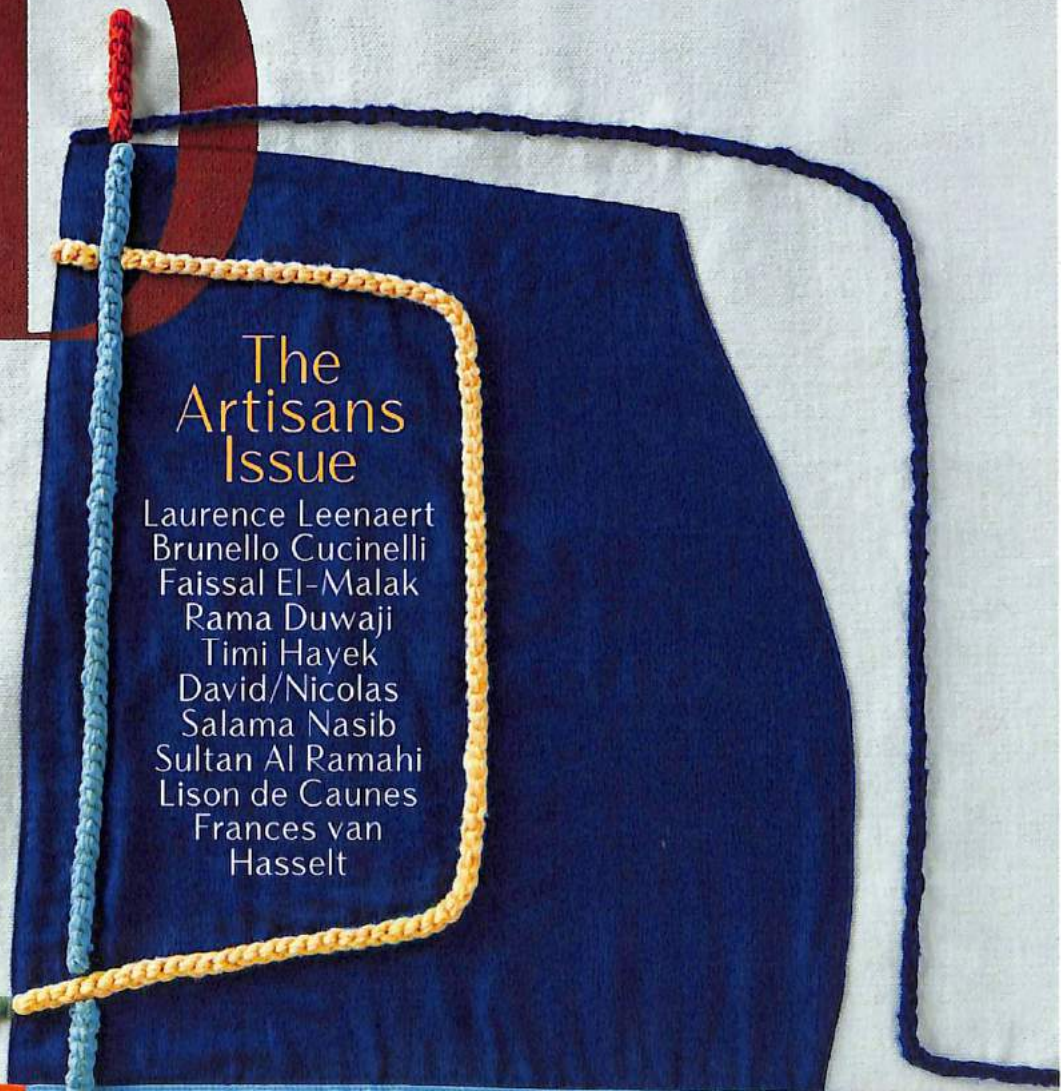
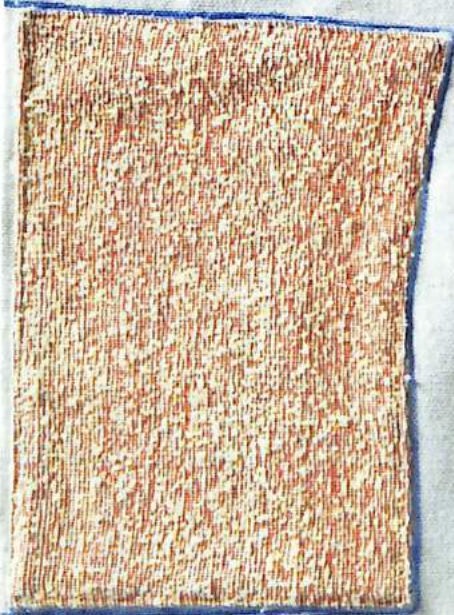


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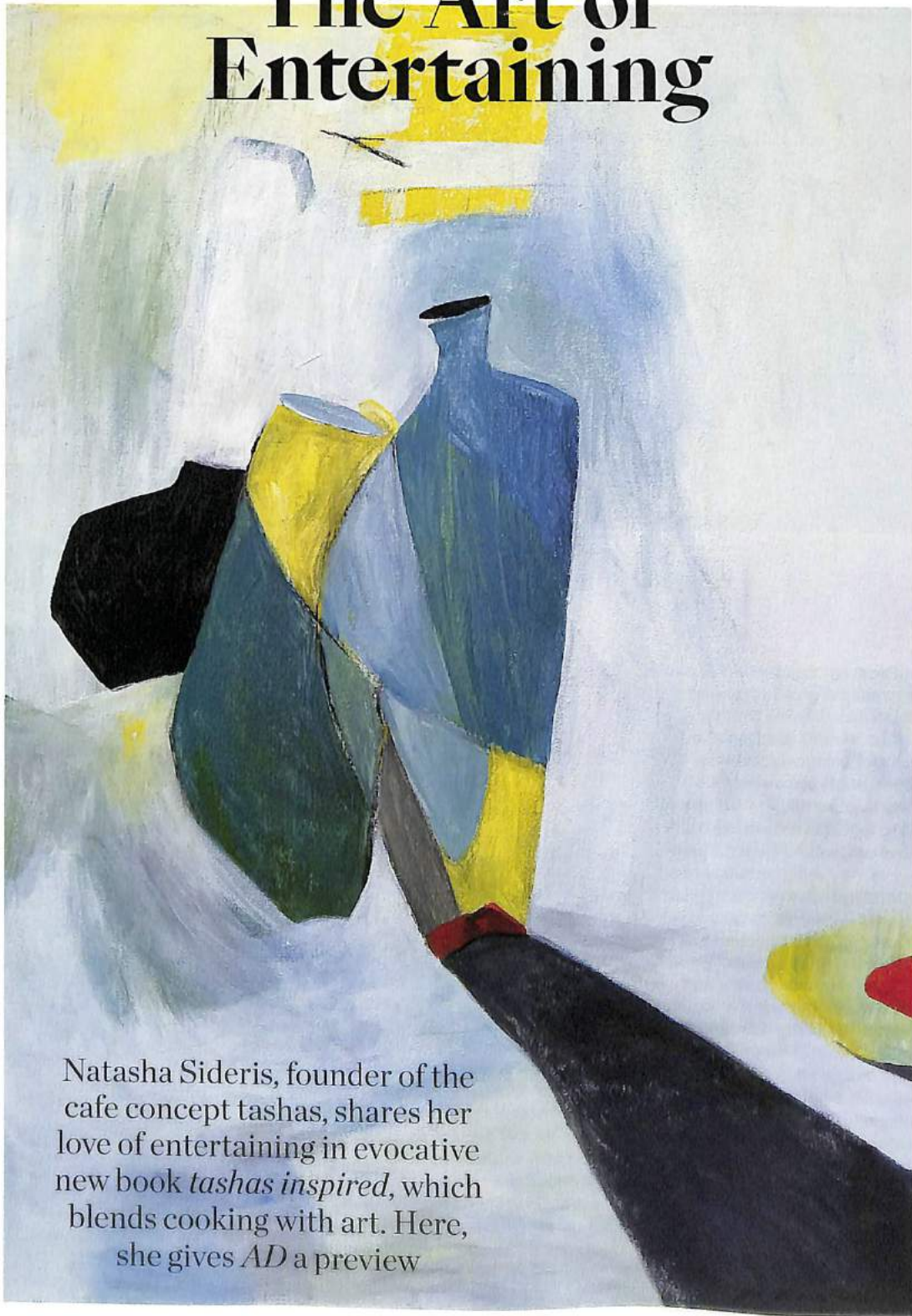
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- GOURMET -

# The Art of Entertaining



Natasha Sideris, founder of the cafe concept *tashas*, shares her love of entertaining in evocative new book *tashas inspired*, which blends cooking with art. Here, she gives *AD* a preview



I have always loved entertaining. The first lunch party I ever hosted was in a tiny space, barely bigger than a table for four, but it had magnificent, sweeping views over the treetops and it was a perfect summer's day. I had spent weeks planning everything down to the last detail, endlessly fine-tuning the menu and the table setting until everything was just right. And then I delegated. My grandmother spent the whole day in the kitchen, preparing the feast and when the guests (the rest of the family) arrived, they were instructed to carry cushions, crockery, flowers and food up the rope ladder into the treehouse and, later, back down again.

At the age of twelve I was already playing restaurateur. People often assume that we are driven solely by the desire to feed people. It's true, food is the leading actor, but there is also a kind of magic that happens when all the other myriad elements that go into creating a remarkable experience are woven together. The restaurateur is the conductor, setting the tone and the pace, selecting and directing the players and bringing the vision to life.

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My vision is to  
create elegant,  
relaxed spaces  
”

When I opened the first tashas café in 2005 it was with the idea of creating a different kind of dining experience for South Africans, something more sophisticated and designed but also more relaxed and social than we were used to at that time. We eat out not only because we are too tired or lazy to cook or because we liked to be waited on, but also to mark special occasions, to dress up, to see and be seen, to celebrate, to socialise and to engage. My vision was, and still is, to create elegant, beautiful environments that are also welcoming and relaxed – places where you can enjoy excellent fresh food that not only looks good but is unforgettable too.

Design, music and lighting all powerfully affect the quality of our experiences and are

essential in turning a good meal into a great experience. Objects, too, are not just things; they have the ability to stir up emotion and memory because we identify with them. The tashas restaurants are all designed with the same underlying blueprint, which makes them identifiable and familiar, and yet each one also has its own signature. Every tashas restaurant has been inspired by a different city, country or culture, and this is expressed in the individual “inspired by” menus, the interior design, the furniture, and even in the crockery and glassware we use. The tactility of objects and surfaces, from cool polished marble to rough natural timber, from terracotta floor tiles to handmade crockery, is carefully selected to evoke the feeling of the places that inspired them.

My inspiration comes from so many sources: my Greek and Cypriot heritage, my travels around the world, beautiful and innovative architecture and interior design, music and, of course, art. The art of entertaining is just that – an art. At tashas we think about every single detail, and I would like to encourage home cooks to do the same.



## Feta Parcels with honey & sesame

This is a really easy dish to make, yet it always manages to impress. A drizzle of honey adds a warm sweetness to the salty feta. Don't be stingy with the fresh thyme at the end.

### SERVES 4

4 filo pastry sheets  
320 g feta cheese  
200 g butter, melted  
2 cups vegetable oil  
2 tbsp honey  
2 tbsp sesame seeds,  
toasted  
1 tsp chopped thyme

Cut the pastry sheets lengthwise into 3 equal strips. Brush both sides of the pastry with butter and layer 3 sheets on top of one another.

Divide the feta into 4 x 80 g portions and place on each sheet. Start folding the pastry around the feta to form a block. Fold the sides in as you would wrap a present and try to tuck the corners into the parcel.

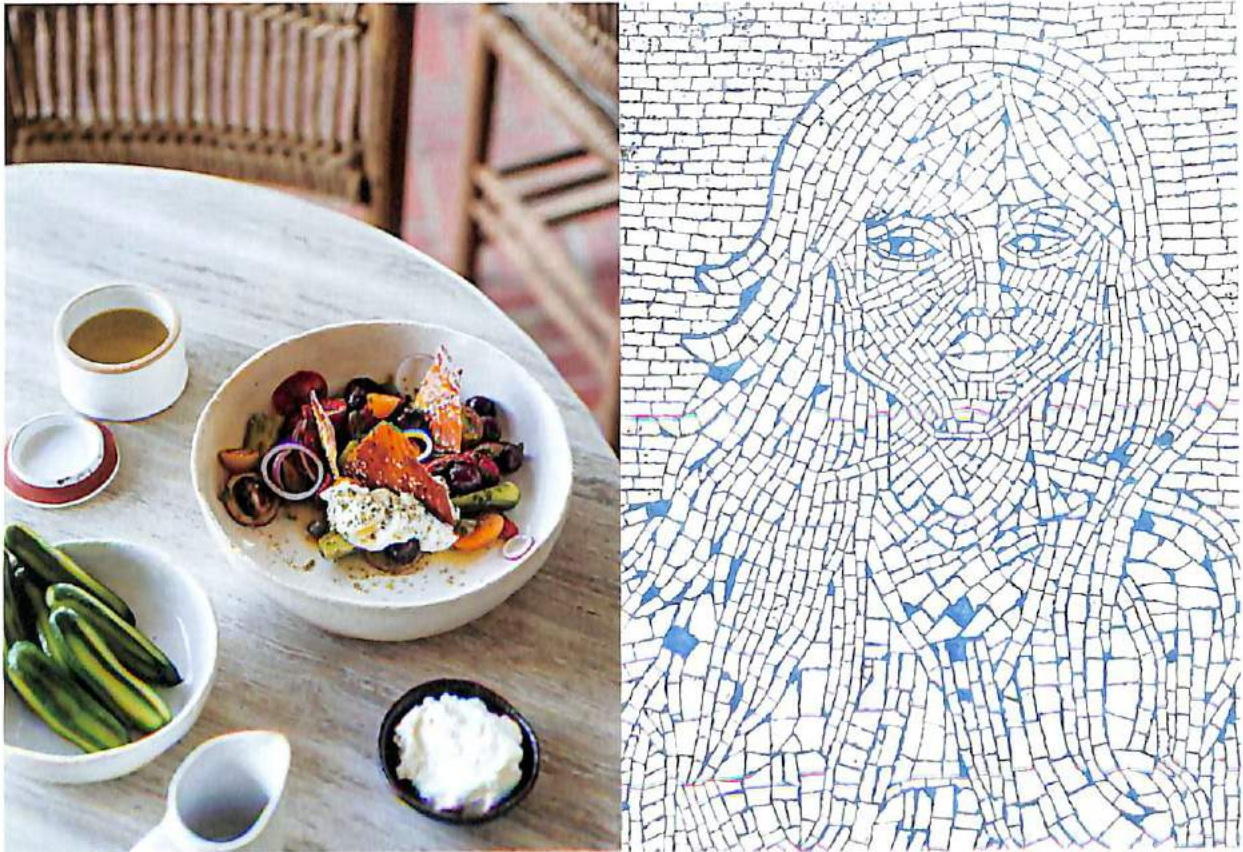
In a large heavy-bottomed frying-pan, heat the oil to medium hot. Fry the pastry parcels in the oil for about 20 seconds on each side, or until golden brown. Place on paper towel to drain off any excess oil.

Place the feta parcels on a serving plate, drizzle with the honey and sprinkle with toasted sesame seeds. Garnish with thyme. The parcels have to be served hot, otherwise the feta will become hard and dry.

- GOURMET -



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Gemista - baked vegetables stuffed with rice and minced meat; *Abstract*, 2010 by Willie van Rensbug, art.co.za; the fresh ingredients for Greek tomato salad; Rizogala, a creamy rice pudding.



ABOVE FROM LEFT: Greek salad with whipped feta; *Wondering what to wear*, 2015, a mosaic by Juanita Frier, [arteye.co.za](http://arteye.co.za)

Some of my most memorable meals in Greece have been the simplest. A plate of broad beans with tender artichoke hearts; spanakorizo, a garlicky spinach and orzo dish; sardines caught in the morning and grilled over hot coals... One of the best meals I had in Greece was vromica, a traditional street food we called “caravan food”. It was the night we slept in my aunt’s car. The family had been on holiday in Athens and we were just sitting down to the feast she had prepared when the apartment block lurched abruptly to one side and the sea slid into view. The 12-storey building was promptly evacuated.

That night, hundreds of people camped out in the local parks and in their cars, seeking refuge from the earthquake. The sausages in pita bought from a street vendor and eaten in my aunt’s little red Golf were unforgettable.

As a child I loved spending time in the kitchen with my mother and my aunt, cooking for family gatherings. I’ve always loved the energy in the kitchen: the hustle and bustle, the laughter, the excitement and the

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Food and love  
go together in  
Greek culture  
”

bonding. In my family, as in Greek culture, food and love go hand in hand. My Greek Mozambican-born-and-raised father would always make sure you were fed before any conversation could be started or business discussed. It was his way of nurturing and caring, and it came directly from his heritage.

Greek and Cypriot meals are usually communal and are often eaten with the hands, which makes things informal and unfussy. There’s a tangible spirit of seizing the day in Greece. It pulses with a soul and a heartbeat, partly because the locals are averse to malls, preferring to socialise and shop on the streets. Greek people support their neighbourhood

butcheries, bakeries and laikes agores (people’s markets), where they’re on first-name terms with the vendors. There’s a laid-back approach to food in the Mediterranean that is so much like the down-to-earth people themselves. It’s all about generosity, abundance and the simple pleasure of eating together.

To create a Mediterranean-style meal invite a lot of people and make the children as welcome as the adults. Greek food is best suited to summer weather, when you can set up outside under a tree, an umbrella or a pergola. If you have a sea view, all the better. The combination of white and sea-blue is the classic colour palette. Set a rustic wooden table with white napkins, plain white or terracotta crockery, and short glass tumblers for water and wine. If you’re doing souvla – a Cypriot barbecue – lay down waxed brown paper and serve the meat straight from the coals on the paper. Drinks can be decanted into typical taverna-style metal pitchers. Earthenware jugs filled with vivid bougainvillea blossoms or olive and fig branches are all the centrepiece you’ll need. Keep things simple and easy-going, the way they do in the Med. <sup>(M)</sup>



## Crispy Flatbreads

Unleavened flatbreads are eaten all over the Middle East and the Med. They are a versatile accompaniment to any meal, but are also a great snack on their own.

**SERVES 4**

5 g instant dry yeast  
1/2 cup tepid water  
1 tbsp honey  
1 tsp olive oil  
5 g salt  
1 egg  
250 g cake flour  
eggwash (1 egg beaten with 2 tsp water)  
sesame seeds  
cumin seeds

Dissolve the yeast in half the water and allow bubbles to form. Mix the honey, oil, salt, egg and the rest of the water. Add it, together with the yeast mixture, to the flour and knead lightly to form a smooth but still sticky dough. Shape the dough into a flat disc and cover with cling wrap. Allow to rest for at least 1 hour in the fridge.

Preheat the oven to 180°C and line a baking tray with baking paper.

Knock the dough down and roll into a log shape. Cut the log into 4 equal pieces and roll the dough out as thinly as possible into circles or oblongs and place on the baking tray, brush with eggwash and sprinkle with sesame and cumin seeds. Bake for 10 minutes or until the flatbreads resemble crispy pizza bases.