

The style *of* Capri

ITALY CASTS ITS SPELL AT SHELLEY JOHNSTONE'S
BACK YARD SUMMER SOIREE



BY LISA CREGAN | PHOTOS BY KATRINA WITTKAMP



Though the party has an Italian theme, Johnstone says the tent reminds her of Morocco, India and even Palm Beach. Opposite: Shelley Johnstone in her North Shore home with sons Hunter, 11, and Ford, 8.

"EVERYONE JUST SAT AT THE TABLE AND TALKED. **IT WAS LIKE SITTING ON THE PATIO IN CAPRI WHERE NO ONE IS RUSHING ANYWHERE.**"

—SHELLEY JOHNSTONE



For Chicago decorator Shelley Johnstone,

there's a lot more to Capri than short pants. ■ The craggy, beautiful island on Italy's western coast is where Johnstone met her husband some 19 years ago while competing in a sailing regatta. So when she was looking for creative inspiration for a summer dinner party, it was a natural for her to draw on her warm memories of Capri. Johnstone says she simply tried to capture the "effortless, easy, casual quality of life there." ■ Voted one of House Beautiful's best young American decorators for 2005, Johnstone has a reputation for creating comfortable, witty spaces that transport her clients and friends far from the cares of "real life."

Although the breeze on this evening was blowing off Lake Michigan rather than the Neapolitan sea, Johnstone managed to conjure up a most un-Midwestern scene for her guests that centered on a light pastel cotton tent, stirring in the summer wind in her back yard.

"I didn't try to capture Capri 100 percent," Johnstone admits. "The tent is from India and I used blue Canton china. But I like a little unexpected quirkiness." Another surprise was the gift each female guest received with her invitation.

"Everyone was asking, 'What should we wear?'" says Johnstone, "so I sent them all one of our caftans." It seems that in addition to her busy interior design business Johnstone finds time to design a line of chic caftans in partnership with her close friend Karen Solomon. Happy to have their wardrobe issues solved, most of the female party guests turned out for the evening in the colorful chemises.

As the guests arrived, their children were quickly enlisted by the Johnstone boys (Hunter, 11, and Ford, 8) into some mysterious childhood mission. They dashed in and out of the house and occasionally back to the terrace, where their parents chatted happily, plied with antipasti and flutes of crisp, cold Bellinis. The occasional interplay of children and adults made for an exuberant, unpredictable atmosphere and Johnstone says that she admires the way Italian families seem to include their children in everything they do.



Clockwise from top left: Small pink glasses hold tuberose found that morning at the Lake Bluff farmer's market. A waiter from Francesco's Intimo in Lake Forest prepares crab-filled cappellacci garnished with fresh herbs. Cecily Waud touches base with mom, Melissa, before dinner. Vegetables scapese arranged on a plate are served family style. Anne Kasten (from left), Karen Solomon and Lesley Crowe wear caftans designed by Johnstone and Solomon for their Shellkare clothing line. Hunter Johnstone wanders under an arbor embellished with branches strung with lemons. Opposite: Conversation goes on into the night; Johnstone's father is seated on her left.





FRANCESCA'S INTIMO MENU

COCKTAILS

Bellinis

APPETIZERS

Crostini with homemade ricotta and tomato
Shrimp skewers

FIRST COURSE

Caprese salad*

FAMILY-STYLE ENTREE COURSE

Crab-filled cappellacci with
sweet 100 tomatoes, garlic, olive oil,
chilies and parsley
Vegetables scapece
Pollo arrosto alla Romano

DESSERT

Chocolate lava cake with gelato*
*Recipe follows on page 36.

Chocolate lava cake with Italian gelato, the perfect finale. Simple Italian country lemon chicken—pollo arrosto alla Romano—from Francesca's Intimo in Lake Forest has a full-bodied flavor. Opposite: Tiki torches were lit around the perimeter of the tent from Big Sky Tents, signaling that dinner was about to be served.



BY DUSK, THE AIR SWEET with the intermingling of food and flora, it was time to move to the tented table for dinner. Johnstone and her mother, a much-admired Wisconsin floral designer, had spent the afternoon in their Wellies, cutting branches in the nearby woods. The pair laced the branches overhead through the tent's underpinnings, then wired dozens of lemons onto the boughs to complete the illusion of Capri's ubiquitous cascading citrus trees. "We were praying all night that lemons didn't fall on people's heads," Johnstone says, laughing. Finally, tiny white lights were wrapped into the greenery, illuminating the tent with a starlight glow.

To complement the atmosphere, a breezy, uncomplicated menu was planned by the Francesca Restaurants' Italian-born executive chef, Massimo Salatino, based on Johnstone's favorite Caprese dishes. Simple preparations of very fresh ingredients were served with a minimum of fuss, and afterward "everyone just sat at the table and talked," says Johnstone. "It was like sitting on the patio in Capri where no one is rushing anywhere."

Capri is so famous

for its happy hedonism that the Italian expression *dolce far niente*, or "it is sweet to do nothing," is usually attributed to the Capresi (or perhaps to their indolent visitors), but Chicagoans have to be pretty determined to get to all that sweet nothingness. There are no airports on Capri, so you must first get to Naples (which itself has no direct Chicago flights), and then take a one-hour hydrofoil ferry over to the island.

Ah, but once you arrive, there is nothing that can take the place of a languorous summer dinner with family and friends on the Isle of Capri, though for one summer right, Shelley Johnstone's back yard came close. □

Lisa Cregan writes about interiors for the Magazine.



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