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Clandestino Artist Dinner  
by Marla Seidell

Art and food have much in common. Both have the effect of nourishing the soul and stimulating conversation. At the Clandestino Artist Dinner I attended on November 13, the event supplied artful conversation and sublime flavors derived from local ingredients cooked in gourmet fashion. In terms of the art, it was the non-deliberate works, such as the symmetrical fern plants lined up alongside the dinner table that left an impression.

Clandestino is an underground supper club, created and helmed by Chef Efrain Cuevas who started the endeavor in the basements of apartments in Oakland, California, and has been running the Chicago version for about a year. Curator Vicki Fowler, creator of the Bridgeport gallery Murtherland, is the artistic advisor and collaborator for the event, along with Sarah and Joseph Belknap, artists and husband-and-wife team. As Fowler explains, the experience is the art: "There's the reaction of being overwhelmed, and then people eating and realizing they're in really good hands."



I must admit that, upon entering the Belknap residence, I was a bit overwhelmed. It's a turn-of-the-century house, located in Cicero. I arrived on a Friday evening, round about 7 p.m. The crowd is quietly milling about in back near the house-like structure built by the Belknaps, or in the garage where Northside Paws, a two-man band, jams on a guitar and mandolin. But guests are quick to make conversation and introduce themselves, I find out, once you make the first move.

When Chef Efrain announces it's time for wine, I'm relieved. Some ice breaking is in order.

"It's not Rick Bayless, and that's what interesting," notes Teri; a 50-something former hippie lady who I find out is a regular on the Clandestino circuit. Teri explained that it's the opportunity to experience the cuisine of an emerging chef, coupled with the unpredictable nature of the events (you never know you'll meet or what will occur) that keeps her coming back.

Clandestino volunteers serve us the first course, fingerling potatoes with sausage and baby arugula. Chef Efrain's food here has the element of [the restaurant Blackbird](#)-- local and gourmet, with an emphasis on unadulterated taste. But of course, it's not the Blackbird. People are here for the chance to socialize with new people, and for the experience of food and art in gestation.

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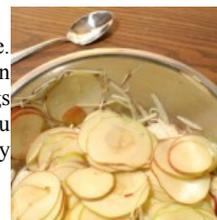
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The second course is a pretty array of Northern Spy apples, drizzled with honey and cheddar cheese. Following this delicate course, which leaves you wanting more, we're given a tour of the artists' sculpture in the attic. There's spooky forest music, lights, and boxes upon boxes of stuff, (supposedly family belongings that nobody wants to get rid of) and videos of the artists tearing a house down. It was kind of like when you were a kid sneaking into the attic at your friend's house, just because it's spooky and weird. It's not exactly the kind of art that makes a definitive statement, but like the food, it's part of the experience.



Down from the attic and continuing with dinner, is ravioli filled with acorn squash, doused with pesto and maple cream. The squash is from the Belknap garden. By now I'm enjoying my conversation with Teri and the other women at my table. Dessert turns out to be the most divine course of the evening: creamy homemade acorn squash ice cream served up with thick slabs of apple and pistachio cake and cider caramel.

The chef is not Rick Bayless and happily so. Some artists are unknown and others have opened up their home and invited us to view the tchotchkes turned into art in the attic. Everything is a bit weird and cool and the company is above average. I have eaten delicious, chef-prepared local food. "More than an event, this is a happening," Fowler says.

Sustainability, the handmade, labor, the environment and the concepts of creation and destruction--all of these themes have attempted to come to the fore through art and food.

But what I find to be the most compelling about the experiential evening is the positive energy created by the artists, chef, crew and curator included. We gathered around the table to share wine and food and conversation with strangers. In a struggling economy, what could be better? This is something we don't do often enough nowadays. We're too busy with our lives and what we think we should be doing. But not doing is an art we should spend more time mastering.

--Marla Seidell

The next Clandestino event, "Dinner at the Toy Factory," takes place on December 12, 2009, at the old toy factory in Roscoe Village. All food prepared will be local ingredients procured from within a 200-mile radius. [For more information, click here.](#)

Posted by [Marla Seidell](#) on 11/30/09

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