

New York
RESIDENT

World of Food: Memories of Holiday Feasts Around the Globe

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By Sylvie Bigar

As the frenetic holiday season begins, a few chefs took time to reminisce about their culinary roots.



Venison in SWITZERLAND

"I grew up in the boonies," said Ralf Kuettel, owner and executive chef at Trestle on Tenth, "in a town called Turbenthal, close to Zürich in Switzerland. "On the 24th, we had canapés, fancy sandwiches on white bread (the only time during the year we had white bread) but the real feast was on the 25th. Because my father was a game warden, we often had duck or game, venison with chestnuts or even a 15-pound ham. The kitchen housed a large wood-burning oven where we roasted the meats," he said. Chef Kuettel remembers going to the forest to cut down a six- or seven-foot-tall tree and bringing it home. He was then forbidden to enter the living room until Christmas morning when he was told, "The angel was here, you can come in," and was finally able to admire the shimmering lights, all decorated by the angel of course.

Roast duck in AUSTRIA

From his Tyrolean childhood in Austria, Daniel Angerer, owner and executive chef of Klee Brasserie on Ninth Avenue, remembers how good a cook his mother was. "On Christmas Eve, she made classic regional dishes such as roast duck served with quince, but we lived very close to the Italian border and were also eating Italian pastries and panettone. I only realized later that these dishes were not Austrian," he said. "On the 25th, we would trek around town to see relatives and exchange cookies. Now, my mother had started making these sugar cookies a month before and she would store them in metal tins in the basement. On New Year's Eve, we would barely stay awake until midnight but the homemade chicken soup helped. We would then

watch the fireworks and crash,” he added.



Latkes in LONG ISLAND

Born in Roslyn, N.Y., of Russian and Romanian ancestry, Todd Mitgang, executive chef and co-owner at Crave Ceviche Bar on Second Avenue near 50th Street, remembers the amazing potato latkes his grandmother cooked. “Grandma didn’t fry them in vegetable oil; she would make them in what I called chicken fat, so they came out crispy and not gooey.

Years later, my grandmother had passed and I went around, looking for chicken fat. No one, not even in Little Neck, knew what I was talking about until a clerk said ‘Schmaltz! You want schmaltz.’” He also recalls “potlegel,” a Romanian recipe for roasted eggplant, chopped tomatoes, cucumbers, garlic and parsley in lemon juice and olive oil. His favorite holiday meal still has to involve brisket and whatever way it’s cooked, said Mitgang, “it has to melt in your mouth.” For New Year’s Eve he remembers toasting with his parents and a Shirley Temple.

Leg of Lamb in FLUSHING

Rick Moonen, executive chef of RM Seafood at the Mandalay Bay Resort in Las Vegas, grew up in Flushing. “It was such a melting pot, typical America. Everybody was hanging out on the front porch and even though we did not experience memorable meals during the holidays in my home, I learned so much by watching what my friends’ families ate. Across from us was a large Greek family and that’s where I tasted my first leg of lamb. My father had come to New York from Holland on a ship, and the waters were so rough that everyone was sick. They drank a consommé made of mutton that was supposed to help with the nausea. He never wanted to taste lamb after that,” he said. On Christmas Eve, his Italian friends invited him over for the Feast of the Seven Fishes. “I walked in and this insane-looking buffet

is set up with anchovies curled up around pimientos, seafood casseroles, salted cod, pasta with calamari. Today, my ideal Christmas meal consists of prime rib with Yorkshire pudding and glazed carrots accompanied by...a big family," he said.

Roast Chicken in VIETNAM

Growing up in Saigon, Michael Bao Huynh, chef-owner of Bun on Grand Street, Christmas was a French-Vietnamese fusion. "We would make large birthday-type cakes, often flavored with vanilla since chocolate was rarely found. We would roast a whole chicken, make a salad, very French. But for New Year's, the stores and the whole city would close down for a week or 10 days, so we made food that could keep. In this case, a braised pork belly in coconut juice with pickled vegetables." When he arrived in New York, he lived with an Italian family and started eating turkey for Christmas. Today, "instead of turkey, I will cook a guinea hen and I'll use Berkshire pork belly. It's three times better and three times more expensive," he said.

"Cream of Wheat" in INDIA

For Jehangir Mehta, holiday foods in his native Mumbai originally meant a cream-of-wheat sort of dish called rawa, based on semolina. "It was similar to a cream of wheat with dried fruits. We had it for the first day of school or for a holiday," said Mehta, a creative pastry chef who worked at Jean Georges, Union Pacific, Compass and Sapa, and now runs his own sweet and savory show at Graffiti in the East Village. "But the great thing about growing up in India was that you got to celebrate all your friends' holidays since people came from very different backgrounds and religions. At Graffiti," he said, "I mix global influences but serve two pretty traditional Indian dishes, a lentil soup and a flat bread with eggplant."