

# VIE®

people + places

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## A Sense of Place

*Rome Was Not Built in a Day*

*Seaside's Perspicacity Turns 25*

## The Art of Life

*Steve Wagner*

*Portrait of an Artist*

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Plus

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# MOTHER'S DAY

VIE PAYS TRIBUTE

# Girls Just Want To Have Fun

BONDING WITH A PURPOSE

By Lisa Burwell

Photography by Jessie Shepard

*On a glorious, sunny day this past January, we attended the Virginia Willis cooking demonstration—a featured event of the The Rosemary Beach Foundation Girls' Getaway Weekend. With the various editorial sections found in VIE, this article could have been placed in For the Love of Food or Giving. However, since many of the people that we met there have special connections to their mothers (including Virginia Willis herself), we have decided to place it in our special A Tribute to Mothers section of this issue.*

Virginia Willis at The Rosemary Beach Foundation  
Girls' Getaway Weekend





Virginia Willis signing copies of *Bon Appétit, Y'all*

Just as the lyrics to Cyndi Lauper's hit song "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" did in the 80s, the "girls' getaway" vacation has sprung into today's mainstream. Both conjure up images of girls bonding and having fun without being hampered by responsibility or—dare we say it—men. What makes it even more special is the desire for girls, or rather women, to feel the freedom of girlhood abandon again. The "girls' getaway" spawned the male version: the "mancation." Isn't it great how catch-phrases can sum up the rhetoric of the day, while tying it up in a nice package?

There is another new marketing term being bandied about—"deservability." What that means in plain speech, is that no matter how bad the economy or the pressures of daily life, we all "de-

serve a break today." Kim Jameson, founder of the Rosemary Beach Girls' Getaway Weekend, intentionally schedules the weekend on the traditionally male-dominated Super Bowl weekend. As a part-time resident, Kim had been coming to Rosemary Beach each January for years with her closest girlfriends as a respite following the busy holidays. Four years ago, she decided to turn the invitation-only weekend soiree into something meaningful for her community. She joined creative forces with Kathy Kemp, Rosemary Beach's marketing director, and together they named it the The Rosemary Beach Foundation Girls' Getaway, with proceeds benefiting worthy causes in South Walton. A weekend of fun combined with the purpose of helping those in need is at the core of the getaway.



The weekend agenda this year included a Writers in the Round session led by Nashville songwriter Nicole Witt; a painting workshop with whimsical "girlie" artist Tricia Robinson, who has an affinity for all things French; a comedy dinner show with Leanne Morgan at nearby restaurant Shades at the Loop; and a cooking demonstration by celebrated chef and author of *Bon Appétit, Y'all*, Virginia Willis.

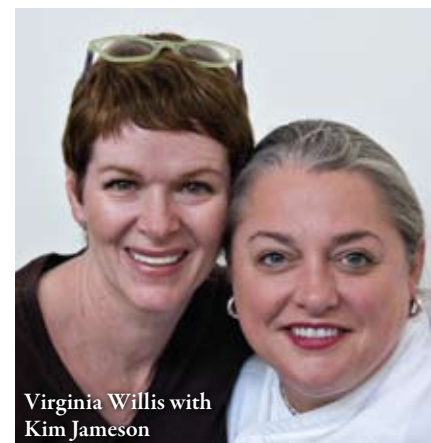
I spoke with Kim shortly before the Virginia Willis cooking event. She described the weekend as "a celebration of women" and added that "each year, the happy hour check-in has become much like a family reunion, since many of the women keep in touch through the year." With a big smile and boundless enthusiasm, Kim directed everything effortlessly. I immediately realized that she has a mission that runs deeper than just having a good time. She has real warmth, and it shows.

Since the cooking demonstration was the only event that *VIE* attended, my only glimpse into the weekend was seen from that vantage point. It was a beautiful Saturday afternoon as women gathered in the Rosemary Beach Town Hall. Upon entering the hall, I noticed Tricia Robinson's art prominently placed around the room. It was so captivating, fresh and inspired that it appealed to the girl in me. Meanwhile, Virginia Willis prepped for her demonstration and

smiled brightly as we took our seats in anticipation of what promised to be an afternoon of fun. For all of her accomplishments, Virginia is very young. In addition to being an author and chef, she is also an editor, producer, teacher, spokesperson and food stylist.

There is brilliance in the name of Virginia's cookbook, *Bon Appétit, Y'all*—it seems to merge the two distinct facets of this accomplished chef. A graduate of L'Academie de Cuisine and Ecole de Cuisine La Varenne, Virginia had fallen in love with cooking as a child, learning from her mother, "Mama," and grandmother, "Meme"—both exceptional cooks who passed their craft down through the generations. She spent her youth absorbed in the Southern culture and culinary traditions of Georgia and Louisiana. As Virginia states in the introduction of her new book, "... the cooking of the American South embodies all the glamour, grit and heartbreak of Southern culture." Her unique style, which she likes to call "refined Southern Cuisine," is a blend of her American South upbringing with classical training in French cuisine.

Virginia became involved with the Girls' Getaway Weekend through another high-profile name. Rosemary Beach resident Jan Stevens—whom Kim refers to as "the quiet driving force" behind the weekend—contacted her friend and



Virginia Willis with Kim Jameson



Virginia Willis and her mother

*"Every time I would come home to visit, whether it was 2:00 a.m. or 2:00 p.m., my Meme would be frying chicken for me."*

—Virginia Willis

former host of CNN's *On the Menu*, Carolyn O'Neil. Carolyn invited Virginia to attend and headline the weekend retreat. Virginia replied with, "Go to the beach and hang out with a bunch of interesting women? How could I say no?" She has a passion for her craft and a penchant for donating her time to charities that help people in need of food. Overjoyed that Virginia accepted, Kathy Kemp remarked, "Her culinary career is fascinating and her accomplishments run as deep as her Southern roots."

Virginia began the demonstration by describing how to prepare chicken fricassee with garlic and red wine vinegar and a side of grits with corn and Vidalia onion. (We bought her cookbook

and cooked this meal the following night—mmmm, good!) "If you were to compress the story of my life into a food, it would be fried chicken," Virginia said. "Every time I would come home to visit, whether it was 2:00 a.m. or 2:00 p.m., my Meme would be frying chicken for me," she added. Her casual approach was completely disarming and I quickly recognized that Virginia is down-to-earth, charismatic and funny. She discussed her cookbook recipes while telling stories of her childhood and how she made it in the culinary field.

As Virginia showed us the correct way to cut up a whole chicken, she entertained us with her early experiences in television. She recounted how she



The Virginia Willis cooking demonstration inside the town hall at Rosemary Beach



Jan Stevens and Kim Jameson

got her start on the *New Southern Cooking with Nathalie Dupree* show as an apprentice. Several years later, as Virginia was making her mark on the world, Nathalie wrote the foreword to Virginia's cookbook, saying that Virginia did what great students do—she exceeded her expectations. Virginia continued with her stories about other celebrity chefs like Paula Deen and Martha Stewart and how her career had taken her around the world. “While working as kitchen director for the Emmy-award winning television show *Martha Stewart Living*, I prepared meals

for Martha and her guests, including President Clinton, Aretha Franklin and Julia Child. As executive producer for the Discovery Channel's *Epicurious*, I went from harvesting capers in the shadow of a smoldering volcano to making authentic mustard in Dijon,” she recalled.

Virginia's cooking philosophy is simple: choose the finest ingredients, then do as little to them as possible to allow the flavors of the food to really come through. At a time when many are choosing the more comfortable and affordable option

of cooking at home, Virginia's approach to easy-to-follow recipes is the perfect remedy.

*Bon Appétit, Y'all* was released in the spring of 2008, paying tribute to the women who nurtured Virginia's culinary roots. During the demonstration, she referred several times to her mother, “Mama,” who was sitting behind us in the audience. Virginia admitted that she had not had the time to make her world-famous Georgia pecan brownies (found in her cookbook), so she had asked her mother to make them for the group of 160-plus women. She beamed with pride when several of us told her that they were the best brownies we had ever tasted! Check out [www.virginiawillis.com](http://www.virginiawillis.com).

I could go on and on about how wonderful that lazy and happy day in paradise was. My mother had come along with me to experience this small segment of the Girls' Getaway Weekend. While there, I realized how special moments like this are in life and how this would become another cherished and unforgettable memory. The event was extremely well put together. Kudos to everyone who made this event a success. More than 160 women attended this year's getaway, raising \$15,000 in cash along with donations of groceries, canned goods and diapers. “In addition to providing a great venue for women to relax and enjoy themselves, the weekend boosts the local economy during the shoulder season while helping out a good cause,” Kim explained. Since its inception in 2005, the Girls' Getaway Weekend has raised over \$32,000 for the charity Caring & Sharing.

Girls may just want to have fun, but helping others while doing it is what the Rosemary Beach Girls' Getaway Weekend is all about. Check out [www.rosemarybeach.com](http://www.rosemarybeach.com). ▀



Painting by Tricia Robinson



Tricia Robinson and her mother

#### THE ARTIST AND HER MOM

Tricia Robinson is a self-taught artist who loves to help people “find their voice with paint and brush.” She inherited her love of art from her mother and grandmother, who were both artists. “My mom is my hero and one of my dearest friends,” Tricia declared, adding that she spent the Girls' Getaway Weekend with her mother. Tricia donated one of her paintings, *Beach Girls*, to be auctioned that weekend to raise funds for the local charity Caring and Sharing.

Tricia's artwork lights up not only a room but also the heart. One needs to be what I term a “girlie girl” to really appreciate the whimsy, charm and childlike happiness of this artist. She had me at hello! I love her work, and I think you will, too—visit [www.triciarobinson.com](http://www.triciarobinson.com). Tricia returns to Rosemary Beach for the West Indies Market June 13–14 and July 11–12 this summer.

## Also In Attendance...

Girls' Getaway Weekend played host to a variety of exceptional women. In addition to the Virginia Willis cooking demonstration, the schedule was filled with activities led by these women who contributed their time and talent to make this weekend such a great success.

#### THE COMEDIAN

Leanne Morgan knew as a child growing up on a farm in Appalachia that she wanted to be in show business one day. Years later, the stay-at-home mother of three got involved in at-home jewelry sales parties as a way to get out of the house and make extra money. She would get up to do her sales presentation and, instead, out of her mouth would come funny stories about her husband and children that just made her customers roar. One thing led to another, and Leanne found her way to the stage doing stand-up comedy. Since then, she has appeared at the Las Vegas Comedy Festival and on ABC's *The View*. She was a finalist on Nick at Nite's *Funniest Mom in America* and toured for three years with the Southern Fried Chicks. Leanne has done her stand-up routines in theatres and comedy clubs all over the United States. A sitcom based on her comedy is currently in development for ABC.

#### THE SONGWRITERS

Early arrivals to Girls' Getaway Weekend enjoyed the musical talents of Nicole Witt, Tiffany Goss and Jennifer Wayne (granddaughter of actor John Wayne). Kicking off the weekend with Songwriters in the Round on Thursday evening in Rosemary Beach's Town Hall, the three distinct Nashville artists shared stories behind some of their songs as women gathered quietly under the soft white lights strung overhead. Leading the event, Nicole Witt's musical style has been likened to Sarah McLachlan and Sheryl Crow among others.