

salons



Patty Barnes and Thomas Houlon enjoy a good conversation, so they developed Spirit of the Senses, where people talk about any number of subjects.

2/15-22: Senses salon a feast of ideas

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Apart from the membership fee, only one thing is required to belong to Spirit of the Senses.

"Curiosity is the one thing that everyone who belongs has in common," says Thomas Houlon, who founded the group 26 years ago. "That is the thread that ties everyone together."

The concept of the group is a simple one. Houlon and his wife Patty Barnes develop salons based on topics that intrigue them. Salons are often held in members' homes, galleries, boardrooms or office spaces. There is really no limit: One recent salon was held on a Phoenix light-rail train.

"One idea will inspire a salon," Houlon says. "Often, things we will discuss in that salon will

lead to other ideas, which lead to other salons. It kind of flows naturally."

Just as the salons cover a wide variety of topics, so do the presenters. Pastry chef Tammie Coe was the focus of one salon; so was former CNN anchor Aaron Brown, now a professor at Arizona State University. Former governor Janet Napolitano spoke at one salon, as did Valley media institution Pat McMahon. There are also scientists, architects, doctors, professors and musicians.

"It's a comfortable environment," says Barnes, who lives with her husband and an affectionate Bernese Mountain dog in the Camelback Corridor. "It's not intimidating or off-putting. It's the kind of setting where people can ask questions."

Surprisingly, Houlon was unfamiliar with the concept that gives the salons their name when



he started the group. The word began being used in the 17th century to refer to gatherings of the culturally and politically elite in Europe.

"Someone mentioned it to me after I started the group," he admits. "I wasn't aware of it, but then we started using the word."

The intimacy of the salons is one of their most appealing traits. There are about 300 members in the group, who pay \$300 for a yearlong membership. Most salons will have between 25 to 50 members in attendance, a small enough number to encourage conversations between members and speakers.

"Thomas and Patty have access to some of the most amazing people," says Arthur Piccinati, a retired physician who has been a member for more than 15 years. "I don't know how they do it. You find yourself with the most amazing people in your living room."

One time, Piccinati recalls, former *Tonight Show* bandleader Doc Severinsen and three of his musicians were at his Paradise Valley home for a Spirit of the Senses event. Severinsen's drummer asked Piccinati if he had any drumsticks. He replied no. Then he asked him if he had the Yellow Pages.

"The next thing you know, the drummer started playing with his brushes on the Yellow Pages, and it sounded just like a drum," Piccinati says. "The musicians are performing in my house, using my phone book."

"These are the kinds of things that don't normally happen, but they happen with Thomas and Patty."

Just as topics for the salons will often spin off and provide inspiration for future salons, the speakers often come through connections Houlon and Barnes make through Spirit of the Senses. At times, even members are surprised by some of the people who come through.

"One time, Sheriff Joe Arpaio was a speaker," Barnes recalled. "A few members may have raised their eyebrows at that, but he was intelligent and delightful. You learn things when you meet people one-on-one."

Learning is a key to Spirit of the Senses. Through the 15 or so salons held each month,

members acquire knowledge about subjects that may be somewhat new to them.

"If you commit yourself to (Spirit of the Senses), you'll automatically expose yourself to things you may have never thought you'd be interested in," says David Lindquester of Scottsdale. "It's almost as if you had an opportunity to take graduate courses at a university and select whatever you wanted to sit in on."

Lindquester, who joined the organization two years ago, recalls attending a salon on how tea is grown in China.

"I never would have thought that would have been of interest to me," he says. "Then you have an opportunity to spend some time with a person who has devoted their life to that study, and it winds up being incredibly stimulating."

That is what drives Barnes and Houlon. That thirst for knowledge is what made Houlon, an ASU grad, come up with the concept in the first place.

"I wanted an environment where people could exchange ideas and ask questions," he says. "It all started with that."