

How to Throw an Intimate Dinner at Home, the Parisian Way

For the fashion designer Julie de Libran, a seasonal meal is filled with lively conversation, close friends — and, of course, copious amounts of wine.

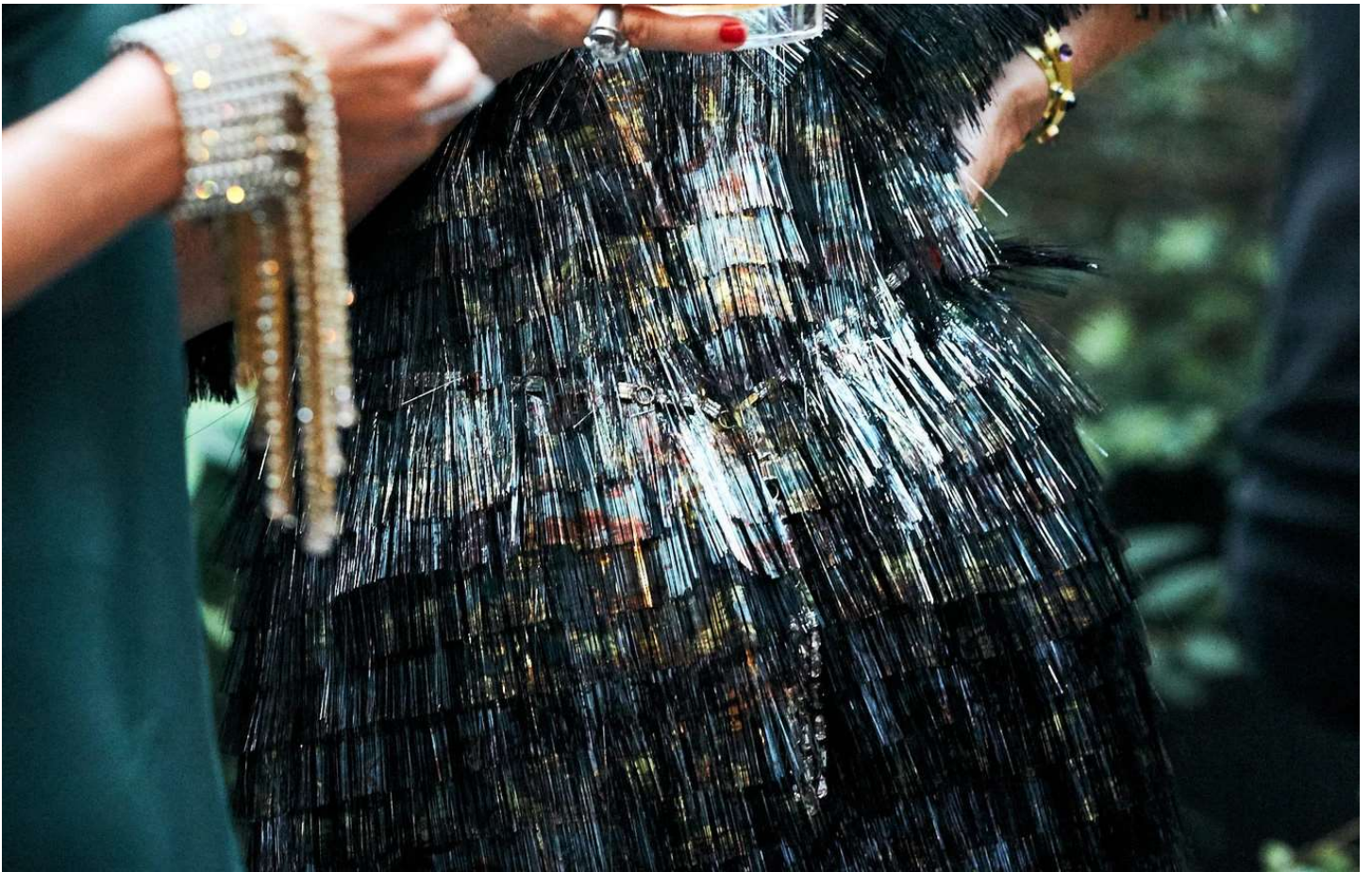
By Kin Woo

Sept. 27, 2019

Last July, at the beginning of Couture Week in Paris, the fashion designer Julie de Libran — fresh off an acclaimed five-year tenure as the artistic director of the legendary French brand Sonia Rykiel — debuted her own namesake line. She presented the first collection, which consists of 21 dresses that are available to order from her website or made to measure in her atelier, at her light-filled, three-story house on the Left Bank (formerly the archives for the publishers of the French dictionary Larousse). To mark the occasion, de Libran held two showings, each attended by 150 guests who sat on a plush green velvet Charles Zana-designed sofa in her airy living room or gathered in the garden, designed by the renowned landscape designer Louis Benech, as models descended the spiral staircase and paraded around the house. “I really wanted everyone to feel at home,” recalls de Libran. “Because I was starting on my own and the collection felt so personal — I felt it was nice to invite my friends and family.”

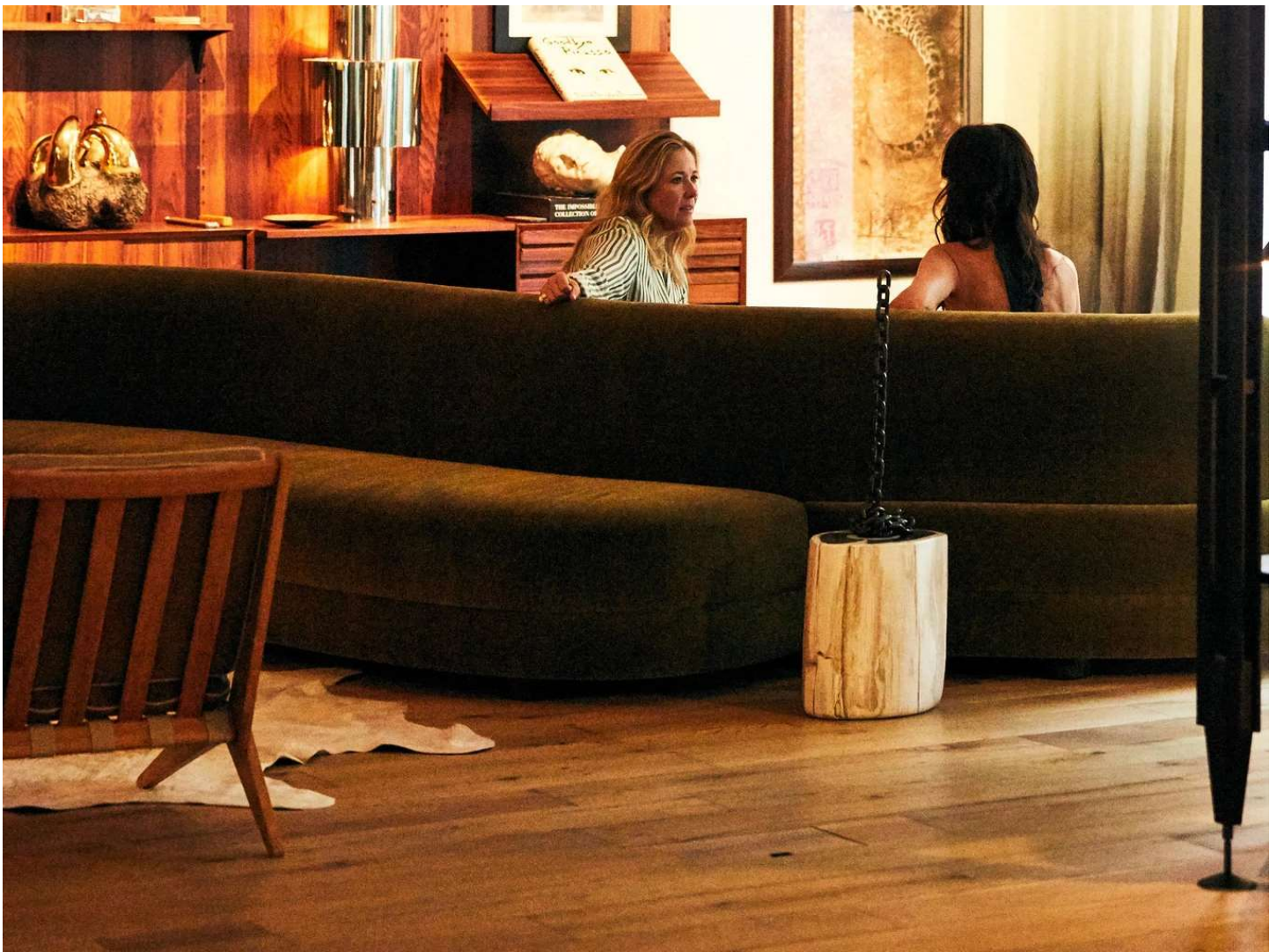
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De Libran wore the Gilda dress from her debut collection, which launched during Couture Week in July. Each dress in the collection is named after a woman who inspired her — in this case, the principal character of the 1946 movie “Gilda,” starring Rita Hayworth. Molly SJ Lowe





The chandelier in de Libran's living room was designed by her architect cousin, Manon Gaillet, who also custom-made the clothes stands to display her dresses during her Couture Week presentation. Molly SJ Lowe

Several weeks later, a few of the same guests gathered back at de Libran's house for a very different affair: an intimate dinner party. Looking tanned after a family holiday in Greece, Istanbul and her country house in Landes, France, de Libran wore a dress of her own design that was made from layers of organza stitched with silver sequins and fringed with antique gold, which she paired with a denim miniskirt. Guests included the shoe designer Fabrizio Viti, the brand consultant Claire Thomson-Jonville, the art dealer H  l  ne Nguyen-Ban and de Libran's sister, Fanelie Phillips (wearing a striped suit from de Libran's spring 2018 collection for Rykiel), and the journalist and designer Alexandra Golovanoff, who arrived in a silver sequined knit dress from the designer's debut collection, which she accessorized with the helmet from the motorcycle she rode in on.

"I wish I could do this more often, but it's been so busy," says de Libran. That's an understatement, given the start to her year: She parted ways with Rykiel in March (the company recently liquidated after filing for bankruptcy) and debuted her own brand in July. De Libran is part of a new wave of designers — including Marco Zanini, formerly of Rochas, Peter Copping, formerly of Nina Ricci, and Stefano Pilati, formerly of Yves Saint Laurent and Agnona — who have taken a step away from the frenetic pace that comes with working for historic houses to try their hand at something slower and more personal. "I've enjoyed the experience to work in those places so much, but for once, I wanted to do it my way," de Libran says. "Nowadays, there's so much more opportunity to do it on your own because you can speak to clients directly. When you have the proximity to do fittings with clients and get their feedback — I think it's rich and interesting."





Later, the 15 guests gathered for dinner in the eat-in kitchen that was lit by a Gran Finale light by Michael Anastassiades. Molly SJ Lowe





The journalist Alexandra Golovanoff wore the Sofia dress (named after de Libran's friend Sofia Coppola) from the designer's collection, which she paired with the helmet from the motorcycle she rode in on. Molly SJ Lowe

De Libran also saw the venture as an opportunity to explore her interest in sustainability (her spring 2019 Sonia Rykiel collection was made primarily from sustainable fabrics). The dresses are made from archived materials sourced from mills in Italy and Switzerland and made to order to reduce waste. “In the past, I was trying to find materials, but it was so hard,” she says. “But there are so many solutions now, and I thought it was time to become more responsible.” Despite introducing e-commerce on her website a little over a month ago, de Libran has already been inundated with personal orders, and Julianne Moore picked out a white silk jacquard negligee dress for a recent television appearance. De Libran has also partnered with Matchesfashion.com on e-commerce, which kicked off this week.

After drinks and canapés on the terrace, the 15 guests gathered in the eat-in kitchen for dinner. The ingredients for the seasonal Gallic menu came straight from de Libran’s organic garden in southwestern France, and the meal was prepared by her family cook, Maria. She served puréed potimarron (winter squash) for soup, a kale and feta salad, and an apple compote (with a side of chocolate mousse) for dessert. Even the eggs from the chickens the family keeps were used to make a baked soufflé served as a main course. Later in the evening, some guests decamped to the courtyard to smoke while others lingered over tisanes and coffee near the fireplace. “In France, it’s more elegant to invite people to your home,” de Libran says. “You can make it more personal.” Here, she shares her advice on entertaining, the Parisian way.





For dessert, de Libran's cook, Maria, baked two apple compotes, which were served with a generous helping of chocolate mousse. Molly SJ Lowe





De Libran opted for a family favorite — baked soufflé, using eggs from the chickens she keeps at her country home — to serve as the main course. Molly SJ Lowe

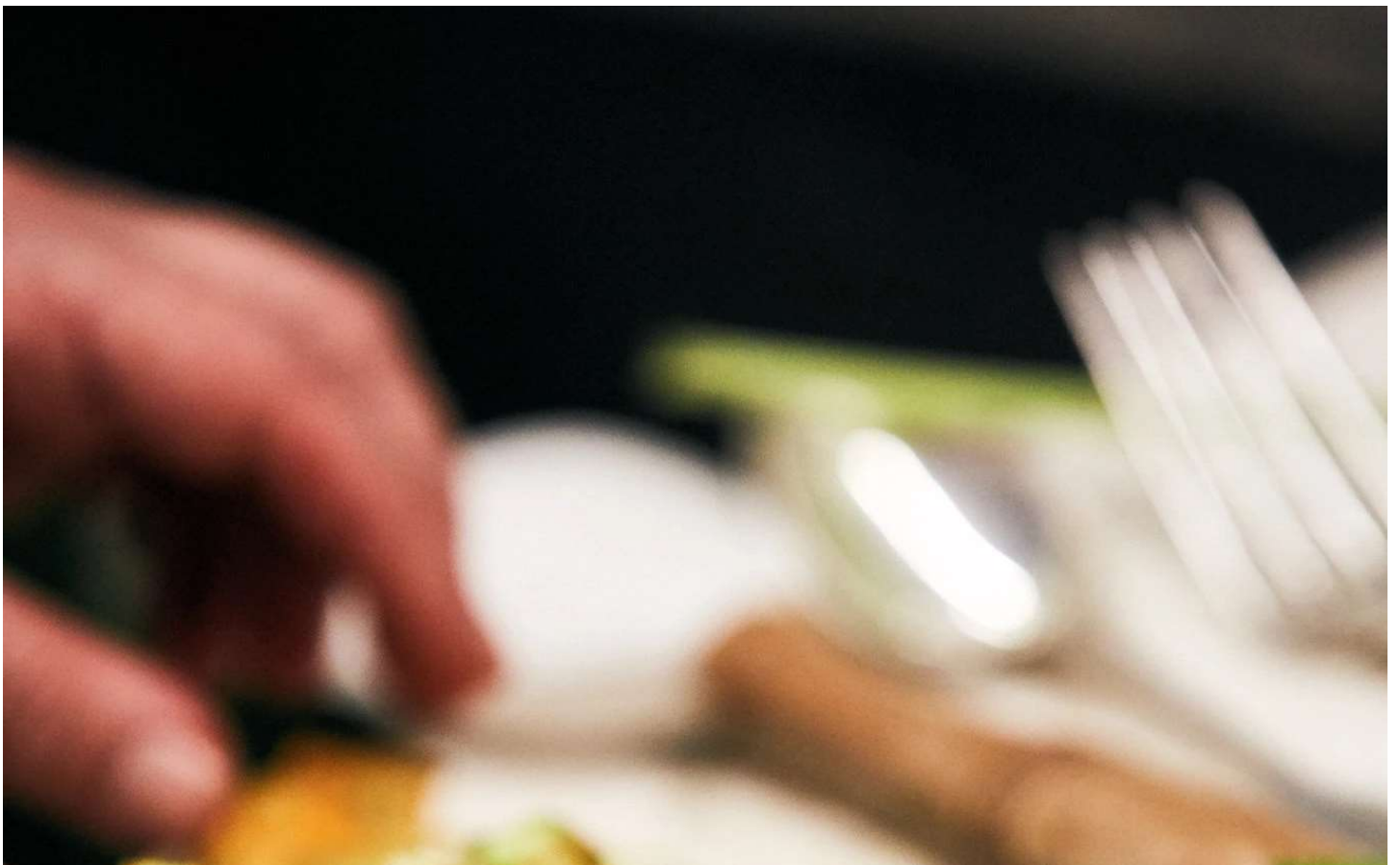
Eat the Way You Do at Home

“I love having people over, but I can’t cook!” confesses de Libran. “I always say I get more stressed in the kitchen than I do in my work.” Instead, she enlisted the services of her family cook to come up from their country home in Landes to make a traditional soufflé, a favorite of the family. “I love everything homemade,” she says. “I like old, traditional recipes — the food that my grandmother and my mother cooked a lot. This soufflé really reminds me of them.”





Guests helped themselves to the giant home-baked loaf of bread, seen here next to some oversize squash from de Libran's garden. Molly SJ Lowe





Zucchini flowers were deep fried to make beignets de fleurs de courgettes, which were served as appetizers alongside goat's cheese canapés. Molly SJ Lowe

Adapt Your Menu to the Seasons (and Guests)

De Libran plans her menus around what's available from her garden. "I feel very lucky to be able to have vegetables and fruits from my organic garden, and fresh eggs from our chickens, which I bring back to Paris from my weekends in the French countryside so I can share with my friends," she says. "I always feel the taste is so much nicer than anything I can get in the city." De Libran initially planned to serve gazpacho as the starter but substituted winter squash for it, as there weren't enough tomatoes in her garden. "I love working with the seasons," she says. She attributes her love of nature to growing up with a father who made his own organic wine. There were further changes to the menu when a guest declared a lactose allergy, and Maria whipped up an omelet as a main course to serve him instead of the soufflé.



De Libran foraged her garden for the fruits and vegetables that she used as centerpieces for the table. Another guest, Kira Faiman, supplied the napkin rings and beaded placemats from her tabletop accessories line, Von Gern Home. Molly SJ Lowe

Use Your Produce Differently

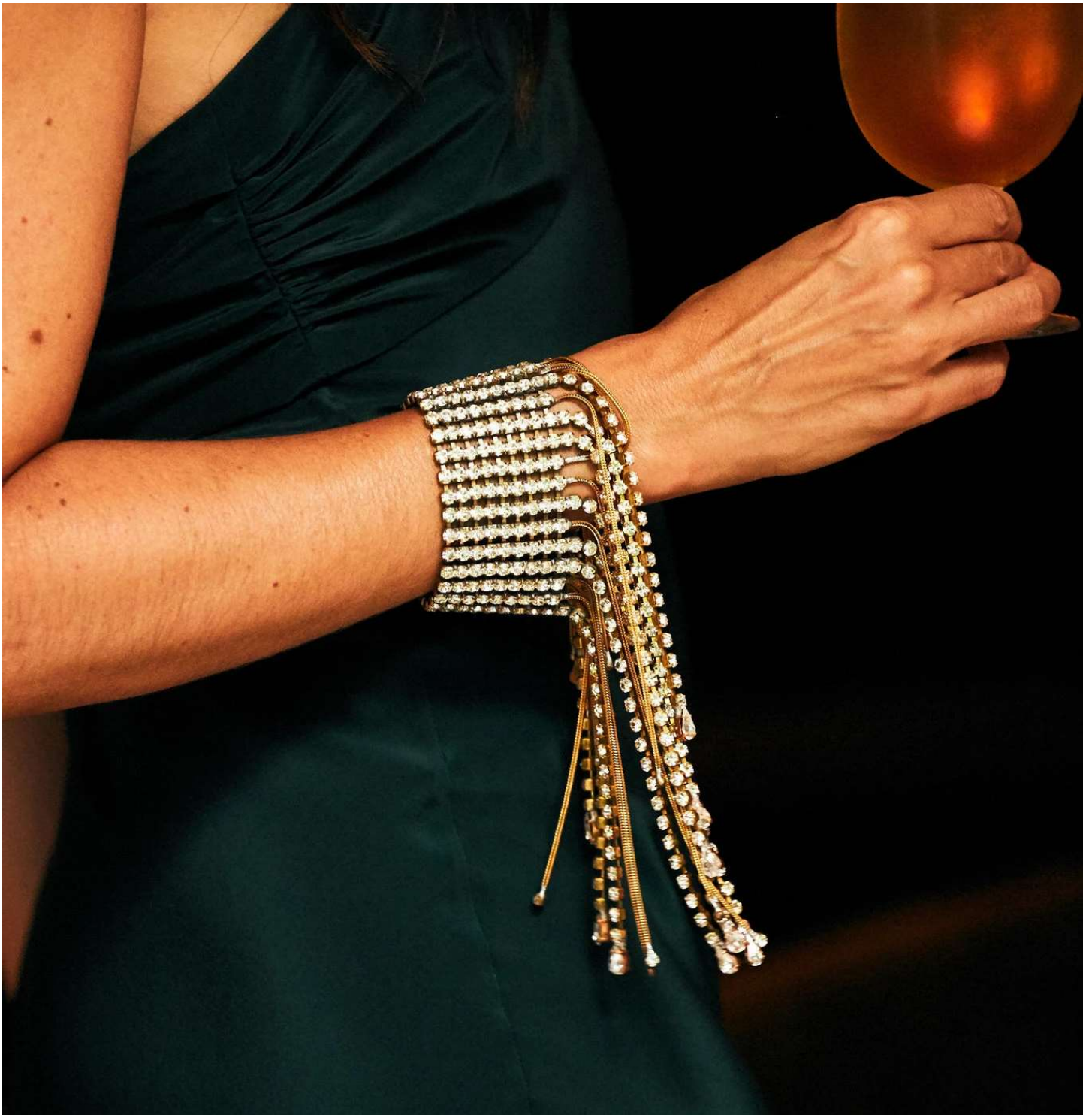
In addition to using ingredients from her garden for the menu, de Libran decorated the table with an assortment of pears, pumpkins, squashes and carrots. “I decided it made a nice center of the table with the colors and the leaves,” she says. “I like to use different themes for my table, and this was all about ‘Dinner from my organic garden.’”





Guests were served cocktails made from Skerzo — a blend of grape juice and Armagnac brandy from the estate of de Libran's husband, Stéphane de Luzé. Molly SJ Lowe





Kira Faiman, one of the dinner guests, wore an emerald green silk crepe de chine halter dress from de Libran's collection, which she accessorized with a fringed crystal-studded bracelet also designed by de Libran. Molly SJ Lowe

Serve Your Signature Drink

The evening started with aperitifs made from Skerzo, a blend of fresh colombar grape juice and Armagnac brandy that is made on the historic Château de Briat estate near Bordeaux, which is owned by de Libran's husband, Stéphane de Luze. De Luze is a fifth-generation descendant of the Pichon-Longueville family, who produces the prestigious Château de Briat Armagnac. The Skerzo was served in two variations: with ice and a garnish of rosemary, or as a cocktail mixed with sparkling water. "I love drinking it in the summer, sitting out in the sun," says de Libran, adding with a laugh, "but it's great to drink all year round, too!"



During a starter of winter-squash soup, guests raised a toast to de Libran, with her husband, Stéphane de Luze, on her left. Molly SJ Lowe

Make It a Family Affair

The playlist for the evening was provided by de Libran's 13-year-old son, Balthazar, and featured songs by Lou Doillon, Julien Doré, Vanessa Paradis and Charlotte Gainsbourg. Balthazar has increasingly been roped in to help out in the family business — he handed out care packages to guests at de Libran's Couture Week presentation in July and even modeled in the spring 2019 Sonia Rykiel show last year with his new Labrador retriever puppy.