

MARSHALL HEYMAN
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Write to Marshall Heyman at marshall.heyman@wsj.com

Raiding the Cookie Jar for a Good Cause

Mario Batali, Marc Murphy, Paul Rudd and More at the Chefs for Kids' Cancer Dinner



Christina Tosi and Karlie Kloss create cookie plates. *Adrienne Grunwald for The Wall Street Journal*

Benefits for illnesses affecting children don't constitute an easy night on the town. The cause is one of the more wrenching ones on the philanthropic circuit, so the trick—sometimes—is to add levity to the proceedings. Or, as an alternative, plenty of sugar. Spoonfuls of it, perhaps.

That's a tactic taken by Cookies for Kids' Cancer, a charity founded by Gretchen and Larry Witt in 2008, after their young son, Liam, lost his four-year battle against pediatric cancer. The organization uses bake sales in person and online to raise funds for scientific research. But we'll get back to cookies, and lots of them, later.

On Tuesday, Cookies for Kids' Cancer hosted a benefit called Chefs for Kids' Cancer at the Altman Building, with the help of Jonathan Benno of Lincoln Ristorante and Dan Kluger of ABC Kitchen. Mr. Kluger is such a hot chef these days that an auction of three private dinners, each for 10 people, raked in a total of \$78,000.

This evening was like an episode of "Iron Chef" come to life on the charity circuit. In the center of the room, more than 25 chefs from around the city toiled over hot plates and stoves cooking three-course meals. Nearly every table had an individualized experience.

Our table, for instance, hosted by Sheila G. Mains, the creator of the Brownie Brittle snack, was assigned to Damon Wise of Lafayette. Onsite, he made cured hamachi with Espelette yogurt and crispy grains; roasted monkfish in a bouillabaisse jus and a third course of what he called "duck au poivre."

How did he like cooking for Ms. Mains, a few of her colleagues and, well, us?

"It's pretty awesome," Mr. Wise said, before the duck was served. "Logistically, I tried to make it ambitious, but not so ambitious that it would be impossible."

Ms. Witt explained how the surprisingly well-organized and rather inspiring evening came together. Her son, Liam, wanted to be a chef. Making chefs and food the center of the fundraiser, she said, "seemed like the right thing to do. Liam would have loved it."

It couldn't have been easy to pull together, we said.

"Well, I didn't sleep a lot," she answered. "And you know when you cash in your Amex miles? I cashed in every favor and chit."

Marc Murphy, the chef at Kingside and Ditch Plains, said getting colleagues together was "like a snowball downhill. You talk to one chef and ask him to join in and suddenly it's 'OK, I'll see you there.' I'm just so happy to do something different."

"My son would watch Marc on the Food Network," Ms. Witt said. "Liam liked to cook to show people he loved them and cared about them. Really, everything here is because of one ingredient, and that's love."

"OK," said Mr. Murphy. "I've got to plate some food."

After dinner was served, Mr. Kluger reminded the room, which included notables like [Mario Batali](#), Christy Turlington, Karlie Kloss and Paul Rudd, that "the dessert portion is a big part of the evening." Remember, folks, this is a charity not just about cancer, but also about cookies.

Servers came out pushing balloon-festooned carts featuring plates upon plates of cookies. Each guest got a plate of 13—yes, 13!—different cookies. (There were more, in glass jars, as parting gifts.) As they tried to decide whether they should eat Zac Young's chocolate mint julep cookie (especially tasty) or Karen Tack and Alan Richardson's chocolate-dipped orange sugar cookie (also very good) first, Mr. Rudd announced the evening's entertainment.

"We get amazing cookies, and we get Barenaked Ladies," he said, introducing the Canadian rock band that is perhaps now best known for the theme to the television sitcom "The Big Bang Theory" but also such '90s hits as "Pinch Me," "One Week" and "If I Had a Million Dollars," a particularly good song for a fundraiser.

Said Ms. Gaines, who had provided 1,100 Brownie Brittle petits fours enrobed in chocolate with peanut butter in the center, as she investigated her cookie plate, "It's like Christmas."



The Chefs for Kids' Cancer benefit hosted by the Cookies for Kids' Cancer organization in Manhattan. Adrienne Grunwald for The Wall Street Journal



Chef Mario Batali Adrienne Grunwald for The Wall Street Journal



Sheila G. Mains Adrienne Grunwald for The Wall Street Journal



Actor Paul Rudd *Adrienne Grunwald for The Wall Street Journal*



Chef Nate Appleman *Adrienne Grunwald for The Wall Street Journal*



Marc Murphy of Kingside and Ditch Plains. 'I'm just so happy to do something different,' Mr. Murphy said. *Adrienne Grunwald for The Wall Street Journal*



Model Christy Turlington *Adrienne Grunwald for The Wall Street Journal*



chef puts the finishing touches on a plate at the event. *Adrienne Grunwald for The Wall Street Journal*