

# DANIELLE ROLLINS

RESPECTED BLOGGER, LIFESTYLE EDITOR,  
TRAINED CHEF AND WORLD-CLASS HOSTESS

BY LOYD MCINTOSH



**IN THE CROWDED WORLD** of lifestyle and entertaining experts, Danielle Rollins is a rising star. From her home base in Atlanta, Rollins is a respected blogger, a contributing editor for *Veranda* magazine, a trained chef and a world-class hostess who has planned parties and events for local Atlanta charities and for such luminaries as Oscar de la Renta. Now, Rollins can add “published author” to her long list of accomplishments. Her first book, *Soirée*, released through Rizzoli Publishing in 2012, is a beautifully designed and expansive 240-page volume offering advice on everything from flowers, linens and cocktails to more than 80 of her original recipes. Rollins hopes *Soirée* will serve as a manual of sorts for a new generation of people interested in reviving the lost art of entertaining. “I think people are afraid to entertain,” says Rollins. “That’s why I did the book.”

An event designed by Rollins will be stylish, elegant and planned to the final detail. She loves mixing old and new and bringing the formality of the home outdoors. However, Rollins says, many of her ideas are influenced by tailgating. “I love tailgating, I have to say,” she says. “I like any excuse that gives me a reason to celebrate and to make something pretty.”

Born and raised in Dallas, Texas, Rollins is steeped in the great southern sports traditions of college and professional football. For Rollins, the game itself is only part of the charm. She finds herself drawn to the history, tradition and pageantry interwoven into the game’s social fabric. “I always in my head go back to old photographs or look at vintage ways of doing things and do them at a modern level, but still have that sense of elegance and tradition, and really, that’s what football is,” she says. “It’s tradition.”

Her first personal tailgating experience, interestingly enough, didn’t come as part of a gridiron celebration, but something a little more *equine*. After transferring from Texas A&M to Hollins University, an all-girls college in Roanoke, Virginia, she attended the Foxfield Races, a biannual steeplechase horse racing event in nearby Charlottesville. Although only held since 1978, the Foxfield Races has become one of those fashionable southern sporting events that brings out people dressed to the nines who dine on chic but simple food in the Virginia countryside. After one look, Rollins was hooked immediately. “The tailgates were so beautiful but simple, and it was the first time I thought ‘wow, isn’t it grand taking your china with you to do a tailgate and bringing pretty flowers and making cocktails,’” Rollins says.

Rollins is a huge fan of pro and major college football and is asked regularly to plan tailgating events for clients throughout the Southeast. However, her time as an impressionable student in Virginia continues to play a role in her entertaining career, as she takes cues from her first college football tailgating experience, a game at Division III Hampden-Sydney College, one of the oldest private men’s colleges in the country. “It was guys in coat-and-tie having tailgates before a football game, and I was hook-line-and-sinker, I’m sold. This is the way I’m doing football from now on,” Rollins says.

“I’m completely influenced by going to a small school in Virginia. I think Virginians just do it right,” she adds. “Watching people have oyster rows out on the edge of the Maury River after a football game at Washington & Lee. A bluegrass band and hot apple cider in the fall, even if it was spiked with bourbon. Just that little bit of extra effort has been a big influence on me.”

That sense of vintage chic—fashion-forward filtered through a nostalgic lens—defines Rollins' approach to entertaining. The setting, decorations, music—even the food—should have a sense of time and place, as though the event one is attending has been a part of the social fabric since time began. Nowhere is this mindset more apparent than when she's involved in the planning of—or drawing inspiration from—a tailgate party. "I think that my nature of taking a car somewhere else and being able to turn it into a combination of your living room, your bar, your dining room, there's something inherently fun about doing that. I love the idea of taking silver julep cups and having a sense of old-school traditional football," says Rollins. "Any time I entertain, I love to go back to a period of grander living, where people entertained and put out the effort."

These days, the Southeastern Conference is where Rollins finds the best tailgates and tons of inspiration. She makes a habit of attending SEC games when she can, soaking up everything the various tailgating scenes have to offer. She was especially impressed with what she saw at the epic Alabama-Georgia showdown at the 2012 SEC Championship at the Georgia Dome. In her opinion, the tailgating was just as good as the game. "The most fun part was going down there early and just walking around and seeing what everybody else was doing and appreciating the creativity," Rollins adds. "I like when people go out there and have an elaborately done hot dog or wings. It's really not what you're serving; it's how you serve it. That's the fun part of watching to see what everybody else does and being able to say 'hey y'all, watch this.'"

Last season, Rollins had the opportunity to plan a tailgate with another lifestyle blogger at the Alabama-Tennessee game in Tuscaloosa. One of the country's oldest football rivalries,

known colloquially as simply "the third Saturday in October," this intense competition gave Rollins a chance to explore the histories and culture of each program. "We had so much fun. Everything was crimson red, including the drinks. We even did mint juleps," she says. We did it all on Alabama blankets, and we had a vintage Alabama pennant on the back of the car. On the Tennessee side, I hollowed out pumpkins to do beers in. That was really a fantasy shoot for us."

### THE NEW SUPPER CLUB

One of the reasons Rollins appreciates the modern tailgate experience is it reminds her of a time when adults entertained on a regular basis. She grew up in a time when people invited friends, colleagues, fellow church members and other people into their homes. While people may not be terribly comfortable entertaining at home, the need for social interaction is still as strong as ever, and the tailgate has become a new venue for a dinner party. "I think the tailgate is absolutely the new supper club," Rollins says. "I think, a lot of times, it's about what people grew up eating. 'This is the way my mother made deviled eggs, this is the way we grilled this.' I love looking at the food people bring, and I just like the creativity of the whole thing."

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With ticket and fuel prices steadily increasing and an economy that remains sluggish at best, Rollins says she could see a time when people aren't able to tailgate and attend games as much as they do now. Her hope is that more people, as they opt to take in games at home, will start homegating and start entertaining more. "I think that people just get afraid of entertaining, and I believe they don't think they have the right pieces," she says. "I think they're afraid of the effort and afraid they're going to do it wrong. But, there is really no wrong or right."

The key, she says, is not to worry about making everything so formal, but adding formal touches to a casual evening are just fine. It's okay to pull out your fine china for a backyard picnic, or to make a fancy cocktail even if you're just grilling burgers on the patio. Adding some simple but elegant touches can turn an evening in front of the big screen watching your favorite team into a special occasion. "I don't think entertaining has to be formal, and I think that sometimes there is a fear of 'I can only do a dinner party if I use my fine china and if I do it in my dining room.' Well, I think it's great to take wedding china and have a picnic in the backyard on a quilt yanked down from the linen closet, just because," Rollins says. "Friends behave differently at home than they do in a restaurant. People may laugh a little bit louder, and they sit at the table and talk a little bit longer."

## SOIRÉE: A LABOR OF LOVE

*Soirée* is one of those books Rollins hopes will not just collect dust on someone's coffee table. Not only is it packed with great information, but it really was a labor of love. The idea to write the book came to her after one of her daughters was seriously injured in a freak go-kart accident. The accident crushed her leg, and she was in acute respiratory distress, requiring several months of hospitalization and several dozen surgeries. In the wake of her family's medical trauma, Rollins established the Women of Style and Substance Annual Luncheon, as well as hosting several dinners benefiting Children's Healthcare of Atlanta. One of those dinners was held in honor of fashion designer Oscar de la Renta, who suggested to Rollins the idea for her book. "I was completely dumbfounded, and I know I said 'On what?'" she says with a laugh, recalling the conversation.

Now, with her daughter's health vastly improved and one book under her belt, Rollins is considering her next move. She's thinking about new ideas for a second book, looking to the world of sports for inspiration and thinking about what event she would like to take on next. "How about a Kentucky Derby watching party?" Rollins says. "Let's talk about how much fun that would be." ■