

Chromosome Talk For Lunching Set

By RAPHAEL ROSEN

There may be no better way to spend a balmy spring afternoon than lunching with friends under a canopy spread upon a grassy lawn.



David X Prutting/BFA
Tory Burch and Samantha Boardman Rosen

Nothing better, that is, unless the refreshments were preceded by a lecture about chromosomes and DNA.

You would have found such lucky lunchers yesterday at Rockefeller University on Manhattan's Upper East Side, at the 15th annual Women & Science Spring Lecture and Luncheon. Since 1998, the Women & Science initiative has brought attention to science issues related to women's health, highlighted women scientists, and raised money to fund those scientists' research. The initiative also has a philanthropic arm, called Partners in Discovery, that provides fellowships for women graduate students and supports summer research programs.

The 520 attendants first assembled in an auditorium at noon to hear a lecture by Dr. Titia de Lange, the head of Rockefeller's laboratory of Cell Biology and Genetics and Director of the University's Anderson Center for Cancer Research. This was no typical biomedical talk: A quick glance around the room revealed ladies looking glamorous in pearls, suits and pastel scarves.



David X Prutting/BFA

Designer Kate Spade

Dr. de Lange showed her speaking chops by throwing in a masterful metaphor, comparing a normal genome to a beautiful Renoir portrait, while arguing that the ugliness of a cancer genome could be represented by the distortions of a Willem de Kooning painting.

And she was just as quick with her wit: when an audience member asked for a comment about a recent news story claiming that exercise could forestall the decay of telomeres (genetic material on the ends of chromosomes whose presence ensures the health of a cell's DNA), Dr. de Lange smiled and said, "Exercise is good for you."

The luncheon followed the lecture, and this year it was resplendent with white peony centerpieces and fuchsia tablecloths, as well as its fair share of celebrity attendants. This reporter found himself within shouting distance of Henry Kissinger and Peggy Noonan, and apparently, seated at tables unknown, were Kate Spade and Tory Burch, of fashion fame. If there is a moral, it is that discussions of telomeres and biomedicine by no means preclude fashionistas and politicians.

A version of this article appeared May 11, 2012, on page A20 in some U.S. editions of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Chromosome Talk For Lunching Set.