FOOD

Christmas with a chef

Four Victorian culinary pros reveal their holiday faves

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Professional chefs, obviously, have an advantage over the rest of us when it comes to preparing a special meal such as Christmas dinner. They are quick with a knife and know all sorts of techniques for preparing wonderful foods.

While those skills separate them from many home cooks, where the time remains equal is in the desire to carry on, or create new, family traditions for what’s served at a celebratory meal. On that note, I asked four talented chefs what they’ll be serving during the holidays and what some of their traditions are.

Heidi Flank, cooking instructor, food writer and culinary tour guide

“We have a number of holiday food traditions in our family. We love the holidays, and any excuse to gather together and eat is great for us! While the big Christmas dinner menu always remains the same, we vary the Xmas Eve menu and Solstice dinner menu every year.

“Christmas dinner is typical, grass-fed turkey with my mom’s sage-and-bread stuffing and gravy, homemade cranberry sauce, glazed yams, mashed potatoes and our extra-yummy Brussels sprouts with chestnuts. (Try them, oh, you gluten-tolerant!) “Christmas Eve we have a big pig roast, seasoned in the living room in front of the tree, finishing up with giltwhine and as far as Christmas carols. Two years ago the smorgasbord had a Polish theme and we stuffed ourselves with perogies, pickled beets, roasted paprika salami and more. The kids especially loved that — it’s a very festive and informal way to celebrate. “The Solstice dinner is the most special, that everyone, young and old, helps to make and is eaten entirely by candlelight in rejoicing in the return of the light.”

Bill Jones, food consultant, culinary instructor and co-owner of Deharrow Farm

“After years in the restaurant business and working every conceivable holiday, we now enjoy the fact that Christmas is the time to slow down, meet with friends and keep alive some of the family traditions.

“We try to relive traditional foods to remind us of our loved ones and to celebrate the local food products here. We always have a fresh salad from the covered garden and Brussels sprouts just picked off the plant. This year we are planning a Dungeness crab feast to entertain our friends and neighbours.

“At the family home, my dad is a great cook and does the lion’s share of cooking. There is always a crowd to eat turkey and stuffing, glazed ham with mustard, brown sugar and cloves, vegetables, fresh bread, lob cabin potatoes (mashed potato rolls in flour, eggs and bread crumbs then fried crisp) and gravy with a dash of sherry. For dessert there’s a choice of three pies — apple, pumpkin and coconut cream. This has been the same menu for as long as I can remember. It’s always good, and always comforting.”

Eva Chernoff, coordinator of Thrifty Foods Tuscany Village Cooking and Lifestyle Centre

“Since I come from a European family, the most important part of the holidays is food — lucky me! For us, being in the kitchen and cooking for hours is a fun and great way to catch up with family.

“Our traditional Christmas Eve dinner used to be foraged, but we have done that in years, so this Christmas, that is what I will be serving. A fun twist for foodies is to try to keep everything local. Vancouver Island has great chefs, meats and artisan products, and using them is a great way to support local producers.

“At right is her simple recipe for homemade cranberry sauce.

“I like to serve it with Rainbow Crisp Crackers and Saltspring Island goat cheese.”

George Sassz, chef and co-owner of Stage Wine Bar
(stagewinewinebar.com)

“Christmas growing up in the Sassz household was Hungarian fish soup to start, roasted goose or duck, with white canned asparagus and roasted breadcrumb, mashed potatoes, gravy and mushroom stuffing. We ended the meal with some sort of torte.

“Nowadays, we usually bring a turkey, roast it and serve it with potatoes and squash from our fall harvest. The mushroom stuffing is still there. Dessert is now pie and ice cream.”

George Sassz uses honey, lemon and rosemary and thyme sprigs for his turkey brine.

RECIPE:

Bill’s Crab and Mushroom Cakes

These cakes make an excellent appetizer served with garlic and lemon flavoured mayonnaise. Or serve for lunch with a side salad and vinaigrette made with local honey and mustard.

Bill can teach you how to make this mixture. (The mixture should form into a ball without too much effort; if it is too wet, you can add a few bread crumbs until a drier mixture is formed. Cook a small sample to test for seasoning and adjust if needed.)

Using an ice cream scoop or 1/2 cup measure, take a scoop of the mixture and form into a ball with your hands. Place in the pan or bread crumbs and roll to coat evenly. Press the ball to form a cake and place on a tray lined with parchment paper. Repeat with remaining crab mixture.

Heat the oil in a non-stick skillet. Add the crab cakes in batches if needed, and fry until golden brown on each side. Transfer to a warm oven and rest while you finish cooking the cakes.

Heidi’s Holiday Dinner Brussels Sprouts

You can learn more about Heidi Flank’s classes and tours by visiting chefheidiflank.com.

Ingredients:

- 2 pounds Brussels sprouts
- 1/2 cup olive oil
- 1/2 cup chopped shallots
- 3 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme
- Salt and pepper

Instructions:

1. Preheat the oven to 425°F. Place the Brussels sprouts on a baking sheet. Drizzle with olive oil, shallots, garlic, thyme, salt and pepper. Toss to coat.

2. Bake for 20-25 minutes, or until the sprouts are tender and lightly browned.

Heidi’s Holiday Dinner Brussels Sprouts

Browned and caramelized don’t rush that off. If the pan looks to be burning, turn the heat down. You can turn them over and brown them on the round side, if you like, or just let them be.

Add the garlic back to the pan, along with the roasted chopped nuts. Stir to combine everything and cook together for several minutes, adding a bit of water to the pan, if necessary, until the sprouts are tender and the flavours have melded. Taste for salt and serve.

Eva’s Cranberry Sauce

You can learn more about Eva’s cooking classes and you can find her at Eva’s Cranberry Sauce.

Ingredients:

- 1 cup fresh cranberries
- 1/2 cup granulated sugar
- 1/4 cup water
- 1 tablespoon cornflour

Instructions:

1. In a large saucepan, over medium-high heat, add cranberries, sugar, water and rosemary. Bring mixture to a boil for 30 seconds. Reduce heat to medium low and simmer for 30-35 minutes. Remove rosemary sprig. Add orange zest and juice and mix well. Mixture should be thick and add a jelly-like consistency. Let cool and then cover and store in the fridge until used.

George’s Turkey Brine

This brine can also be used for duck or chicken.

Ingredients:

- 4 cups water
- 1 cup salt
- 1 cup sugar
- 1 cup brown sugar

Instructions:

1. In a large pot, bring 4 cups water to a boil. Add salt, sugar and brown sugar. Stir until dissolved. Cool to room temperature.

2. Place turkey in brine and refrigerate for at least 24 hours. Remove from brine and pat dry with paper towels. Grill or roast as usual. Discard brine.