

Join
us for a peek
at the Christmas
events planned by
some of the area's best
known restaurateurs
and
chefs.

Maybe they'll even inspire you...

by Barbara Ann Rosenberg

HOLIDAYS Dinners



Everybody knows what bus drivers do on their holidays — ride buses, of course! At least, that's how the old tongue-in-cheek story goes. But how about chefs and restaurant owners? What do they do on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day when most restaurants are closed?

To find out, we called on three stellar Philadelphia restaurateurs: Giuseppe Sena, Nunzio Patrino, and Jeannine Mermet. All three are part owners in landmark restaurants: Sena in *La Famiglia*; Patrino in *The Monte Carlo Living Room*, and Mermet in *La Truffe*. We went to each of their

kitchens, either at home or in the restaurant, and sampled the flavors and aromas to get a close enough impression of their holiday dining plans to share the experience with you.

Carlo and Giuseppina Sena, father and mother of the Sena clan, gather their extended family for a night of traditional feasting on Christmas Eve, much as it was done in generations past in their home in Bagnoli Irpinio, about 60 miles from Naples. On other nights of the year, the Sena family recipes are prepared by son Gino, the chef at *La Famiglia*, a trailblazing Front Street restaurant which opened soon after the Senas came to Philadelphia in 1976. The family patriarch, Carlo, who trained in his profession in Italy, was the chef at the restaurant when it first opened, but he kept a very low profile and he also never cooked at home.

"On Christmas Eve, the kitchen belongs to the queens," Giuseppe said, referring to his mother, sister, and sister-in-law who spend all day preparing the 10 to 12 course meal that the family manages to devour every year. "Then we don't want to see food ever again," said Giuseppe mischievously, "at least not until Christmas Day." Giuseppe said, however, "The men are in charge of the wines."

Dinner starts with a huge platter of antipasto *giardiniera*, a vegetable appetizer topped with fresh truffles which are shipped in by air every year, according to Giuseppe. "Fresh from Italy," he said, "packed in rice - that we use later to make a wonderful risotto."

Giuseppe said that Christmas Eve is the only night of the year that he and his brothers Luca (owner of *Panorama* and *Il Bar* — much newer and also on Front Street), Gino, and Maurizio, along with sister Rosa, ever sit down together to eat and relax. "[Christmas is] the only time we can discuss *how's this* and *how's that*," Giuseppe said, "Otherwise, we're all too busy working." Another sister, Rachele, lives in Italy, and she can only share Christmas with the family occasionally.

Although Nunzio Patrino, executive chef and co-owner of *The Monte Carlo Living Room* also grew up in southern Italy, in the town of Bari in the region of Puglia, his family celebration takes on a very different cast from the Sena's — primarily because it is centered around his and his brother's young children. "We used to go to Midnight Mass," said Patrino, "but now we start our festivities at about five o'clock at the Children's Mass...the kids can't hold out until the later one — they'd be sound asleep by midnight."

After mass, Nunzio and his brother Domenico (who was formerly his sous-chef at *The Monte Carlo* and who is now chef at *Primavera Pizza Kitchen* in Ardmore) and their wives Maribel and Maria and the four children Angela, Michael, Marie Angela, and Veronica, return to Nunzio's house, just a few blocks from his restaurant. "Living so close gives me the flexibility to run home and see my kids, whenever I have a few minutes to spare," he said. "Otherwise with the hours I spend at *The Monte Carlo*, they'd never know their father."

Anyone who sees Nunzio with his children and his brother's children realizes that he's a doting father and uncle. So it seems just right, somehow, that Christmas Eve and Christmas Day celebrations are child-oriented. (Actually, whether they celebrate just on Christmas Eve or both on the Eve and the Day depends on the day of the week when Christmas falls — and whether the restaurant stays open. Nunzio said that if Christmas is on a Sunday, the restaurant is most often closed.)

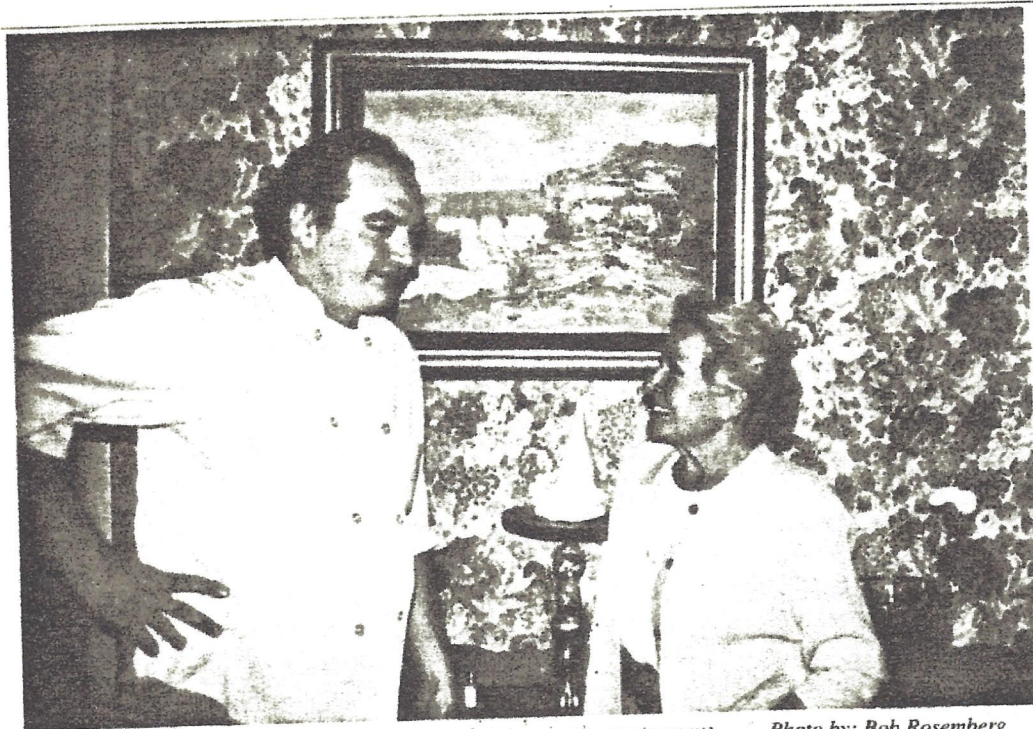
"When we come back from Mass we open some Champagne," Nunzio said. "We all love it...even the kids. As soon as we open the bottle, they start, *Champagne. Champagne.* So we give them a sip. They love to hold the champagne glasses. They feel so grown up and festive. So, we sit them on the stairs in their good clothes and pour them a little champagne, and they feel so grown up

but they can't run around and break the glasses and hurt themselves." Nunzio said that the house belongs to the children that night. "They have such a good time," he said. "They destroy the house!"

Nunzio said that after the family champagne "ritual" is over, they all sit down about 7 PM to a dinner that is prepared, partly by Nunzio (he cooks that day at *Primavera*, located just next door on South Street, making the typically Italian "seven fishes" dinner and he brings some of the food home) and partly by his wife. "She makes the pasta," he said. "That's really all our little boy likes to eat. When we ask him what he wants, he always answers, *Pasta!*"

"Then, although we serve all the seven fishes, some of us don't eat every one," Nunzio said. "My brother doesn't like *baccala* (dried salt cod). He calls it *stinky fish*, but I do, and my wife and his also like it, so we have it. I make it just like my mother does. And we always have eel (*capitone*) and mussels and clams and octopus salad and sardines and whatever else is wonderful and fresh."

Nunzio laughed when he thought about what his little girl will eat. "She mostly likes junk food...but, somehow, when we are in Italy, she'll eat green beans — raw. She takes them right off the stand in the market and eats them. And when the people say to her (in Italian), *Don't eat them raw*, she answers them (in English), *I like them just this way*," Nunzio added, "She has a mind of her own."



Chef Daniel Frank and Jeannine Mermet chatting in the restaurant

Photo by: Bob Rosemberg

Nunzio noted that the part of dinner *everyone* loves is dessert. "My wife makes that, too...with the kids' help. She makes apple pie and tiramisu...so they can lick the bowl from the tiramisu. Then they help rolling out the pie dough...and get flour all over the kitchen!" Nunzio said that they all eat everything at the table, and a lot of it! "It's a lot of fun," he added. "We all love Christmas ... the food — and the presents!"

Jeannine Mermet, the quintessential French owner (with partner, Les Smith) of Front Street pioneer, Monet-inspired, *La Truffe* and the more casual *Jeannine's Bistro* approaches Christmas Eve in an entirely different way. "I feel like crawling into bed and sleeping," she said, "after all the work, the parties, the activity that takes place at that time of the year. But, I don't, because my family comes on that night and I wouldn't miss it for anything."

Youthful as she is, Mermet has eight grandchildren. "My kids are having babies right and left," she laughed. "But, we were all very young when we started."

Jeannine said she particularly looked forward to seeing the children. "I love their sweet little faces and their sweet little voices. I sometimes find them more interesting than the adults," she said.

Mermet makes dinner for the family herself. "Except for dessert ... my daughter Patricia always makes and decorates the beautiful, classic *Buche de Noel* (Christmas Log)," she said, noting that *Buche de Noel* is served in nearly every French home, both in the mother country and, as a sentimental and delicious reminder, when people are out of the country. She said that although people may begin to assemble early in the evening to get the cooking started, "We wait for the children to decorate the tree ... and, then, since it is in my house I have to make up a story about Pere Noel (Father Christmas) ... known in this country as Santa Claus. I have to tell them he arrived at my house a day early

so they would be able to have their presents when we are together on that night! And I guess I do a pretty good job because (for now, at least) they believe me!"

Mermet said that she always begins the evening with oysters: "Belon (from Maine) if I can get them...but any really good oysters will do...the ones that taste of the sea. It's traditional to eat oysters on Christmas — and, besides, I love them."

Jeannine recalled that in France, "We always had goose as a main course, but now there are too many of us to have just *one* goose so we usually have lamb — or pork." She then described her favorite way of cooking pork: "I cook it in milk. In France we used to get the kind of milk with

the cream on the top, but I can't find it here so I use part milk — and part heavy cream! And a lot of garlic. I put it through a fine sieve after the meat is all cooked ... and then I serve it on the mashed potatoes." Mermet said that she makes the mashed potatoes with butter and milk (instead of cream or all butter). "There is a limit to what a person can digest, I think."

A good *pate* is always on Mermet's table, "or *rillettes* [a classic French spread made from meat or poultry cooked with herbs in its own juice and fat until it is meltingly tender]. "Something to munch on," she said. "Also a little smoked salmon."

Jeannine, who began her restaurant career as a chef and who now has Daniel Frank as the head chef at *La Truffe*, said that she always makes her favorite Christmas salad: "*Frizee* (tiny curly endive), fresh red beets, little cubes of apples, walnuts and garlic — I don't know how anyone can live without garlic — and a really good, strong mustard vinaigrette with raspberry vinegar for a little bit of sweetness."

Speaking about what time the party breaks up, Mermet laughed, "Too late! The children play in my bedroom and watch TV until very late — and we all have a good time!" And the next day, Mermet said, "I sit in front of the tree and dream ... I live the whole thing again!"

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Although their styles of celebrating are quite different, Sena, Patruno, and Mermet shared the same thought about Christmas. They all agreed that it's good that Christmas comes only once a year. In spite of the fact they are involved in the dining business every other day of the year, neither their energy levels nor their waistlines would tolerate it any more often at home.