

Christmas with a chef

Four Victoria culinary pros reveal their holiday faves



ERIC AKIS
In Our Backyard
eakis@tc.canwest.com

Professionally trained chefs, obviously, have an advantage over most folks 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 two remain equal is in the desire to carry on old, 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 Fink, 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 Christmas 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-delicious browned Brussels sprouts with chestnuts. (Try them, oh, you sprout-haters!)

"Christmas Eve we have a big picnic smorgasbord in the living room in front of the tree, finishing up with glühwein and an hour of Christmas carols. Two years ago the smorg had a Polish theme and we stuffed ourselves with perogies, pickled herring, paprika salami and more. The kids especially love this — it's a very fun 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 to rejoice in the returning of the light."

Bill Jones, food consultant, culinary instructor and co-owner of Deerholme 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 great local 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, log cabin potatoes (mashed potato rolled in flour, eggs and bread crumbs then fried crispy) 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, co-ordinator 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 fondue, but we haven't done that in years, so this Christmas, that is what I will be serving. A fun twist for fondue is to try to keep everything local. Vancouver Island has great cheeses, 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 Raincoast Crisps crackers and Saltspring Island goat cheese."

George Szasz, chef and co-owner of Stage Wine Bar (stagewinebar.com)

"Christmas growing up in the Szasz household was Hungarian fish soup to start, roasted goose or duck with white canned asparagus and toasted bread crumbs, roasted potatoes, gravy and mushroom stuffing. We ended the meal with some sort of torte.

"Nowadays, we usually brine 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 Szasz uses honey, lemon and rosemary and thyme sprigs for his turkey brine.

RECIPES

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. You can learn about Bill's cooking classes and other culinary adventures by visiting his website mag-north.bc.ca.

Preparation time:

30 minutes

Cooking time:

6 to 8 minutes

Makes: 8 cakes

1 lb. white fish (snapper, pacific cod, halibut or sole)

1/4 cup whipping cream

2 cups crab meat (from about a 1.5-lb. crab)

1 cup mushrooms (pine, button, enoki, etc.), diced fine

1 tsp minced garlic

1 green onion, thinly sliced

■ salt and pepper to taste

1 cup panko or bread crumbs

2 Tbsp canola oil

In a food processor, add the fish and pulse until a rough paste is formed. Add the cream and process until a smooth paste is obtained.

Transfer to a mixing bowl and add the crab (without any liquid), mushrooms, garlic, green onion, salt and pepper. Mix until a smooth mixture is formed. (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 1/4 cup measure, take a scoop of the mixture and form into a ball with your hands. Place in the panko 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 Fink's classes and tours by visiting chefheidifink.com.

Preparation time:

20 minutes

Cooking time: About 12 minutes

Makes: 4 to 6 servings

1 to 1 1/2 lbs. Brussels sprouts

1/4 cup, or more, butter

4 to 6 cloves garlic, sliced

1/2 cup to 1 cup shelled roasted chestnuts (it's easiest to use the ones in the can from an Italian deli), or 1/2 cup to 1 cup toasted walnuts, chopped

■ salt to taste

Bring a large pot of salted water to the boil. Meanwhile, cut sprouts in half lengthwise through the stem. When the water is boiling, drop in the prepared sprouts and cook for about 30 seconds to 1 minute. Drain and spread on a tray to cool.

Heat a large skillet over medium heat. Add the butter and let melt. Add the garlic and sauté until pale golden. Scoop out garlic with a slotted spoon and set aside. Add the Brussels sprouts to the pan, arranging them cut-side down, if you can. Sprinkle with salt. Let them cook until they are

browned and caramelized (don't rush this!). 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 leave as is.

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 and the cooking classes she presents and coordinates by visiting thriftyfoods.com and clicking on cooking and lifestyle.

Preparation time: A few minutes

Cooking time: 30 to 35 minutes

Makes: About 2 1/2 cups

1 bag fresh cranberries
1 cup granulated sugar
1 cup water
1 sprig fresh rosemary (optional)
■ zest and juice of one orange

In a large sauce pan, 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 have a jelly-like consistency. Let cool and then cover and store in the fridge until needed.

George's Turkey Brine

This brine can also be used for duck or chicken. **Preparation time:** 5 minutes
Cooking time: About 6 to 8 minutes to boil
Makes: enough brine for an 18- to 20-lb. turkey

6 litres water

1 cup kosher salt

1/2 cup honey

18 to 20 bay leaves

30 garlic cloves

5 rosemary sprigs

5 thyme sprigs

3 Tbsp black peppercorns

3 Tbsp pickling spice

4 lemons, zested and juiced

Place all ingredients in a pot and bring to a boil. Remove from the heat and let cool. To brine a turkey, place in a bucket and pour brine over it. Refrigerate and let sit overnight. Remove turkey from brine and roast as usual. Discard brine.

Note: Brining turkey is a process designed to enhance flavour and make the bird more moist after cooking.

Eric Akis's columns appear in the Life section Wednesday and Sunday.