

# *edible*

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AN ARTIST SALON SPRINGS UP IN SAG HARBOR

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# AN ARTIST SALON SPRINGS UP IN SAG HARBOR

*The Church invites artists to break bread—and to break down philosophical questions surrounding their art.*



BY MEGHAN HARLOW • PHOTOS BY LINDSAY MORRIS

The most coveted invitation on the East End arrives by email. The guest list is short—only twenty inboxes east of Southampton receive the invitation—and the language is clear. You are invited, it says, to an “intimate salon-style artists dinner.”

The invitation briefly describes the meal: soup, salad, bread, and bring-your-own beverages. If this menu sounds a bit monastic for the Hamptons, that’s because it is—by design. Because the actual dinner at this dinner party functions less as a standard family meal than it does a lofty, artistic conceit, a device to bring together a specific group of people around a specifically designed, twenty-foot table, to discuss a specific, predetermined topic. It is these topics that are both the meat and potatoes at these otherwise meatless feasts.

Hosted by The Church in Sag Harbor, a not-for-profit art center founded by world-renowned artists Eric Fischl and April Gornik, these artists dinners are a natural and yet highly intentional outgrowth of the mission of The Church itself: “to foster creativity on the East End and to honor the living history of Sag Harbor as a ‘maker’ Village.” They also, in layman’s terms, scratch a hard-to-scratch itch.

While the East End in general, and Sag Harbor in particular, has a rich history of drawing artists to live, work, and play in its environs, the pace of modern life—and the walls built by the realities of the marketplace—have changed the ways in which these artists communicate with one another. Long gone are the wine-stained salons that star in so many of society’s fantasies, leaving artists with few real opportunities to gather and discuss philosophical questions surrounding their art.

The Church’s artists dinners are changing that.

“I was involved in the creation of The Church with April [Gornik] and Eric [Fischl] from day one,” says Sheri Pasquarella, The Church’s executive director. “And from the beginning, they had always talked about this idea of doing community artist dinners that would be in the style of salons and function as a dynamic way of bringing artists from throughout the community together over a meal and conversation.”

And so when Pasquarella officially joined the organization in August 2022, the idea was already there and so, too, was the table.

“The very first facilities director at The Church built the table himself,” says Pasquarella. “He was a woodworker and the table was conceived for just this purpose. So, yes, these dinners were a core concept for The Church and the community-based, artist-driven work that it does. Then I came on board, with my execution skills, and we got it done. We hosted our first artists dinner in January of this year.”

The topic of that first dinner was “On Taboos.” Twenty artists gathered around The Church’s table, enjoyed soup and bread and salad, and discussed whether or not any given subject should be off-limits when it comes to art. The second dinner followed in February,

when the topic was “On Morality.” Again, a curated group of artists gathered, ate, drank, and discussed whether or not art should have a moral imperative. In April, The Church hosted its third artists dinner, at which the topic was a bit lighter and centered on love.

The Church’s dining space features a lot of invisible scaffolding to support these spirited conversations. First, there is the meal itself, which is designed to support, but never to distract from, the dinner’s less tangible food for thought. This is not to say, of course, that the food itself is unappealing. It is actually quite lovely—supplied by either The

Cookery in East Hampton or Serene Green Farm in Sag Harbor, with bread from Carissa’s The Bakery, cheese from Cavaniola’s Gourmet, and beverages from Kidd Squid Brewing Co., Channing Daughters Winery, Wolfier Estate Vineyard, and more—it’s just not the point.

Then, there is the guest list and seating arrangements.

“The guest list is highly curated,” says Pasquarella. “We bear in mind what the topic is that we’ll be talking about and who the group of artists is. We also have a couple of rules. First, every artist in attendance must be from the East End. Second, we don’t invite couples to the same dinner. I think that makes the dinner really great for everybody. There’s a little bit of alchemy in there. And then, finally, I personally make the place settings.”









This is a job Pasquarella particularly enjoys. The Church artists dinners bring together artists of all mediums, backgrounds, and levels of acclaim; it is a thrill to figure out how best to arrange them.

Wunetu Wrepaai Tarrant attended The Church's second artists dinner in February. Tarrant is a member of the Shinnecock Indian Nation, a Guild Hall Community Artist-in-Residence, and the founder of the First Literature Project.

"First Literature Project is an approach to presenting indigenous storytelling as a form of literature, utilizing cutting edge virtual reality technology to present an ancient tradition crucial to the history and culture of Indigenous people," writes Tarrant over email. "[Attending The Church's artists dinner in February] was a wonderful opportunity to meet more artists in the East End community and reconnect with some I have known since what seems like a lifetime ago."

With multimedia maker Erling Hope to her right, Tarrant enjoyed the dinner's discussion of the artist's right to freedom of expression, and of all the moral implications that freedom could have in a society with its own set of sometimes-contradictory morals.

"This setting provided a wonderful opportunity for discussion of some of the more difficult topics in art today," writes Tarrant. "I believe it is important for artists to gather in settings such as this because these conversations will stay with each attendee and doubtless these topics will come up again throughout [their] career. It is important to specifically focus on such difficult topics and hear the voices of a diverse group to come to an understanding of what these questions actually entail and how we may approach answering them with the perspectives of others in mind."

It is this sense of perspective that acclaimed artist Almond Zigmund, who attended the first of The Church's artists dinners back in January, prizes most.

"I think one of the most important things for artists is perspective and a continuing reevaluation of perspective," says Zigmund. "And when you don't have connections with other people, you just don't get that. So I do think it's really important for artists to meet and to kind of step into these situations. [The Church founders] April and Eric are not insatiable, but they are looking for intellect and the exchange of ideas. So creating the kind of atmosphere where that can happen is really important. That's what they are doing with The Church."

And in partnership with Pasquarella, that is what they are doing particularly well. The Church's artists dinners feature food that is nourishing but not sexy; a diverse, curated guest list; and a discussion topic that is pre-selected and intentionally a bit slippery. Pasquarella's careful moderation keeps the conversation from slipping too far off course.

"That moderation, I think, is the thing that keeps the dinners in the realm of a discussion," says Zigmund. "[The Church's chief curator] Sara [Cochran], Eric, April, and Sheri are all incredibly well read and well spoken. They certainly have opinions about whatever topic there might be. So you've got four very strong people leading the discussion, but there is also an awareness that they want to bring everybody into the discussion. So there really is time and attention given to having everybody participate in some way and it is wonderful. Nothing spins out of control."

Instead, everything spins in the direction of an enriching experience for everyone—for The Church, for its founders and team, for all of the attending artists, and for capital-A Art itself.

For Sag Harbor, too, The Church ensures an engaged and active congregation of creatives. Except now there are no pews; just a handmade, purpose-built dinner table. ●

For more information on The Church, please visit [thechurchsagharbor.org](http://thechurchsagharbor.org).