



Genevieve black seersucker bikini, **Lisa Marie Fernandez** (\$385). Tenet, 91 Main St., Southampton, 631-377-3981; [lisamariefernandez.com](http://lisamariefernandez.com)

# HOSTESS *with the* MOSTEST

Cookbook author, food TV host, and Hamptons local **Katie Lee** is biting off as much as she can chew.

by ALLISON BERG photography by MELANIE ACEVEDO

**W**ith 14 years in the Hamptons and counting, Katie Lee, host of *Beach Bites* on the Cooking Channel and cohost of *The Kitchen* on the Food Network, is always cooking up something good—literally and figuratively. Yet even from her high-profile perch, she never loses sight of her West Virginia roots and old-school values, especially when it comes to entertaining. “My grandma always told me it’s not just about the food,” Lee says, “but the way you make people feel in your home.”

Expressions like “outta dirt holler” roll smoothly off Lee’s tongue, and the self-proclaimed small-town gal just wants everyone to have a good time. Lee has loved the beach since childhood and smiles as she recalls how her family saved money all year long for one-week vacations to Myrtle Beach. “My grandpa would drive us, and when we would be about an hour away, he would exclaim, ‘I smell the ocean!’ We would get so excited,” she says. Living in the Hamptons has only intensified Lee’s infatuation. On any given afternoon, she can likely be found reading a book under an umbrella, with her toes in the sand. Recently *Beach Bites* has had her island-hopping from St. Barths to Hawaii and all the beaches in between, showcasing culinary artists and their exceptionally creative treats.

When she and her producers on *The Kitchen* concocted the *Beach Bites* idea, Lee was skeptical that anyone would green-light a show in which she simply goes to the beach and eats. Two seasons later, she still can’t believe it’s her job. During the first season, she feasted on local specialties like stewed chicken in Charlotte Amalie, in the US Virgin Islands; barbecue ribs in Punta Mita, Mexico; and fried cheesecake in St. Petersburg, Florida. Lately she has been stateside, savoring dirty-chai pancakes in San Diego; chicken chimichangas in Lake Havasu City, Arizona; and the legendary “Nasty G,” a sandwich piled high with Alabama favorites.

Dependably dressed in chic bohemian resortwear, Lee remains bright-eyed and eager no matter where *Beach Bites* takes her. She says her supportive research team is key to the show’s success, while social media plays a large role in their discoveries. When a critical mass of people get excited about a particularly visual post, Lee’s team will Skype with the chefs, watch them work, and pull together a group her audience will be excited to spend time with. Hawaii is Lee’s favorite locale so far. “If I could figure out how to live in Maui, I would,” she says, explaining that the islands feel to her like a tropical take on the Hamptons, with acres of farms and chefs who work magic with local ingredients.

Thailand and Italy’s Amalfi Coast are on her wish list for future excursions,

but frankly, Lee could convince us that any cuisine is to die for. Her energy and enthusiasm are infectious. Whether she’s biting into an enormous layered burger or mixing an assortment of goodies on a plate of fried fish, Lee’s adventurous spirit shines through, especially when she’s declaring (as she often does) that she wants to taste everything simultaneously.

Although every host claims to have the greatest crew in television, with Lee it doesn’t seem like an idle boast. The show’s high production values are obvious. The cinematography lets viewers practically feel the heat of the morning sun as they savor a Mallorca breakfast sandwich at Pinky’s in Puerto Rico or score the best waterfront bar seat for sipping a Painkiller cocktail at Duffy’s Love Shack in St. Thomas. The crew’s main challenge, according to Lee, is to ensure that she manages to fit into her clothes, as her samplings can be, shall we say, on the gluttonous side. To maintain her figure while indulging in this fantasy diet, she does Tracy Anderson workouts for at least 90 minutes a day, five to six days a week, and streams Anderson’s workouts on her laptop while traveling. “I really work hard at it,” Lee says. “I don’t believe people who say they can eat whatever they want and stay thin!”

**O**nscreen *and* off, food is central to this beach beauty’s life, but she tries to keep things simple when entertaining. She isn’t too fussy, she says, believing that the best way to have carefree guests is for her to remain calm and remember to have a blast herself. And the secret to being a relaxed host? Complete as much as possible before guests arrive, Lee says. Even a seasoned chef doesn’t want to be surrounded by a crowd while trying to concentrate in the kitchen, so her first step is planning, which involves a lot of list-making. Depending on her mood, Lee may map out an elaborate meal for an intimate circle of friends or prepare a more casual spread for a larger group.

Next, she chooses a theme. “Especially when someone is a novice, a theme is a wonderful place to start,” Lee says. “It will help decide décor, menu, music, cocktails, and wine pairings.” The third step is creating the menu, and she always incorporates some items that can be served at room temperature or chilled. Locally sourced ingredients strongly influence her choices, and Green Thumb organic market in Water Mill is generally her first shopping stop. Sometimes she’ll call up Smokin’ Wolf in East Hampton and order a slab of ribs, pick up some corn at a farmstand, and throw together a big salad. Or when expecting a considerable turnout, Lee often organizes pizza parties, utilizing both her own pizza oven and the experts at Rolling in Dough in Greenport.

Lee emphasizes the importance of delegating tasks and being realistic about how much you can manage on your own. So she can focus on the entrée, she sometimes opts for “assembly-only” hors d’oeuvres and, for dessert, ice cream sandwiches made with Tate’s Bake Shop cookies. But she maintains the healthy perspective that guests are just happy to have an invitation to her home; they aren’t coming to judge her talents. “It’s not about perfection,” she says. “I’m certainly not perfect—I don’t pretend to be and I’m not trying to be.” One can even be a fantastic host with takeout, Lee confides: Simply order from your favorite Chinese restaurant, put the food in pretty bowls, turn on some good music, get the cocktails flowing, and voilà! You’ve got a fabulous party.

Lee treasures the Hamptons habit of holding dinner parties in private homes. While it may sound counterintuitive to the fancier set, she has observed that East Enders have a better time at casual gatherings, where they aren’t glued to their seat, waiting for formal service, and on alert for the etiquette police. She advises balancing a formal setup with casual food, so it doesn’t feel too stuffy. In fact, Lee surmises that her most fun Hamptons shindig may have been a keg party: It entailed six kegs, a barbecue, an ice luge, and beer-pong tables. This summer she anticipates trying her hand at a Hawaiian feast in the Hamptons, but then nervously remembers that she has never attempted a traditional pig roast. “There will certainly be mai tais,” she giggles.



When not playing hostess, Lee revels in East End activities. “I really feel like this is my home now, and I’m happiest when I’m in the Hamptons,” she says. Having grown up in Milton, West Virginia, Lee was initially caught off-guard by the Hamptons’ provincial feel. She recalls laughing when she first heard someone refer to the Hamptons as “the country.” “Y’all don’t even know,” she says. “There’s a Ralph Lauren store here!” But now she gets it. She relishes being surrounded by farms and living in a community where everyone knows and looks out for each another. “I’m very predictable,” Lee says. Most of her days involve going to Green Thumb, taking a tennis lesson, hanging out at the beach, cooking, eating, and playing with her new puppy, Gus. Her favorite local spot is the frozen-yogurt haven Buddhberry, which she lovingly calls her “roller coaster of emotions.” Her go-to flavor: peanut butter with hot fudge or peanut butter sauce. “It doesn’t matter how much you put in the cup,” she says. “You always want more.”

Carissa’s Bread in East Hampton is another haunt. The bakery uses locally grown and milled wheat, and Lee declares its loaves possibly the best bread she has ever tasted. She also routinely visits Amagansett Sea Salt Co., which harvests flavorful sea salt right here in the Hamptons; Mecox Bay Dairy, for cheese; North Sea Farms, for chicken; and Clamman, for fish. Her newest find is Peconic Prime Meats, for homemade sausage in a variety of flavors (her favorites are curry and Thai chicken). “Everything they do is spot-on,” she says.

Convinced that this area has the ultimate “beach bites,” Lee is disappointed to report that we won’t be seeing any of these local delicacies on the show this season. But she hopes *Beach Bites* will see a Season 3, in which she can visit Sag Harbor for Grindstone doughnuts and Dock House fried clams, stop in at Clam Bar and The Lobster Roll in Amagansett, and head to Bostwick’s Chowder House in East Hampton.

She also knows that to visit these places is a luxury. Lee recently joined the board of directors of the Food Bank for New York City and explains that one in five New Yorkers is food-insecure. The current face of hunger even includes working-class families, and the numbers are quickly rising. Lee was astonished to learn that many women turn to the Food Bank as their only source of feminine hygiene products. It’s the most challenging donation for the organization to obtain, and Lee fervently supports its work.

Since her first cookbook, *The Comfort Table*, was published in 2008, Lee feels she has evolved both professionally and personally. Back then, she was focused on “the three C’s—comfortable, casual, and with a touch of couture.” Now, having clearly come into her own, she really is all about being relaxed. “I just like to have fun,” she says, “and I want my guests at home or viewers on TV to feel the same way.” ■

Embroidered tulle dress (\$19,500), knit bra (\$880), and panties (\$1,400), **Dior**. Americana Manhasset, 2060 Northern Blvd., 516-365-5680; [dior.com](http://dior.com)  
 RIGHT: Embroidered tulle panel dress, **Burberry** (\$2,595). Americana Manhasset, 2060

Northern Blvd., 516-365-2050; [us.burberry.com](http://us.burberry.com)

Styling by Claudia Talamas  
 Hair by Bryce Scarlett using Moroccan oil at The Wall Group  
 Makeup by Quinn Murphy at The Wall Group





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