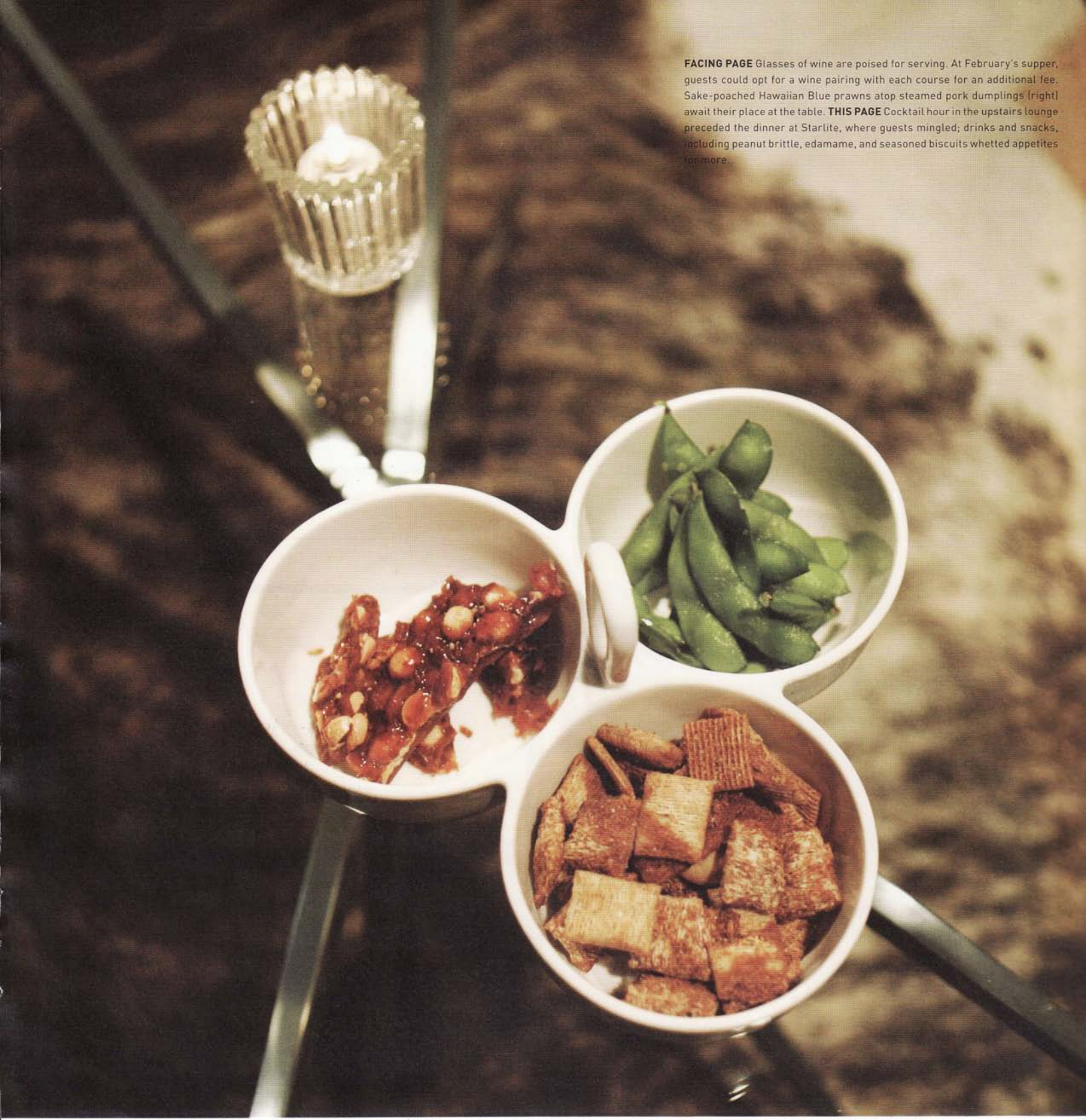
"You're put into a situation where you're interacting with strangers rather than just sitting in a restaurant," Nathan pipes in. "It's nice to meet other people and share the same food. Supper Underground also has a reputation, so you feel like you're part of something growing."

That reputation keeps several people coming back regularly to the monthly dinners. John Sammons even road-tripped from Fort Worth to sample sake-marinated prawns and braised rabbit at Supper Underground's evening at Starlite. "I would've never ordered rabbit in a restaurant, but this forces me into something I wouldn't ordinarily do," he says. "I like the experimental side of it."

Ihor Gowda has also attended more than once because "the first was so terrific that I definitely wanted to do it again," he says. After reading an article in the *Wall Street Journal* about Supper Underground, the recent transplant from Seattle signed up for the mailing list. "I thought it was desperately cool that something like this was going on in Austin. It sounded mysterious and fun and vaguely illegal," he notes, eyes twinkling. "It's great food, of course, but it's the interesting company that's also a complete surprise—meeting interesting total strangers. It has a very low-key, friendly, relaxed feel to it while you're eating great food and drinking great wine. It's like a family gathered around a table."

It's an assessment that Hannah recognizes too. "I have watched people make love connections, business connections, and friend connections," she says. "That's something they take beyond the dinner. Everyone leaves so happy. And as much as Tasso and I pour ourselves into it, we laugh beginning, middle, and end." ■

Visit www.supperunderground.com, to sign up for the mailing list.



FACING PAGE Glasses of wine are poised for serving. At February's supper, guests could opt for a wine pairing with each course for an additional fee. Sake-poached Hawaiian Blue prawns atop steamed pork dumplings (right) await their place at the table. **THIS PAGE** Cocktail hour in the upstairs lounge preceded the dinner at Starlite, where guests mingled; drinks and snacks, including peanut brittle, edamame, and seasoned biscuits whetted appetites for more.