

*southern gentleman*

Glorisa Design owner Keith Robinson plans and executes all aspects of an event, including culinary, floral and lighting, in service of "creating memories."



*“My aesthetic can be somewhat eclectic. It really has its roots in European sensibility. I [also] love getting back to my country roots.”* — KEITH ROBINSON

# THE toast OF THE hosts

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**K**eith Girard Robinson belongs to a dying breed. Raised in the North Carolina mountains, the event designer is the sort of gentleman who still swings to his feet when a lady excuses herself from the table.

Though he adheres to the dictates of tradition, Robinson remains a modern family man, sharing his 175-year-old home at Hutcheson-Redwine Plantation in Palmetto with his husband, Scott.

Robinson’s 27-year-old event production company, Gloriosa, based in Decatur, boasts such famous clients as Michelle Obama, and his culinary prowess has won praise from the likes of Oprah Winfrey. Still, he seems to have mastered the art of pageantry without pomposity. In a conversation at his kitchen table, Robinson talked about beauty, history, style and the perfect Southern biscuit.



Top and above, Keith Robinson has lived for the past six years at the 175-year-old Hutcheson-Redwine home in Palmetto, once the largest working plantation in the area.

**Living Intown: How would you define your career?**

**Keith Robinson:** If I were to paint a broad stroke, I would say that I create memories. More specifically, I am an event designer and I own a company that executes all aspects of that event: the culinary, floral, lighting, etc.

**Where does the name Gloriosa come from?**

I don’t recall when it happened but I was shown an orchid lily called a Gloriosa. A Gloriosa is beautiful, it’s exotic, and it’s expensive. I thought, “Well, aside from the ‘expensive’ part, this could be a really great name for a company.”

**What inspires you in creating events?**

I start with nature. Nature is first. And I have to be »

## southern gentleman

inspired by the client. We go back to beauty when we talk about inspiration. Sometimes it's just a single word that a client might impart that can literally direct a scheme.

### How would you describe your personal aesthetic?

My aesthetic can be somewhat eclectic. It really has its roots in European sensibility. I [also] love getting back to my country roots: I love things that are very simple, juxtaposed against something that is really sublime. For instance, a beautiful French porcelain vessel filled with gnarled, knobby pears from a tree in the yard. That juxtaposition is really quite beautiful.

### Do you ever have clients that come to you with no idea of what they want?

Often! Aside from your basic corporate meeting or something that needs food and basic table linens and a floral arrangement or two, a lot of events that people do are for milestones in their life. Until that event occurs – especially in terms of weddings – they may never



At his Palmetto home, Robinson lives out his personal credo of “showcasing a beautiful life in every way.”

have planned anything this large, or ever thought that they would spend the amount of money that it would cost. One of the biggest challenges is helping someone understand that the vision

that they have is going to have dollars and cents attached to it. While we can take your vision and manipulate it in a way that gives you the essence of it, it may not be the same.

### How long have you lived on Hutcheson-Redwine Plantation?

This year will be six years. I had been coming to the Chattahoochee

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Hill country since 2007. There was something within me that secretly was ready to leave the city. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I always dreamt of ending up in a rambling white farmhouse. Through the good fortune of knowing the right people and asking the right questions, I ended up here. And, it's one of those decisions that I will never, ever regret.

**It was at some point a plantation, was it not?**

Yes. The land that this house sits on was acquired as a part of 10,000 acres purchased by James Hutcheson. He acquired the property in the land lottery of the French and Indian Wars for 10 cents an acre in 1827. In 1841, the house was built on the property, [which] became the largest working plantation in the area.

**How do you feel, as black man and as a gay man, living in a home that may be seen as a symbol of the Antebellum South and the oppression of slavery?**

I think that it's an absolutely beautiful thing that here is this house that

**insider TIP** » Robinson's advice for simple entertaining includes making it easy on yourself. "You can entertain at home and bring in takeout and present it beautifully," he says. "You can be at the grocery and [see that] lemons are on sale. You put lemons on a platter and on the table, and call it a center piece."

was built in 1841, and here in 2016, I, as a man of color, have taken on this project to restore it to a glory that it may not have ever seen, and to transform it into something that many people can see and enjoy.

**In a time when we seem to be moving away from codified etiquette, do you feel that we are losing some of the beauty and ceremony of living?**

That's a great question! In this house, we use cloth napkins always and they are always pressed by hand with an iron. We always use silver flatware in this house. Is it precious? No, it goes in the dishwasher just like everything

else. ... I think that there is absolutely nothing wrong with wanting to surround oneself with beauty every waking moment. I think that if I had to attach a tagline to my life, it would be "showcasing what my interpretation is of a beautiful life in every way." Don't shortchange yourself by not giving yourself the opportunity to experience something beautiful every single day.

**How does it feel to have your work appreciated by people of such merit as Dr. Maya Angelou or Oprah Winfrey?**

I am not a star-struck person. I am not a person who is impressed in the least by celebrity. What impresses me about people is if they are real, if they treat others in a way that they would want to be treated, if they are respectful, if they are kind. ... In some of those experiences, those people have impacted my life in a powerful way. I think about the first time that I ever met Dr. Maya Angelou. I had done work for many celebrities and I told her that of all the people that I had met, I was in awe of her presence. To »



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have had a personal interaction with someone like Coretta Scott King, to know just what an impact that woman and her husband made on the lives of so many people ... it's matchless, truly.

**Your biscuits are one of Oprah's favorite things. What are your favorite things?**

My mother's sweet potato pie, my mother's crawfish étouffée, a perfectly cooked pot of rice.

**Are you going to tell us the secret to the biscuits?**

There is no secret! Number one, a very hot oven. It's a very important thing. Number two, don't overwork the ingredients. Number three, all ingredients at the proper temperature. I like a biscuit that is light. I like a biscuit that is very crispy on the outside. I like a biscuit that has more salt in it than most because I love the balance between a salty biscuit with sweet butter and sweet preserves to create that really lovely, balanced bite.

**What is your formal culinary training?**

I have none! My culinary training is



Above, one of Robinson's floral displays lends elegance to an event. Below, Robinson (center) catered and decorated a private graduation party at Steve Harvey's Atlanta home in 2009.

called eating well, life experience and understanding ingredients. My mother would say that I am a much better cook than she is, but I will say that my love of the kitchen and my love of cooking came from my mother. I grew up in a household where every meal was sublime, whether it was simple or it was complicated. We are creole people and there is no such thing in our household as a bad meal. As a very curious child,

I was always in the kitchen, as we say in the South, "up under my mother," constantly asking questions.

**What advice would you give someone who would like to create a memorable event?**

If you are not accustomed to entertaining, *keep it simple*. There are so few people these days that entertain anymore. People call and make a reservation to entertain. While there is absolutely nothing wrong with that, I think that people think that if they are going to entertain at home, it is going to require spending days creating a meal, laying an elaborate table and spending a fortune. None of those things are true. In this day and age, it means a lot more just to be invited to someone's home than it does to pull out all the stops, [so there is no need to] stress yourself out thinking that what you are doing is not enough.

**What is next for you?**

Planting daffodils.

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