Modern Man

Eric Villency fills his downtown loft with all things sleek — from furniture to friends.

By Pilar Viladas
Photographs by François Dischinger
Styled by William Norwich
At the entrance to Eric Villency's loft, the lacquered cabinet and flannel chair, both from Maurice Villency, sit below Russell Young's silk screens made from police mug shots of Malcolm X and Jane Fonda. The host, left, wears a Jil Sander suit and Paul Smith London shirt.
In theory, Eric Villency is not someone you really want to like. He is tall, dark and handsome. At the tender age of 28, he is the president of Maurice Villency Inc., the furniture retailing business founded by his grandfather in 1932. He lives in a minimalist-chic downtown loft, sparsely furnished with stylish items from said company. And this evening, he has invited some of his extremely attractive and accomplished friends — many of whom attended the kind of fancy Manhattan private schools that he did — for a dinner party. Ugh, right?

Wrong. Villency is actually a nice guy. He is sweet and unassuming, so you believe him when he tells you that when he first joined the family business, in 1999, he spent six months getting up every day at 5 a.m. to load furniture onto trucks and deliver it to customers. But once he learned firsthand that “furniture is heavy and it’s fragile” — the two rules taught him by his father, Robert, Maurice’s son and the company’s chairman — Villency set about applying to the furniture business branding and marketing concepts he picked up during stints in fashion (as a model, for Calvin Klein and Dolce & Gabbana) and real estate (lucrative, but not creative enough for his taste). He opened a sleek, high-visibility store (designed by TEK Architects) at Third Avenue and 57th Street last fall, and the fashion label Imitation of Christ held a show there, which was not your typical furniture-store promotion.

He introduced home accessories lines, including bed linens and Murano glass vases. Then he introduced the company’s in-house decorating staff to a hipper kind of client: the rapper Ja Rule. (He even involved the company in the design of a lounge, called WEI, which is scheduled to open next month and in which he is an investor.) Finally, Villency redesigned the company’s signature logo to look more abstract, more modern. No, not your grandfather’s furniture store.

But Eric Villency does have something in common with the energetic Scot who set up shop in a loft on Eighth Street 71 years ago after working as the head

Two Maurice Villency Lips chairs, left flank a pair of paintings by Eric Villency’s mother, Rosanna. The metal stairs lead up to the bedroom; the giant steel door slides to the left to reveal the kitchen. This page, from top: The caterer, Melanie de Cappet, with her back to Villency (now in a René Lezard suit and Dolce & Gabbana shirt). Gigi Stone, in a Marc by Marc Jacobs dress, with Sabine Heller, in a Lucy Barlow top, Sasha Lazard and Sabine Heller.
The Conversation

WHITNEY CASEY: Aren’t you going to Europe soon?
ERIC VILENCY: Yes, I am going to Paris and Milan.
WHITNEY: Are you nervous to travel?
ERIC: Not really, I try not to worry about things you can’t control. How about you?
WHITNEY: Traveling is part of my job, so I’m used to it. I can’t afford to be afraid.
ERIC: So how is it going with Alexis? He is a great guy.
WHITNEY: [laughing] It certainly seems like you put a lot of thought into the seating arrangements!

designer for the Pullman Coach Company; he has inherited Maurice’s eye. As Robert Villency says, “I don’t have an aesthetic bone in my body, but Eric has his grandfather’s sense of design.”

Vilency’s loft offers ample evidence of the above. It is even more pared down than the store, with only a few pieces of handsomely scaled, clean-lined furniture and contemporary art (including paintings by his mother, Rowan). “The European approach is for fewer things, but quality is important,” Vilency maintains. On this evening, though, it is looking particularly festive in honor of his dinner party. “As a young single guy in the city, I rarely entertain. So when I do, I like to make a production out of it.”

The guest list reflects the view, expressed by Vilency’s friend Alexis Zoulas, that “New York social life is like the intersecting rings of the Olympics.” Zoulas, an executive at Kaufman Astoria Studios, met
Opposite: Sasha Lazarev, bedecked in Celine bracelets, helps herself to balsamic-glazed asparagus, as Gigi Stone, in bracelets by Kenneth Jay Lane, digs into the beef. Most of the big metal pieces in the loft, like the kitchen island, below, were made by Michael Shen, the loft’s previous owner. Villency added the custom glass-fronted cabinets and the hanging lights, designed by Achille Castiglioni for Flos and available from Moss.
Villency only recently, but says he feels as if they've known each other forever, as well they could have since Zoulias went to Buckley and Villency went to Dalton. Gigi Stone, a reporter for Business Week TV, met her host through her childhood friend Sabine Heller, an old friend of Villency's who is also his director of marketing.

But lest you think this guest list is some kind of inbred high-school reunion, it also includes relative newcomers like Whitney Casey, a reporter for CNN, and Finola Hughes, the actress who stars in "All My Children," and her husband, Russell Young, an artist whose silk-screen mug-shot portraits of Malcolm X and Jane Fonda hang in Villency's living room; the couple met him at the Imagination of Christ show.

Villency has been known to cook for friends. But tonight — maybe it was the intimidating prospect of being photographed — he decided to let Melanie de Coppet, a school friend of Sabine Heller's and the owner of Red Table Catering, do the cooking. Like Villency, de Coppet fled the business world (film production) for something more creative. "I've been cooking since I was little and started doing dinner parties when I was 14," she explains.

De Coppet, who will come to your house and do everything from the table decorations to the tarte Tatin (wearing a dress and high heels but never an apron), describes herself as "Holly Golightly meets Mrs. Dalloway." But for Villency's party, she wanted to keep it simple.

"I wanted to make things that Eric could have made himself," she says, which explains the elegant but not nervous-breakdown-inducing menu: roast fillet of beef, mashed potatoes with garlic infusion, pan-roasted asparagus, roasted peppers stuffed with cherry tomatoes and a make-ahead frozen chocolate soufflé that takes the drama (but not the glamour) out of dessert.

And since this party was a special one, Villency asked Bronson van Wyck, the new bright young thing on the event-planning scene, to do the flowers. Another refugee from the film business, van Wyck also admires his host's warmth. "Eric will ask you how your day was, and he doesn't have the next question in his head."

As if final proof of Villency's down-to-earth nature is necessary, consider this: he may be quite the man about town, but, as he says, he still heads uptown once a week to dine with his parents. "They expect to see me every Sunday for dinner."
English Roast Fillet of Beef With Two Sauces

(ADAPTED FROM RED TABLE CATERING)
1 3-pound fillet of beef (ask your butcher to tie it into a log)
2 tablespoons fresh rosemary needles, finely chopped
2 tablespoons fresh thyme leaves, finely chopped
2 tablespoons good quality olive oil
½ teaspoon sea salt
½ teaspoon freshly ground pepper
Morel gravy (see recipe)
Horseradish cream with dried cherries (see recipe).

2. Melt the butter in the oil in a shallow saucepan over medium heat. Add the shallot and garlic and sauté until soft, but not brown, about 3 minutes. Add the wine and heat to boiling. Boil 1 minute to reduce slightly. Add the prepared gravy, peppercorns and morels.
3. Heat the gravy to boiling, reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer until the flavors are blended, 5 to 10 minutes. Stir in the heavy cream and season to taste with salt and pepper.

Yield: About 2 cups.

1. Preheat the oven to 475 degrees. Place the fillet in a roasting pan. Combine the herbs, oil, salt and pepper in a small bowl, mix well and rub all over the fillet. Roast for 20 minutes (for medium-rare). Remove the pan from the oven, loosely cover the fillet with aluminum foil and let rest for 10 minutes before carving into thin slices. Serve with accompanying sauces.

Yield: 6 servings.

Roasted Stuffed Red Peppers

(ADAPTED FROM DELIA SMITH)
3 tablespoons olive oil, plus more for greasing the pan and peppers
3 medium-to-large red peppers
1 bunch basil
½ pounds cherry tomatoes, quartered
3 sun-dried tomatoes packed in olive oil, drained and finely chopped
3 anchovy fillets, drained and finely minced
1 clove garlic, peeled and minced
2 teaspoons balsamic vinegar
Salt and freshly ground pepper to taste.

1. Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Grease a shallow roasting pan with olive oil.
2. Carefully halve each pepper lengthwise so that the stem remains intact on each half. Coat each half with oil and place in the pan.
3. Reserve 6 basil leaves for garnish and finely chop the remaining leaves to make 3 to 4 tablespoons. In a large bowl, combine all the remaining ingredients and salt and pepper to taste. Mix gently but thoroughly. You can make this ahead and keep in the refrigerator for up to 4 hours.
4. Spoon the tomato mixture into the pepper halves and roast until the peppers have browned lightly and the tomato filling is juicy and bubbling, about 1 hour. Garnish each pepper with a whole basil leaf.

Yield: 6 servings.

Horseradish Cream With Dried Cherries

1 handful of dried cherries (about ½ cup)
1 cup heavy cream
Dash of white-wine vinegar
3 tablespoons grated fresh horseradish or more to taste
Salt and freshly ground white pepper to taste.

1. Place the cherries in a small bowl, cover with very warm water and let soak until softened. Drain on paper towels and set aside to dry.
2. With a whisk or electric hand mixer, beat the cream until thick but not stiff. Blend in a dash of vinegar. Stir in the cherries and horseradish and salt and pepper to taste. Serve with roasted meats or with fresh vegetables.

Yield: About 1 cup.

Balsamic-Glazed Asparagus

1 bunch asparagus (about 1 pound), tough ends removed
1 tablespoon olive oil, plus more for greasing the skillet
Sea salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar.

1. Place the asparagus in a roasting pan and drizzle with 1 tablespoon oil. Sprinkle with sea salt and pepper and toss to coat.

2. Lightly grease a large nonstick skillet with oil and place over high heat. When the oil is hot, add the balsamic vinegar. When the vinegar is sizzling, add the asparagus and spread out. Reduce the heat to medium-high and cook the asparagus, turning the stalks frequently to coat with the vinegar, until they are crisp-tender and bright green, 10 to 15 minutes. Adjust the seasonings as desired.

Yield: 4 to 6 servings.