Artful activism, in 3 courses

BY MARTHA THOMAS
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In the kitchen of St. John’s United Methodist Church in Baltimore, Matt Day smears soft sorrel-seasoned butter on 115 salad plates and Dane Nester positions French breakfast radishes just so: Each plate gets a whole radish framed by two half-radishes, one facing up and one facing down.

It’s Course No. 2 at Stew 4, a fundraising dinner for three local nonprofit organizations, held in late April. Day has taken the night off from Woodberry Kitchen, where he is chef de cuisine, to prepare the meal. He’s got a crew of volunteers to run the food out to diners who sit expectantly at long rows of tables in the auditorium-size nave of the ramshackle church. But he and Nester like to plate the food themselves.

“The layout of the food is important,” says Nester, who studied painting at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) and Yale University. “The plating becomes a celebration of exactly what the product is.”

In this case, the radishes and the sorrel were grown at Great Kids Farm, owned and operated by the Baltimore City Public Schools. The butter likewise is from a local farm and was purchased that morning at the Waverly Market. When guests arrive, hunks of bread sit at intervals along the brown-paper-topped tables. Each place is set with flatware, a cloth napkin, a glass goblet for water or wine (available, along with beer and soft

to place a handful of greens on each plate, followed by a drizzle of vinaigrette.

A Stew meal is not elaborate. The main course is soup; tonight it’s a choice between vegan spring onion and rabbit with dumplings. Tickets to the event are $10 each. But there’s more to this meal than the composition of a plate of radishes, or of the next course: spears of roasted asparagus, pleasantly salted, arranged to form squares that overlap at the corners.

Stew is the brainchild of the Baltimore Development Cooperative (not to be confused with the Baltimore Development Corp.), which was started in 2007 by three recent MICA graduates, all artists now in their late 20s: Scott Berzofsky, Nicholas Wisniewski and Nester. They wanted to use food to foster community and stimulate activism.

“Some art represents change you want to see,” Berzofsky says. “We’re trying to make that kind of change actually happen.”

This is nothing new in the art world, says Doreen Bolger, director of the Baltimore Museum of Art and a frequent guest at Stew events. “The art the BDC guys are making,” she says, “isn’t a commodity you hang on the wall. It’s directly tied to social change.”

Stew is not the only event of its kind. There’s Feast in Brooklyn, which hosts quarterly dinners for about 350, and Chicago’s Incubate, which puts on Sunday Soup once a month. Both of those collect money specifically for art projects. An Incubate member, Abigail Satinsky, attended Stew 3. Satinsky, who is completing a fellowship at Brown University that involves researching alternative funding models for artists, says she knows of about 15 groups around the country that organize informal dinner parties to raise money for art projects. Stew, she says, is unique in its reach, helping artists as well as groups committed to social-justice causes.

And, she adds, “I can definitely say their food blows our food out of the water."

Cheif Matt Day plates salad before the fourth Stew dinner.

Between each Stew course, an organization makes its pitch, describing — with the help of PowerPoint presentations, performances and testimonials — what it does and how it plans to use the money disbursed at evening’s end. Tonight’s presenters: the Velocipede Bike Project, Baltimore’s Drag King Community and an after-school program called Follow Your Dreams.

Organizers rely on volunteers to keep costs down by growing some of the produce that’s served, or by going to pick-your-own farms. The group doesn’t actively seek donated foodstuffs: “I don’t expect small farms to give away produce,” Day says. “The point of the event is to support local farms and keep the cycle going.”

The space, however, is free: St. John’s Church, known as 2640 (its address on St. Paul Street), has been operated by Red Emma’s Bookstore and Coffeehouse as a community-event venue since 2007. The bookstore is a co-sponsor of Stew events.

Each Stew dinner — the first was held the day after Thanksgiving last year — follows the same format. At the end of the night close to $900, about 90 percent of ticket sales, is distributed

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among three presenters. Diners vote for their preferred recipients, and the money is divided according to the votes cast.

The take might seem minimal, but big bucks aren’t the goal. For one thing, the young organizers and guests know from experience that small donations can make things happen. After all, they are among the donors who helped finance Barack Obama’s presidential campaign and have texted millions of dollars for earthquake relief in Haiti.

And some presenters aren’t here for the money. Stew, says Anna Ricklin, who represents Velocipede Bike Project, “is a chance to talk about what we do to a thinking audience.”

Hugh Pocock, a MICA professor, never had the BDC members in class. But their work, he says, has inspired courses he teaches in sustainability and urban farming, which he says have a place in the art world: “Art isn’t just about the making of images; it’s the making of social movement and discourse.” Pocock also applauds the three BDC founders. “These guys are talented artists. They could be in New York getting recognized and showing in galleries. Instead they’ve chosen to stay here, to intentionally engage with other groups and with the community.”

Stew dinners are not exclusive, Pocock says. “It’s not about knowing the right person to get a ticket. It’s if you get to Red Emma’s on time.” Tickets, which go on sale about four weeks before each event, are publicized on the Stew Web site and are available at the bookstore. Each of the four dinners has sold out within a week.

The question remains, is Stew art?

Pocock and the BMA’s Bolger are not alone in saying that BDC’s embrace of sustainable food as a means for community-building can be defined as art. Last year, the three artists won the prestigious Sondheim Prize, a $25,000 award given annually to an artist working in the Baltimore area. The Sondheim jury recognized Participation Park, a vacant lot in East Baltimore that Nester, Berzofsky and Wisniewski, along with neighborhood residents, had converted into an urban garden. BDC had also constructed a geodesic dome in front of the museum and offered it to the community as a gathering place.

Last July, Washington Post art critic Blake Gopnik wrote that although such projects “can seem anti-art,” they “believe in art more than most of today’s paintings or sculptures do.” By winning prizes, he wrote, the Baltimore artists set an example: Art can be about something that matters more than making fancy gewgaws that sell.”

Thomas is a freelance writer in Baltimore. To find out when the next Stew dinner will be held, go to www.redemmas.org.
Don Sapo of Baltimore helps set tables for the Stew dinner at St. John's United Methodist Church in Baltimore.