



## PALM BEACH'S HILARY GEARY ROSS TAKES ON WASHINGTON

BY MICHELE MEYER  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY HARRY BENSON

Though well past her bedtime, Hilary Somers Roche headed down the stairs of her aunt Jeanne Vanderbilt's Upper East Side Manhattan townhome. Vanderbilt wanted to introduce her to a few guests. Among the group, the grade school-aged girl spotted actors Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, Montgomery Clift, and Roddy McDowall.

"It was amazing to see all those legends," recalls the since-married Hilary Geary Ross. "Liz was so beautiful. Richard Burton was so handsome. I was dazzled."

She was also hooked—on hosting. Her mother, social scribe Patricia Murray Ney, and another aunt, former *Vogue* fashion editor Catherine "Cathy" Murray di Montezemolo, were also fabled for their fêtes. "I had great examples of how to do it right," Ross says.

*The Indomitable*

# MRS. ROSS

WITH HOMES IN PALM BEACH, NEW YORK, AND WASHINGTON D.C., HILARY GEARY ROSS HAS EARNED A REPUTATION AS ONE OF THE EAST COAST'S BEST HOSTESSES.

“

## If you're looking for optimism for our future and our country, spend time with Hilary.” —Robert Zimmerman

Long renowned for her own gatherings in Palm Beach, Southampton, and Manhattan, Ross has brought her skills to a new locale: the nation's capital.

Almost a year since husband and prosperous private equity investor Wilbur Louis Ross Jr. became U.S. Secretary of Commerce, Ross' bashes are the buzz of D.C., rivaling those of Sally Quinn (wife of then *Washington Post* editor Ben Bradlee) and Georgette Mosbacher (then wife of Robert A. Mosbacher Sr., George H. W. Bush's commerce secretary).

"She'll be one of D.C.'s greatest hostesses," says New York's Jay McInerney, author of *Bright Lights, Big City*. "She and Wilbur know everyone, and she has the most interesting guests."

But it's more than her connections that make this philanthropist and art collector a hostess par excellence.

"When Hilary throws a reception or dinner, that's where you want to be," says Robert Zimmerman, a Democratic National Committee member and marketing and advertising firm founder who's known the Rosses for more than a decade.

"I was struck by the energy in the room and the frank exchange of ideas between Democrats and Republicans," he says of a recent D.C. party—and potential power-keg—that included Trump staffers Steven Mnuchin and Kellyanne Conway, former Trump Chief of Staff Reince Priebus, former Reagan Chief of Staff Ken Duberstein, and senators Bill Nelson and Amy Klobuchar.

"She's an inspiring and uniting force, with a great gift of encouraging and elevating discussion," Zimmerman says. "And her embracing warmth permeates everything she does."

Indeed, Ross' party prowess extends beyond setting a beautiful table and knowing what canapés to serve.

"I love the whole process—choosing the tablecloths, china, and menu, creating the seating charts—every bit of it," she says. "It's great fun and a great way to cement friendships and make new ones as you celebrate occasions in your guests' lives. If you're a matchmaker, that's even better."

The Rosses themselves benefited in 2002 when Amanda Haynes-Dale, a hedge fund investor and bridesmaid at Hilary's first nuptials in 1973, sat them side by side at an event.

Ross also believes in the art of the seating chart. She uses pink Post-its for women and blue for men, placing someone the guest knows on one side and someone new on the other. As she learned from aunt Cathy, a mix of power players, jet-setters, and fashionistas of all ages and nationalities gives a get-together pizzazz. Her list of dream guests ranges from Oscar Wilde to Thomas Jefferson, but they all have one

thing in common: humor, intelligence, and lots of personality.

Regardless of the attendees, Ross' events often start with cocktails and hors d'oeuvres on each home's expansive terrace, with views of the Intracoastal Waterway at their Palm Beach estate, the skyline at their Manhattan penthouse, or the pool and formal gardens at their summer home in Southampton.

But wherever she is, "Palm Beach is home," Ross says. "I've been [coming here] since I was a tiny tot and always remembered the soft, balmy air and sparkling water. Palm Beach is easy to love. It's the most beautiful place in the world."

Ross also takes care to set the stage with ample flowers and vignettes—all the better to get photo ops in society columns and on Instagram, notes florist and frequent collaborator Tom Mathieu.

"She's very creative and easygoing," Mathieu says. "She'll give me the main details, color scheme, and number of attendees. Sometimes I tell her what I'm going to do and sometimes I surprise her."

Another Ross signature is tongue-in-cheek party favors, such as funny glasses or "something amusing to unwrap," Ross says. Her personal favorite was for a dinner dance celebrating Wilbur's birthday. "I placed masks with Wilbur's face on sticks at each place setting and requested guests wear them. That was quite a visual. Imagine, 350 Wilburs!"

Grander gestures include transforming their Palm Beach ballroom into Club R, where an aerialist poured Champagne into guests' glasses while swinging upside down from a trapeze.

Another time, she and Mathieu recreated legendary '70s New York nightclub El Morocco, aglitter with mirrors, massive zebra banquettes, and white palm trees.

When possible, Ross has New York songster and TV host Christopher Mason play piano and perform numbers that name-drop invitees. His versions of tunes such as Noel Coward's "The Stately Homes of England" have substituted lyrics with the names of Andrea and Steve Wynn, Emilia and Pepe Fanjul, Rudy and Judith Giuliani, and the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough.

For the Rosses' first D.C. cocktail party at their new 1927 Beaux-Arts manse, Mason penned an amusing song about how many of the guests wrongly presumed that the guest of honor, Scott Snyder, was the North Korean missiles expert, comedian, or governor by the same name.

In actuality, Snyder is the Rosses' interior decorator, who made the \$12 million D.C. party palace purchased from philanthropist Adrienne Arsht move-in ready in less than four months.

A book launch for Larry Kudlow's *JFK and the Reagan Revolution: A Secret History of American Prosperity* was another early capital



“

## We are both mad about art, and each time we take a trip we scout for more artworks.”

soirée. When bad weather grounded Kudlow's flight to Washington, “We all toasted Larry and said how much we missed him, but went on with the show,” she says.

That hasn't been her sole mishap. Ross' penchant for a decadent dessert following a healthy menu led to an awkward moment at one of her first fêtes.

The on-site caterer was asked to make chocolate soufflé. When it was served, “a guest exclaimed: ‘Don't eat the soufflé! It's salt, not sugar,’” Ross recounts.

The caterer had mistaken a container of sea salt for sugar. “We all laughed, and then I served Häagen-Dazs chocolate chip mint ice cream and homemade cookies.”

Her advice? “Have cookies and ice cream on hand. They're staples, like milk and eggs. But most importantly, have a sense of humor when things go wrong.”

That trait is among many that make Hilary, 67, and Wilbur, 80, well-matched. Soft-spoken and stylish, the kindred spirits share sunny dispositions and a love of entertaining, writing, surrealist painter René Magritte, and decorator Mario Buatta, who's worked for them since their 2004 nuptials as well as separately since the 1970s. Theirs was the third marriage for each. Her first husband, stockbroker John W. Geary II, died in 1995.

A social columnist and author of *Palm Beach People* and *New York, New York*, Ross comes from a long line of writers, including mother Patricia Murray Ney, father J. Jeffrey Roche, and grandfather Arthur Somers Roche. For her next tome, she's spoken with photographer Harry Benson about a collaboration on Washington power players and philanthropists.

Wilbur, the son of a New Jersey school teacher and a judge, attended Yale with the hope of becoming a fiction writer, but a summer internship on Wall Street steered him toward finance. After earning his M.B.A. at Harvard, he became an investor specializing in bankruptcy.

Their mutual passion for Magritte—a favorite of hers since childhood—has led to an invaluable collection of his work.

“We are both mad for art, and each time we take a trip we scout for more artworks,” she says. “Hence the Chinese contemporary collection, as we're in the Far East so much.” They often lend Magritte paintings to museums,

“which gives us a good excuse to travel, to the (Georges) Pompidou in Paris and the Albertina in Vienna.”

Acquiring art for their homes isn't Ross' sole style quest. She's also emboldened her husband's already elegant wardrobe, most notably with Stubbs & Wootton black velvet slippers embroidered with the logo of the Secretary of Commerce.

This penchant for sartorial ease extends to Ross' own wardrobe, which consists of cashmere suits and sequin sheaths by Oscar de la Renta and Michael Kors, who made the gold suit she wore at their wedding. She hews to white, cream, silver, gold, and blues, accessorized with statement jewelry by Bulgari and JAR. “I try to have a touch of whimsy, such as fun shoes or an interesting belt, bag, or jewelry—something unexpected.”

The same desire for elegance coupled with comfort drives the settings for their homes. The Rosses invest in great houses and revel in the restoration process. Their Palm Beach estate is a 1939 Georgian Revival manor built by architect John L. Volk, while their Southampton summer house is an early 1900s Colonial Revival. Their penthouse in Manhattan is located in a well-known Art Deco co-op.

A champion of architecture and history since attending the private girls-only Hewitt School on Manhattan's Upper East Side, Ross has served on the board of the Palm Beach Preservation Foundation since 2005 and as president of the American Friends of Blenheim Palace (the birthplace of Winston Churchill) since 2007. She and Wilbur also support the Central Park Conservancy, the National Gallery of Art in D.C., and the Magritte Museum in Belgium.

“If Hilary is involved, she makes it a cause, and you instinctively want to be on her team,” says Robert Zimmerman, who's participated in fundraisers she's hosted. “She engages, energizes, and encourages people.”

Ross' true legacy extends beyond her philanthropy: It's the positive openness she shares with her husband and, now, all of Washington. Zimmerman believes she's just the person to bring some joy to the capital. “If you're looking for optimism for our future and our country, spend time with Hilary.” ◀◀



HILARY ROSS SHARES A LOVE OF ART, WRITING, AND ENTERTAINING WITH HUSBAND WILBUR.