

... and now, for our next act

Turn the page for our story on Kathryn Besser, who is on a mission to counter Silicon Valley's impersonal "virtual friendships" and "online communities" — one party at a time...



On Kathryn Besser

Milly ruched silk skirt, \$279; **Milly** jabot ruffled blouse, \$220; **Flavio Castellani** fox trimmed coat, \$1,104; **Mawi** earrings, \$97 (all from Bella Rosa, Los Gatos); **Dolce Vita** pumps, \$159, Bloomingdale's, Stanford Shopping Center

Shot on location at the California Theatre, San Jose (see Page 153).
Makeup: Ben Monroy, Neiman Marcus, Stanford Shopping Center. Hair: Ivy Le, www.ivymakeupartist.com.



The valley's mild climate lets Besser, above, entertain al fresco almost year-round. Below, she prepares a simple, elegant dessert plate.



the party evangelist

Not a season passes without Kathryn Besser hosting a sangria party for 50, a gourmet potluck for 20, a wine and chocolate soiree. One Saturday each month, she invites neighbors over for "coffee mornings" that don't end 'til 2. And on any given day, her pantry is stocked with special ingredients to serve epicurean meals for unexpected guests.

With her wine glass raised high, Besser is leading her own rebellion to Silicon Valley's all-too-pervasive "virtual friendships" and "online

Kathryn Besser is on a mission: to bring people together

Story by **Julia Prodis Sulek**
Photos by **Patrick Tehan**



A graphic artist, Besser makes her own menus, with each dish typed out around the edges of paper circles she cuts by hand.

communities" – one party at a time.

"All this technology is pushing everyone further apart," she says. "Everyone is sitting there with their iPhones and BlackBerries and not talking to each other. I'm an evangelist for the old style of entertaining."

Besser is first to play a party game. She loves a printed menu, a fine olive oil, a good salt, a cashmere dress. Whether she's gathering friends together for two weeks at a villa in Spain (and orchestrating an impromptu wedding there in 24 hours!) or pick-

ing pomegranates from her garden for a ladies luncheon on the terrace, it's a ball every time.

"It's like candy for me," she says. "I do it for the pure sugar high."

She's a graphic artist who works from home. Her husband, Paul Besser, is an engineer and research director at a semiconductor company. When they first met and he told her what he did for a living, "my eyes glazed over," she says. Ever since, she has reveled in the idea of getting opposites together and finding common ground. And their remodeled ranch-style house in Sunnyvale – which they share with their two sons – is party central.

It is here, in the kitchen that opens to the great room with soaring windows overlooking the back garden, where guests are as likely to be pulling hot cookies out of the oven as playing the "three-adjectives-that-describe-me" game under the trellis.

"I tend to avoid parties that are 'too cool for school' and people stand around and don't approach anyone," says Besser, 45. "I'm all about being approachable. I kind of grew up this way. It's my way of carrying forth the things that were important in my childhood."

When she was growing up in suburban Washington, D.C., in the 1970s, her parents were "major party people" who rarely had fewer than 20 guests over at a time. When her father, Paul Holland, was transferred to Poland as a doctor for the National Institutes of Health, he took the family with him. Kathryn, who was 9, learned Polish quickly and translated for her mother in the marketplaces.

A decade later, a college semester abroad reinforced her love



Besser's *amuse-bouches* include one made with fig, goat cheese and basil, and another open-face turkey salad sandwich with grapes, apples, walnuts and fig jam.



Besser picks basil, sage and arugula in her garden for luncheon garnishes.

of language (she can converse in six) as well as of shopping daily for fresh, local ingredients. And now, with her annual family trips to Europe where she invites friends to “live locally” with them, she can’t help but bring the *al fresco* lifestyle back home.

She has scouted out every produce stand (C.J. Olson’s Cherries is her favorite), and as a francophile, she found the perfect place for cheeses and authentic (frozen!) croissants at the Milk Pail in Los Altos. She goes to Marin County’s farmers market to replenish her DaVero olive oil supply that comes in big brown jugs, buys Maldon sea salt from Whole Foods and for special occasions, orders flowers from Emily Joubert Home and Garden in Woodside. And, every other Friday, one pound of Stumptown coffee from Portland, Ore., lands on her doorstep.

“I love to seek out one person who does one thing really well,” she says. “I like to search out people who care, because I really care. If I find people equally passionate, how can I go wrong?”

Her husband is an equal partner in team Besser. He loves to bake, choose scotch whiskies and pull shots from the Italian Vibiemme espresso machine they bought after a two-hour appointment at Thomas Cara in San Francisco helped them decide the best machine for them.

“People think entertaining is all work. But the work part is never a big deal with so many willing helpers,” she says. “The energy of all the people, that’s the magic.”

And often, while her ingredients are always fresh and top quality, her recipes are quick and simple. Her favorite cupboard meal

Besser’s favorite ice-breaker

A sure-fire way to get your guests in party mode. You can download Kathryn Besser’s other party game ideas at www.dirtandsunshine.com:

Have all guests write down answers to the following on cards:

- What three adjectives best describe you?
- What is your hidden talent? What do you secretly desire to accomplish?
- What cause (or causes) are you most passionate about?

Here’s how to play:

1. Drop cards in a box.
2. Find a partner.
3. Round 1: Cards are read aloud, and the teams guess who they think it is.
4. Round 2: Identities are revealed; if there’s a story behind it, we want to hear it!
5. Winner is the team who guesses the most correctly.
6. Prizes are awarded!

when someone stops by? A can of Italian As do Mar oil-packed tuna over a can of cannelloni beans, topped with thinly sliced sweet onions, then drizzled with olive oil and cracked pepper.

The best part of entertaining, she says, is fostering new friendships among her guests.

“If people go beyond us, that’s another way of connecting us all more tightly together,” she says. “If I could pick a job for myself, I would be matchmaker.”

She self-published a book recently called “Dirt and Sunshine” that includes her thoughts on child-rearing, but it’s as much about living a rich lifestyle filled with friends, good food and simple pleasures as anything else. She includes recipes, family traditions and party tips that can be downloaded from www.dirtandsunshine.com. (When her children were babies, she always ground a little pepper into their baby food so they would appreciate flavor. Now, she says, they’re both adventurous eaters, which helps when they vacation abroad.)

BESSER jumps to Page 157




A Besser party gift of cinnamon, her favorite Maldon sea salt and home-dried parsley.

KATHRYN BESSER

continued from Page 88

While some people might roll their eyes at ice-breaker games, Besser is unabashed and insists it draws out the shy guests and sets a festive mood. And almost always, something new is learned about old friends and family. When she held a Valentine's Day party, she asked everyone to write on a piece of paper "What I did for love." Her father said he had given up medical school at Yale, choosing to stay at UCLA to remain close to a nurse named Patti who would become his wife.

"The time we get to spend with friends and neighbors, that's the gold to me," she says. "I feel if I'm not opening my house, I'm not being the person I want to be." 

Scene magazine reader contest

continued from Page 162

You and your BFF can win a makeover at **Bloomingdale's Stanford!**

See contest rules and how to enter on Page 162. To help promote the contest, Bloomingdale's Stanford will donate a generous beauty gift basket to Christmas Tree Elegance 2009. The basket will be awarded in a special drawing at a Christmas Tree Elegance "coffee" on the morning of Dec. 3. See www.vallemonte.org to purchase tickets to the event.

You must be 18 years old and a legal California resident to enter. Employees of the Mercury News/Bay Area News Group and their families are ineligible. Limit one entry per person, per household. The winner will be photographed by Scene magazine wearing fashions from Bloomingdale's Stanford; the photo will be featured in the spring 2010 issue of Scene.



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