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**Shannen
Doherty**
does food
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CHEERS. Dinner guests toast the arrival of their gourmet feast.

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Avant garde 'mobile fine dining' business Room Forty dishes out upscale cuisine, down-home camaraderie in the comfort of clients' homes.

// STORY BY **JESSICA HAMLIN**

➤ **CATERING COMPANIES SERVE FOOD** AND OFTEN SUPPLY LINENS, TABLES AND CHAIRS FOR AN EVENT, BUT SOUTH PASADENA-BASED ROOM FORTY DEFIES THE STATUS QUO AND PROVIDES MORE THAN JUST THE BASICS. IT PROVIDES AN EXPERIENCE. TWO YEARS AGO WHEN STEVE FORTUNATO CREATED ROOM FORTY, WHICH HE DESCRIBES AS A "MOBILE FINE DINING COMPANY," his vision was as much about food as it was about people. Having spent 19 years in the restaurant industry, including a bartending stint at the Patina Group, Fortunato is no stranger to prepping fine cuisine or hosting food-centric gatherings. "I think where I drew inspiration for Room Forty's vibe is living in LA and opening up my home for dinner parties and realizing that people in LA often have a hard time finding real community," says Fortunato, whose nickname "Fort" inspired the company name. "I realized this practice of eating



together is a very intimate, relational-building thing but the way restaurants are set up is not very conducive to that happening.”

Room Forty distinguishes itself not only through its philosophy but also via its events. While individuals and companies can hire Room Forty to create cuisine and atmosphere, the company also holds unconventional monthly winemaker dinners. Instead of knowing what’s on the menu ahead of time, guests who sign up are privy only to the featured winemaker and are e-mailed the location a few days before the event, where the menu is unveiled.

The whole experience has a somewhat underground feel due to the mystery, but because the winemaker dinners are held at luxurious private homes, a sense of intimacy and community also fills the air. “There is a type of person that when we present them with the concept of hosting one of these dinners, their first question is, ‘Why would I want to have 100 strangers in my house?’” says Fortunato. “Then there’s another type of person that is like, ‘Oh, my gosh. I love it. Let’s do it.’ It’s someone who is inspired by the concept of the winemaker and fine dining chefs and that sort of demographic coming in and seeing their home.”

Room Forty’s June winemaker dinner, for instance, featured Paso Robles’ Justin Vineyards and Winery and was graciously hosted at the Altadena home of Tim Cantwell and Stephani Hardy, who attended a February Room Forty winemaker dinner and decided that evening they wanted to host a future dinner.

“It was different from anything that we had ever been to before,” says Hardy. “We love to entertain and cook and we love wine and thought what a great opportunity to have a bunch of people in your home and not have to do any of the cooking for it.”

Arriving at a Room Forty winemaker dinner is like arriving for a large dinner party at a friend’s home. At the Cantwell/Hardy fete, for instance, none of the guests went straight to their tables and sat down. Instead, they stood around the large backyard chatting and sampling Justin’s sauvignon blanc and tray-passed hors d’oeuvres. Creations like crostini topped with soft goat cheese and orange marmalade hinted at the delightful decadence later to come.

The yard had a sprawling view of the mountains and a winding road and the house was a bit downhill from the others on the street, adding to the private feel.

Eventually everyone found their place at long, Tuscan-styled wooden benches parked alongside tables adorned with handwritten namecards,

local Jean-Vier French linens, flowers and candles. It was comfortable, yet elegant and even the tables had a personal touch—Fortunato handcrafted them himself. Touches like these are what make Room Forty “first and foremost a hospitality company,” Fortunato says.

Prior to each course, a Justin Wines employee described the flavors of the wine and briefed listeners about how it was made. The first course, a chilled corn and summer parsnip bisque, was refreshing and creamy, yet light—perfect for the hot summer evening.

A moist roasted escolar came next, served with savory morel mushrooms, squash puree, pea tendrils salad and brandy bacon cream that echoed the savory flavors in the 2006 Syrah. Despite sounding rich, the course was subtle and Hardy particularly enjoyed the atypical pairing of fish with red wine. The richness began with the smoked maple leaf duck resting on a bed of cooked greens and peas, accented with a bing cherry cabernet

sauce and fresh cherries. The duck was exquisitely prepared, juicy and smoky, and the sauce accentuated the accompanying 2006 Cabernet.

Next, paired with a 2006 Justification (Cabernet Franc/Merlot blend), was Ni-

man Ranch braised pork with stoned ground grits, Romanesco cauliflower and a Malbec reduction—the most juicy and tender course of all. The creamy grits, resembling polenta, provided an indulgent accompaniment.

Titled “Light and Dark Duo,” the final stop on the evening’s culinary journey was a stunning presentation of a small, sparkle-topped portion of rich bittersweet chocolate mousse and bing cherry gelée and three baked brie bombolini (small round pastries) filled with apple chutney and accented with apricot confit and calvados cream. Justin’s 2006 Obtuse pairing made delicious sense with its bittersweet chocolate note and raspberry, sweet cherry and plum aromas.

After the meal, each guest received a moist, cellophane-wrapped “good morning” muffin to enjoy the following day as a reminder of the Fortunato-created experience they enjoyed the night before.

For more information, go to roomforty.com.

