

Cami Jetta Knows How to Throw a Dinner Party
By Erianne Lewis

After reading *My Brilliant Friend* by Elena Ferrante (a pseudonym for the Italian author) Cami Jetta decided she needed to go to Italy. She wanted to visit Ischia, an island in the Tyrrhenian Sea about 30 km from Naples. One by one she convinced her closest friends and the staff of her quaint, communal-style restaurant, Dinner Party, to go with her. So, in August of this year the restaurant closed for two weeks, and the staff (some accompanied by friends or partners) traveled with Cami to the vacation spot in the northern end of the Gulf of Naples.

In sharp contrast to other restaurants where staff members have worked, extended breaks exist at Dinner Party. They are not expected to work Christmas or other holidays or the entire summer. During the two weeks that Cami spent there, around 24 people visited the house (never more than 14 at a time), she admitted.

“The first week was more like my friends from college and just New York and different times in life. And then the second week, like end of the first week into the second week, Dinner Party people past and present sort of trickling in,” Cami said.

They swam, drank, played games, enjoyed each other’s company and cooked family dinners each night during their stay in the Italian villa. There were many tearful nights filled with reflections on the uniqueness of this community Cami has created.

“[Cami] is just like incredibly ambitious. And, like speaks ... she doesn't speak like she's much older per se, but just what she has accomplished,” says Justine “Teenie” Peyton, a line cook at Dinner Party, who has known Cami for almost two years now. “She like went to school where I grew up, so we like kind of instantly clicked on regional stuff. So, I always felt very, like comfortable and very seen by her.”

A seemingly common sentiment throughout the Dinner Party staff.

People are important to Cami. Whether that’s uplifting them, laughing with them or bringing up their names in rooms full of opportunity. Creating genuine camaraderie is at the forefront of everything she does. At Dinner Party, the hanging out, social aspect is at the forefront and the cooking is sometimes placed on the backburner.

Every item scattered throughout the dining room and kitchen has meaning. Many objects were gifted or contributed by friends or family. In the front window of Cami’s Fort Greene restaurant, located at 86 South Portland Avenue, is a tiny business card for her college best friend, Loryn Cook, an architectural designer who devised a plan for the space when Cami secured the spot.

Cami lives just around the corner from the restaurant and would often pass it on walks. The space was previously occupied by two woman-owned restaurants, the latest being Pequeña, a beloved local Mexican restaurant that closed due to the pandemic. Noticing a for rent sign in the window, Cami inquired about the listing online and soon went in person to check it out.

“Everything just kind of happened fast after that. The broker and I really hit it off, we have the same initials CMJ. She loves Aquariuses, so she said. And I guess I just fell in love with like, the bones of the space and the energy,” Cami said.

Miscellaneous paintings and pictures line the walls in an assortment of funky and simplistic frames, forming an artsy wall collage that may find itself on a 20-somethings dream Pinterest board. Thrifted and secondhand colorful cloth napkins, stained-glass lamp shades, golden candlestick holder centerpieces, crocheted placemats and various other décor have found their home among the tables.

The restaurant’s aesthetics and cooking style is inspired by Cami’s maternal grandparents, who died prior to the opening of Dinner Party. She says that her grandparents, along with Anne Boleyn, the second wife of King Henry VIII and Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor make up her list of dream dinner guests, followed by “every single person I love and at least one person I want to kiss,” Cami told me during our initial informal sit-down interview.

Small parties of vicenarians find themselves seated with strangers-turned-quick-friends in Cami’s eatery. The experience feels kind of like when a friend that you aren’t super close with invites you to a meal at their charming apartment, filled with friends of friends of friends and you strike up a conversation with the person next to you out of curiosity. Through sheer coincidence you discover you are actually connected through multiple social spheres. In this scenario, Cami is the friend who is hosting, and she’s inviting you into her pandemic daydream come true.

Cami, born Camille Jetta on February 1, 1996, in Shelton, Connecticut, is the youngest child of a businessman and a fulltime AA sponsor.

Cami’s paternal side is German and Scandinavian, while her mother’s side is “Italian” (she admitted that her family loves to overemphasize their likely small percentage of Italian heritage).

With the exception of her older cousin who ran a deli in Connecticut, no one in Cami’s family has experience cooking in or running restaurants. However, her maternal grandparents were passionate home cooks and “prolific hosts,” who would throw elaborate dinner parties, she said.

Before Cami was a chef and owner (“chefowner,” as her staff jokingly calls her) she was stuck in a rut. It soon led to an existential crisis that was shaped by the pandemic. A University of

California, Berkeley alum, Cami graduated with a history degree in 2018. She strongly believes that food and history are one in the same. “Food is history’s story and history is food’s story,” Cami says.

The Bay Area, where Berkeley is located, is not only filled with divine scenery, but is also an epicenter of food culture that devoured a large percentage of Cami’s paychecks in undergrad. Berkeley is home to Chez Panisse, initiator of the farm-to-table movement and brainchild of Alice Waters, a famed American chef, restauranter and one of Cami’s culinary idols. Dinner Party’s business model is inspired by Waters and Chez Panisse, Cami admitted. The restaurant’s downstairs is an upscale, formal dining area with a prix-fixe menu.

While the upstairs is a more relaxed, café section, where Cami dined a few times throughout her time at Berkeley. Although she’s never met Waters, Cami considered it an “immense privilege” to be able to experience the restaurant.

“God I’m like feeling warm inside just thinking about it. I think one of the biggest lessons of Chez Panisse, and this is something that Alice Waters writes about explicitly, is the way that you know, ambiance isn’t simply incidental to the food it really does materially make the food taste better. And I feel like that was one of the big and is still one of the big lessons that we take from Dinner Party is just like the food can’t really be separated from the ‘vibe,” Cami said. “I mean, and Chez Panisse is so ... it feels like you’re in a tree house. It just ... it feels like something from another time and just like the lighting and the warm wood and really friendly service. I was pretty young when I was like a college student when I was eating there. We would save up the whole semester and then like me and a couple friends would go once a year as like this big treat.”

Cami worked at Gregoire, a high-end French takeout restaurant located in the same area of town as Chez Panisse, during undergrad. After graduating from Berkeley, she worked at a political action committee for six months in San Francisco, then moved to New York City in 2018.

She found a job working as a development coordinator in a fundraising department at the Museum of Natural History.

“I was working with the trustees and got to see a lot of really awesome behind the scenes stuff. But yeah, also sort of a political lesson in the way that like wealth and cultural capital works in New York,” Cami said. “The museum is really interesting as sort of another institution that represents a cross section of New York, because there’s so many different jobs that that place contains and so many different kinds of people working there also so many different kinds of people that the museum serves.”

She enjoyed her coworkers and her time there, but when the pandemic hit and everything was moved online, her perception of the role changed. Exposed to the bare bones of what the job

entailed, Cami's love for it dwindled and she knew she needed to move on. She considered law school briefly, but her inner voice insisted otherwise. It screamed *restaurant* and she listened.

The beginning days of Dinner Party were as you'd probably expect when five people with no formal culinary training or experience cooking in a restaurant decide to open one. An overnight best friend(ship) was formed between the restaurant's opening staff: Karma Masselli (a director), Michelle Kariuki (an actor), Pilar Herrera (a painter), Emily Small (a textile artist) and Cami as they navigated this new adventure. Cami said the first months were "magical," not only because it was springtime in New York City, but also because of the constant creativity flowing from the group.

Cami said the restaurant's financial trajectory is typical of a business that has been operating for less than three years. Dinner Party didn't have a liquor license the first year they were open, which made operating in New York City extremely difficult.

"Really only now are we starting to break even and kind of crawl out from under that debt, which we are very gradually beginning to do knock on wood, all praise be," Cami joked. "It didn't really start meaningfully making money until very, very recently. The sad reality of that is because we hiked up prices quite a bit from the original like fairly low price and also started hosting a lot of private events, which is just hugely lucrative."

She only recently began to pay herself beyond what she needs to survive, but still not a "meaningful" wage, she said.

When Dinner Party officially opened to the public in June of 2021, it was takeout only. Cami received vast media attention in 2021 and 2022 from publications like Eater, Brooklyn Magazine, Gothamist, Time Out NY, Thrillist, The Infatuation, Grub Street and lots of TikTok buzz. Cami admitted the media exposure had kind of a "mixed effect" in the sense that it was "great for business and it's really exciting. But I always want Dinner Party to be a place that locals can come easily, that doesn't have a reputation for being super exclusive." She says it is still difficult sometimes to get a reservation at Dinner Party, not just because of its popularity, but because of the restaurant's size as well, but it's a "happy problem to have."

During the takeout days, for \$16 they served different variations of "classic picnic food," like pickled hot peppers, seasonal fruit, rice pudding, salad, sourdough toast with garnishes, etc. The menu changed weekly and is similar to what they serve on their current brunch menus.

Cami and her crew had brief interactions with customers, but most of their day was just hanging out, playing games, laughing with one another (and cooking here and there). “I think so much love was infused into the space so early,” Cami said.

“There are so many things about this entire experience that have made me much more spiritually inclined, and like believing in fate and all sorts of things,” Cami said. “I think the opening staff in particular. And just the way it came together, the fact that everyone got along with each other so much. I mean, there was no personality clash at all, just true teamwork. And just like deep, deep love.”

This feeling is still crystal clear two and a half years later. Although they have stepped up their professionalism (and have stopped running out of food), the fun is still there. Cami finds it difficult to describe this time in her life because where do you begin to talk about something “at close range that you already know is going to affect the rest of your life so deeply,” she pondered during our chat.

Cami says she doesn’t have a routine. More than two years since opening her restaurant, her time is still disorganized (sort of). Her day can either go two ways: prep or dinner shift. For prep she gets there at 8 am and usually leaves at around 4/4:30 pm. On dinner shift days she’ll arrive at 3:30 pm and leaves at around 10:45 pm during the week and closer to 12:30 am on the weekends (they have two dinner seatings on Friday and Saturday nights versus the one during the week). Cami’s staff includes her and nine other people. There are usually two people working prep in the morning and four (two in the kitchen, two in front of house) during the services.

I was able to witness Cami closely in the kitchen during a dinner service and it was nothing short of enchanting. With her shoulder length hair pulled into a fuzzy pink scrunchie and tucked under a white “Museum of Natural History” baseball cap, she pulled her thinly worn blue apron closed and turned on her Dinner Party-specific Spotify playlist.

Cami said she started building the playlist before she even signed the lease. There’s a little bit of everything including 60’s Rock, Alt, Indie, Contemporary and Jazz music. It’s what you’d expect to hear at high-spirited dinner gathering and once it’s on, the dinner service is ready to commence. On the Tuesday night I visited the four courses included:

Scallop and young coconut in leche de tigre, green Cara Cara, shiso, toasted coconut
Miso braised Tender sweet cabbage, spicy peanut butter, Thai basil
Seared pork tenderloin with bagnét verd, kohlrabi and cucumber slaw, limequat
Grilled pink pineapple and passionfruit layer cake with mascarpone mousse.

(Most of which I had never heard of and wouldn't dare to even try to pronounce). The food was delicious and plated beautifully. Everything blended together nicely, and it was even more enjoyable to watch it all happen before my eyes.

Cami, a self-identified Francophile, acknowledges the French influences in the food she cooks and the preparation style at Dinner Party. She spent a year in France in both high school and college and considers it to be a time in which her love of cooking was strongly impacted.

"I feel like both of those places (Brittany and Paris) are where I started to, like, really come into my own as a cook. So, you know, like, really shop for myself, eat out widely. So that was hugely, hugely influential, because French cooking is so expansive, but I feel like it's just like their way of eating and their obsession with food is sort of an obsession with ingredients ... is maybe the mentality," Cami said. "I loved food before but definitely like I learned how to be a cook in France."

If the roughly six hours I spent with Cami are any testament to the energy circling during the early days of the restaurant, I could easily discern the "magical" feeling she described. Despite the lack of formal training, the high dining terminology flows off her tongue like a seasoned professional. Watching Cami maneuver throughout the tiny kitchen, with the help of her Chef de Partie, Teenie, was more entertaining than in movies. The kitchen is filled with running jokes, sibling-esque banter and lots and lots of gossip.

"She really has like set that tone across the board of like, you can share your life happenings you can share what you're like, super interested in at the moment. And that just leads to so many more interesting conversations and fun moments," says Julie Saha, a line cook, who has been working at Dinner Party since February 2023.

Cami said she doesn't run a tight ship, it's more like a pirate ship. Only in a space like this, with a leader like Cami could the "Jimmy Nardello Project" be born.

"Jimmy Nardello... Now that's a name I haven't heard in 25 goddamn years. Not since I was a good for nothing kid running amok on Mulberry Street. Jimmy was like a god to us: good lookin, funny, real popular with the ladies. But he had a dark streak, too. He wasn't a made man—not in the usual way. He wasn't nobody's thug. No, Jimmy Nardello was out for Jimmy Nardello. And it wasn't long before he had every gin joint and trattoria on the block under his quote unquote protection. Forking over their lives and livelihoods for some marinated peppers their ma probably made better anyway. But Jimmy had a way about him. He wasn't a man you told no."

What started as a caption posted to Dinner Party's Instagram by Cami quickly became one of many inside jokes between her and the staff. Who is Jimmy Nardello? The vibrant red, sweet

Italian pepper is named after a Connecticut gardener. The “Jimmy Nardello Project,” as the staff calls it, was memorized and performed in different variations (scornful ex-lover, unpopular high school boy, etc.) throughout shifts by some the staff. This moment encapsulates the vivacity that the restaurant and Cami are all about.

“I think that the people that she surrounds herself really reflects well on Cami. That’s like one of the biggest qualities that I recognize about her. And like my parents even recognize, they're like, ‘oh, you just join this random kitchen and like, month one, you're thinking about buying tickets to Italy?’, I was like, yeah, absolutely,” Oona Frauenfelder, lead line cook who started in January 2023, said. “It was all a testament to like Cami’s openness and just warmness.”
