

CHEF'S HOLIDAY

by Barbara Ann Rosenberg

A peek at how some Delaware Valley chefs entertain at Christmas time when most of the other restaurants are closed.



~~verybody~~ knows what busmen do on ~~their~~ holidays — ride busses, of course! At ~~least~~ that's how the story goes. But, how ~~about~~ chefs and restaurant owners? What ~~do they~~ do on their days off, or when their ~~restaurants~~ are closed? What would they ~~do~~ for instance, on Christmas Eve, or ~~Christmas~~ Day, when most of the other restaurants are closed, too?

~~Do~~ they put up their feet and turn the ~~kitchen over to~~ their mates? Or do they ~~take their own~~ version of a busman's holiday and cook at home, or for a real busman's holiday, in the restaurant, closed or not? *Delaware Valley Magazine* decided to find out. We invite you to join us for a peek at the Christmas events planned by some of the area's best known restaurateurs and chefs. Maybe they'll inspire You?

No gussied up nouvelle cuisine for Jim Hamilton's friends.

Jim Hamilton, owner of Hamilton's Grill Room in Lambertville, NJ, is a paradox of sorts. By training he's an interior and architectural designer who can't stand "designer" food as well as a cook who is rarely in the kitchen. The Christmas holiday is an exception, however. He feeds his friends on Christmas Eve with the kind of simple, hearty food he loves. "I don't appreciate a plate that has three snow peas pointing to the North Star," he says, summing up his dislike for gussied up nouvelle cuisine.

Over the years, Hamilton has honed his cooking skills by studying with such renowned chefs as Jeremiah Tower, Marcella Hazan, Jacques Pepin and Giuliano Bugialli and credits them all with helping him develop the unique, eclectic food that he includes on the menu at his restaurant, although he's not the one on the "line" preparing it day by day.

But, when holiday time rolls around, the genial restaurant owner usurps the role of his daughter Melissa, who is the full-time chef at the Hamilton Grill Room, and takes over the kitchen there to feed a few dozen friends for a bang up Christmas Eve party. The four course meal this night is entirely Jim Hamilton's culinary creation. Otherwise he exercises his creative talents by "designing houses for people who want a theatrical flair to them." (In a previous career he designed the sets for such plays as *Hair*, *Godspell* and *Equus*.)

The guests usually begin arriving about 8 p.m., "after they've gotten rid of their children." Chef Melissa Hamilton comes with her husband Michael Hagerty. "And the dogs, which normally aren't allowed in the restaurant," says Hamilton. "but Christmas Eve is special!" Aside from the "no dogs" edict, her father says Melissa has another rule: "Only one Hamilton in the restaurant at any given time. That's because she has four brothers and sisters and they're just plain disruptive — critiquing the food, bombarding Melissa with cooking suggestions — so she won't have them en

masse. And I don't blame her." But, on Christmas Eve when her father is giving a party, there aren't any rules. So all Jim Hamilton's "kids" are there, too, (at least the ones who happen to be in town).

"We always start with a sparkling wine," says Jim Hamilton. "and, I recently discovered a Vouvray from the Loire that I really like, particularly with the shellfish I serve as stand-up food before dinner. Along with his shrimp and clams and mussels, the host says he serves "home-made potato chips, heaped on a white linen napkin in a wonderful, rustic basket. I like that look."

The rest of the dinner "consists of the kinds of food my friends won't find at our restaurant, or any other that I know about. Foods I love to eat. They gobble them up, so I guess they like them, too."

Lamb shanks are among the host's favorites, so he'll serve them at this year's party. "I like my food 'down home and dirty' — and my guests can have fancy food anytime. But not good shanks." The meal will end with a grappa torte which Hamilton describes as "a kind of shortbread." And, with that, he plans to serve a basil digestivo that he concocted in October, "when I filled my bathtub with the basil harvested from our garden on the night of the first frost. I worked on it in batches over the next couple of days. It's wonderful."

The party usually goes on until almost morning, and as the last guest straggles out, Jim Hamilton is back at the stove preparing a traditional Christmas dinner for his family. Maybe by the time that meal is over, he'll turn in his apron — at least until next Christmas.

Open house at the Lemprechts on Christmas Eve.

Nina and John Lemprecht, owners of the Blue Bell Inn, also host a party on Christmas Eve in their suburban home, a tradition that started the first year they were married. It grew and grew. "This year we'll probably have about 175 guests," says John — "and we never even send out an invitation. They just know it's always open house at the Lemprechts on Christmas Eve."

"Our kitchen at home was designed with commercial appliances," says Nina, "and that equipment really comes in handy when we prepare a big party like this."

"We prepare huge quantities of food," says husband John: "about 10 whole tenderloins, 15 pounds of crabmeat, 600 jumbo shrimp, several sides of Petrossian smoked salmon. A huge assortment of bread — and to top it all off, about five pounds of fresh caviar." He adds with a grin, "It always was beluga in the past, but now the price has gone out of sight (about \$500 a pound) so last year we served ossetra (at a mere \$200 a

pound). And, who knows what will happen this year. We'll just wait and see. But, for sure there will be caviar."

For a fitting accompaniment to the elegant buffet served from the kitchen island under a rack loaded with huge copper pots, the Lemprechts pour champagne. "It just isn't Christmas without champagne," says the hostess. "It contributes to the festivity — and ours is a fun party. Some people come around 6 o'clock with their children, have a bite and then go home to put them to bed. Others stop by about 8 or 9, then leave for church — and the young adults (our children's friends) come late and finish up late. People come and go all evening long."

John Lemprecht grew up in the restaurant business. His family has owned the Blue Bell Inn since 1945, but John had other ideas about what he wanted to do with his life, says wife Nina. "He studied electrical engineering and got an MBA from the Wharton School. I thought I was marrying an up-and-coming young executive, and when I saw him in the kitchen slicing an onion, I was one surprised young lady!"

John actually started working at the Inn full-time 25 years ago when the manager there retired, and the younger engineer began reading and experimenting with the menu until he got it perfected. Then he started cooking the dishes. "It was all by practical experience," he says. "I never went to the Culinary Institute or anything."

Much of John Lemprecht's "practical experience" also came under the tutelage of his father, now 84, and still actively involved at the restaurant. The elder Lemprecht started his restaurant career at the Warwick Hotel in Philadelphia where he worked under the famous manager, George Lamaze, for whom Shrimp Lamaze (now a Philadelphia classic) was named. Shrimp Lamaze (modified to suite Lemprecht's demanding taste) is still served at the Blue Bell Inn. And, needless to say, at the Lemprecht home on Christmas Eve.

Traditional Italian feasting for the Sena Family

Another totally different, totally ethnic Christmas Eve party takes place each year at the South Philadelphia home of Carlo and Giuseppina Sena when their extended family gathers for a night of traditional Italian feasting, much as it was done in generations past in their home in Bagnoli Irpino, outside of Naples. On other nights of the year, the Sena family recipes are prepared by son Gino, the chef at their restaurant (La Famiglia) a trailblazing Front Street restaurant, opened soon after the Senas came to Philadelphia in 1969. Father Carlo, who trained in his profession in Italy, was the chef at the restaurant when it first

opened, "but kept a very low profile," according to his son Giuseppe, the maitre d' — and never cooked at home."

"On Christmas Eve, the kitchen belongs to the queens," says Giuseppe Sena, speaking of his mother, sister and sister-in-law who spend all day preparing the 10 to 12-course meal the family manages to devour every year. "Then we don't want to see food ever again," says Giuseppe mischievously — "at least not until Christmas Day."

The meal starts with a huge platter of antipasto giardiniera, a vegetable appetizer, "topped with fresh truffles" according to Giuseppe, who says that the truffles are shipped in from Italy by air every year, packed in rice, "that we use later to make a wonderful risotto."

Giuseppe says that Christmas Eve is the only night of the year that he and his brothers Lucca, Gino and Maurizio, along with sister Rosa ever sit down together to eat and relax. "The only time we can discuss, 'how's this how's that'. Otherwise, we're all too busy working." (Another sister, Rachele, lives in Italy — and only comes once in a while to share Christmas here).

And, all the time they're talking, the

Taquet's Medallion of Venison, Red Wine Sauce

4 6oz. venison medallions, cut from the rack (center of the loin)

2 shallots

1/2 liter of red wine

(cabernet or merlot)

1 clove of garlic

2 oz. butter

Salt and pepper

Chop garlic and shallots. Place in a pot with the wine and cook down until only 1/3 the liquid remains (approximately 2/3 of a cup). Remove from fire and add butter, piece by piece, until sauce is thick. Salt and pepper to taste. Sauté the medallions in a very hot pan 2 minutes on each side. Place the meat on a warmed plate and pour sauce over. Garnish with watercress and serve with a chestnut puree. Serves 4.

Senas are eating their way through such things as bacalao (cod) salad: spinach pasta and linguine with clams in both red and white sauces, depending on the individual preference. Then it's time for the fried fish: calamari, alicia (tiny minnow-like fish), shrimp, cod, whiting and eel. "In Naples everybody eats eel on Christmas Eve," says Giuseppe. "It's a must."

Along with every course, the Sena family drinks wine. "Some wonderful old red wines, Barolos and Sasicaias," says Giuseppe, more interested in the quality of what he's drinking than observing the dictum of "White with fish and red with meat" along with this totally meatless meal, which, as in many Italian traditional families, always include seven kinds of fish or seafood on Christmas Eve. The meal continues with potato croquettes and mozzarella, fried cauliflower, broccoli di rabe, "anything that's in season — and ends with fruits and nuts and a ribbon pastry called struffoli, made by mother Sena just once a year for her famiglia, only for this special occasion meal.

France gets its share of glory, too, on

Christmas from Jean Francois Taquet, the ultimate Frenchman and owner of the Radnor restaurant that bears his name. His wife Catherine is French, too, quintessentially French, from her Parisian haircut to the tip of her Charles Jourdan shoes. So, it is no surprise that when the Taquets entertain at home on Christmas Day, the inspiration for the menu and the wines comes straight from their native land.

The meal is reminiscent of the kind of fare served in the aristocratic chateaux in centuries past: eight courses, starting with canapes and champagne (French, of course) and winding its way through fois gras, oysters, salmon, venison, cheese, dessert (the classic *Buche de Noel*), and coffee with petits fours. Each course is accompanied with an appropriate wine: champagne (French, of course) with the canapes, Sauternes with the fois gras, Mersault with the salmon, and on and on.

Surprisingly, in this very Francophile household, traditional French fois gras and belon oysters originate in the United States: the liver from ducks grown in New York state, and the oysters from specially seeded beds in Maine, where the mollusk thrives, and are, for many people, preferable to their French progenitors.

Each course is cooked by the acclaimed chef himself — many in advance, but both the sauteed Norwegian salmon with wild mushrooms and the medallions of venison are totally last minute preparations. The chef's wife is only allowed "to help a little."

Guests for the occasion are all "family or very close friends," says Chef Taquet. "Including my old friend who is the chef at the French Embassy in Washington and comes up just for the day. I guess the Ambassador cooks for himself on Christmas."

The Taquets limit their guest list stringently — for a very important reason. "No more than 10 people," explains the chef's wife. "To taste and appreciate the exquisite wines we serve for this special occasion."

But, no matter how lavish the feast and no matter how wonderful the wine and no matter how much fun they have, the Hamiltons, Lemprechts, Senas and Taquets all admit that it's good that Christmas only comes once a year. In spite of the fact they are involved, in one way or another, every other day of the year at their restaurants, neither their energy nor their waistlines would tolerate it any more often at home. ■

Lemprecht's Lamaze Sauce

3/4 c. chili sauce
1/4 c. mayonnaise
1/4 c. Indian relish
2 T. good-quality mustard
1 t. chives

Worcestershire sauce and hot pepper sauce to taste

Black pepper to taste

1 hard cooked egg

Combine all the ingredients, except the egg and serve with cold cooked shrimp, crab or lobster, or other seafood or fish salads. Garnish with chipped hard cooked egg. Makes 1-1/4 cup.

Sena's Bacalao (Salt Cod) Salad

1 lb. bacalao (Volpe semi-dried is recommended by Gino Sena)
3 ounces extra virgin olive oil
1 clove garlic, finely chopped
Juice of 2 lemons
4 - 5 T. chopped parsley
1/2 c. oil cured Italian olives

Soak bacalao in a basin of cold water set under barely trickling faucet for 36 hours, completely changing the water every 12 hours, until no salt remains. Steam fish in fresh water 10-15 minutes until fish is soft and flakes easily.

Place fish on a platter and top with chopped garlic, olive oil, juice of two lemons. Top with oil cured olives and chopped parsley. Serves 4.

Jim Hamilton's Basil Digestivo

1/2 liter alcohol (or vodka)
50 basil leaves
Zest of one lemon
2/3 lb. sugar
1-1/4 c. water

Wipe basil leaves with a damp cloth. Place lemon zest and leaves in a jar with alcohol. Close tightly and let steep 20 days, shaking once every a.m. and every p.m. Mash and strain mixture.

Boil sugar and water until sugar dissolves. Cool and add to above mixture. Bottle and let stand one month before drinking.