



Food, Fashion and a Passion for Outdoor Living

Trend-savvy international supermodel turned Italian cookbook author Maria Liberati brings it all together, and shares her fresh ideas centered on celebrating life.

WRITTEN BY SHANE PLISKA

BACKYARD DINING HAS MATURED beyond throwing hot dogs on a grill and calling it dinner. Today's foodies are taking their love of gourmet outside to their grills, and they're creating elegant outdoor living spaces worthy of the finer fare.

To explore how trends in outdoor cooking are influencing outdoor living, we spoke with Maria Liberati, a former supermodel and the author of the popular cookbook *The Basic Art of Italian Cooking* as well as an upcoming title on the art of outdoor entertaining. Here, she dishes about how the growth in cooking *al fresco* is transforming the way we entertain outdoors, and how fashion ties it all together.

We always hear about ultra-thin supermodels, so a cookbook by a former model seems like an unusual fit.

I get that comment a lot. But I think food and the preparation of it is closely related to fashion. I use that in whatever I do. In Europe, what you eat is always fashion related, and I think [here in the United States] we're getting that way, too. The way we prepare and serve food is fashionable.

It's basically the same thing with trends in gardening and outdoor living. As outdoor living becomes more popular, the fashion world is going to significantly affect what's going on.

How does cooking fit in with today's interest in outdoor living and entertaining?

It has a lot to do with eating and entertaining outdoors. We are seeing tableware in many different colors and materials, such as unbreakable plastic that resembles fine china or porcelain. Also, with the trend of firepits being used as centerpieces, there are more opportunities and more interest in cooking and entertaining outdoors.

What has helped transform entertaining in the garden from a basic pastime to a sort of art form?

You now can experience a picnic in Tuscany or a seashore-style barbecue in your own back yard. This brings with it a whole new set of required items, not only for cooking but for entertaining and serving. For example, the firepit that doubles as a centerpiece and special lighting sets that attach to table umbrellas are hot trends related to cooking outdoors.

And because we are now doing more outdoors, we are doing more with our outdoor spaces. One thing that is becoming hot in the Philadelphia area is having an artist come to your house to finely sculpt an animal out of one of the largest trees in your back yard. So we are becoming very artistic in our back yards - artistic with nature.

Do you think trends in garden decor will change as quickly as we see in the fashion industry?

Trends in fashion are fickle. Every season, we see something new. A skirt might be ultra short one season and long the next.

In outdoor living, and even in the food industry, we're still not into the fickle trendiness where things go in and out quickly. But there are some trends that will come and go.

What I try to tell people is to keep

the larger items in natural colors. They can add trendy pieces to natural colors because everything will match. To add trendiness to their decor, they could add pillows and lamps and items like that to change the look effectively without incurring the expense of changing everything.

Speaking of trends, what's hot in outdoor living right now?

A lot of the trends have been spiked by media influences like the TV show *Trading Spaces* and the Food Network on cable. They have brought the consciousness of the consumer toward food and outdoor cooking, and have taken entertaining to a new level.

Right now, anything to do with water is in style, including high-end garden ponds and fountains - especially Zen-style fountains made with natural-looking pieces, such as slate, as well as lighted fountains.

Items traditionally thought to be indoor only are now being made for the outdoors, such as rugs, lamps and room dividers, which are being used to divide back yards into more than one

room. Imagine that - not only an outdoor space for eating but maybe a living room for watching TV or, my favorite, an outdoor office where you could work from your laptop.

I thought it was gone, but what is also hot now seems to be black wrought iron furniture.

The mock wicker look and natural wood chairs with oversized, comfy pillows are big, too. They go along with the trend of creating a comfy haven in your own home.

All types of walkways leading up to your "little piece of heaven" - your garden or outdoor space - are also popular today.

What trends do you expect to influence outdoor living over the next five years?

Fashion is influencing the outdoor living market. In Europe, lace on outdoor furniture is trendy, and this comes from the appearance of lace on [fashion] runways.

Greater interest in urban living is another trend I foresee. In Rome, there are gardens on every sized patio you can



imagine. You can see gardens growing on the highest apartment balconies. When my grandfather moved from Italy to a row home in South Philadelphia, he planted tomatoes, peppers and herbs. He also grew a fig tree, all while living in the city. Now, this kind of gardening is becoming a trend.

I also predict consumers will begin picking up on something I have been doing for years - creating some type of outdoor working space or office. With outdoor room dividers, rugs and lamps, it is possible. At my last house, I had an outdoor gazebo with a phone line hooked up to it. Sure, the outdoor space is supposed to be a relaxing haven - but why not take that feeling with you to work?

Which colors are playing a role in outdoor living?

I am seeing a lot of bright colors - reds, purples and pinks. The colors go along with fashion. Bright colors are so wonderful. When you go on vacation to the beach, you'll notice these vibrant colors - and they go toward creating your own ambiance and haven.

I don't know if there is one set of particular colors that are popular. But as a whole, bright colors are popping up. We've been catching up to the European tradition of using them in recent years.

Would you recommend garden center buyers read fashion magazines?

I definitely would. Fashion is connected to garden centers' outdoor living items. I understand most garden center customers are savvy women, and who references fashion more than them? It would make their stores more woman-friendly if garden centers would pay more attention to fashion trends.

How are homeowners using their yards and gardens to entertain?

I remember growing up, my parents used to have barbecues only on Memorial Day, the Fourth of July and Labor Day, and, of course, during some weekends in the summer.

Now, however, consumers want to take advantage of that "little piece of heaven" or "mini-vacation retreat" right in their own back yards anytime, whether it's during the week or weekend, for a special occasion or just to enjoy themselves. So they are using their yards and gardens as regular places to eat and entertain - a place to go outside and experience nature.

What role do independent garden centers play in outdoor entertaining?

Garden centers provide a higher level of customized service to the consumer than the boxes. They also have the freedom to carry more specialized items or be a source of unique or upscale items the big box retailers don't sell.

You are known as a spokesperson for Italian-style living. How does that connect to outdoor living?

Having the luxury of living in Italy part of the year, I acquired the habit of enjoying my outdoor space for many years. At my grandfather's vineyard in the mountains of Abruzzo (an unspoiled village about an hour from Rome), Sundays were always a time for gathering for dinner outside in the back yard or on the front patio, depending on how many people we had.

I have kept up the tradition. We are working on our garden at my house in Italy and are keeping it a conducive space for living outdoors. We grow herbs, cherry trees, plum trees, artichokes, zucchini and potatoes.

We are also looking into putting in an

outdoor kitchen since it will be so much more convenient to eat outside this way, instead of bringing food down from our kitchen on the second floor.

Would Italians think of a fully loaded outdoor kitchen as an import from suburban America?

No, if anyone likes to eat outdoors, it's Italians. We are diehard fans of it. In the back of many Italian homes, there are cantinas, kitchenlike structures that traditionally attach to a patio. They are about the size of a shed or small barn, and some are underground. This is where wine and cheese are stored and where preserves are made. Our [outdoor kitchen] is more of a modern version of a cantina.

More U.S. consumers are getting into wine. Do you think garden centers could have a viniculture section in the future?

Yes, a lot of people are growing plants on trellises. They are beautiful and decorative, as well as useful for wine production. I could see that as a unique niche for garden centers.

The trend now in food is artisanal. It is slowly creeping up on us as people want to go back to homemade foods. ■

