

# The Holiday Table: Valley Chefs' Holiday Traditions

Written by Melissa Larsen

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**Grandma's noodles and fresh-baked yeast rolls slathered in butter and dill. Roasted chestnut soup and sweet panettone French toast. Six Valley chefs share their favorite holiday dishes and traditions—as well as their insight on new seasonal food trends and the tastiest treats to gift (and which they hope to receive).**

*Photography by Kayla Fisher*

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## **Chef Cullen Campbell of Okra and Crudo**

**Favorite holiday tradition?** Decorating the tree with the family. It's the perfect mix of nostalgia and making new memories with family and friends.

**Cherished holiday memory?** Growing up we always gathered for a big Christmas Eve dinner. Then the kids went to sleep so our parents could wake us up at midnight to open gifts. I always remember struggling to stay up to midnight on my own, but it never happened.

**Favorite foods to prepare during the holiday season?** Anything duck! Most of my family is from the South and were always big duck hunters, so it always popped up at our holiday dinners.

**Any new holiday food traditions?** Feast of the Seven Fishes, which is a Southern Italian Christmas Eve tradition of fasting from meat and instead counting down to Christmas with a smorgasbord of seafood dishes. Throw in some pastas, veggies and lots of wine, and you've got a true Italian-style feast.

**Dishes at-home cooks should prepare this season?** Casseroles! It sounds old fashioned, but they are easy to prep ahead of time, and then you just throw it in the oven and get to hang out with your guests while it cooks. Plus, you don't have to make your grandma's casserole; feel free to experiment and have some fun with a taco, spaghetti or enchilada casserole.

**Tip for making holiday cooking easy for the at-home chef?** Drink wine, and relax. You're hosting family and friends, right? Don't overthink it, and have fun.

**Ideas for homemade food gifts?** I like to give out some of my baking recipes and dry ingredients in a mason jar. Just add wet ingredients, and bake.

**Favorite spots to visit in the Valley during the holiday season?** El Chorro for the beef stroganoff. It's such an underrated comfort classic.

## **Fast Holiday Faves**

**Cookie:** *Oatmeal butterscotch*

**Cocktail:** *Martini*

**Carol:** *"Christmas in Hollis" by Run DMC*

**Movie:** *"A Muppet Christmas Carol"*

**Gift to give:** *Coal*

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**Gift to receive:** Fernet Branca. You can't go wrong with a tasty Italian liqueur.

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## Chef Julie Moreno of Jewel's Bakery & Cafe

**Favorite holiday tradition?** Everyone gathering at my mom's house for Christmas Eve is amazing. We have a huge feast, and the kids open a ton of presents.

**Cherished holiday memory?** Before we celebrated Christmas Eve at my mom's, it was always at my grandmother's house. We had the hugest pile of presents anyone had ever seen. It would take forever to open them all, and the whole room would be filled with wrapping paper.

**Favorite foods to prepare during the holiday season?** Fresh-baked yeast rolls are always so comforting covered with melted butter and dill.

**Any new holiday food traditions?** I think going out to eat at resorts is getting more popular. You can just sit back and enjoy all the food with no work.

**Dishes at-home cooks should prepare this season?** Make your own pies [see sidebar]! I never go to anyone's house where they make the pies. They always are store-bought. They are so much better fresh-baked and warm.

**Tip for making holiday cooking easy for the at-home chef?** Prep a lot of things in the few days before. You can get a few things done each day, and heat them all up the day of. It makes for a stress-free day.

**Ideas for homemade food gifts?** Fresh-baked pies! Plates of holiday cookies!

**Favorite spots to visit in the Valley during the holiday season?** We love to drive around to the houses with big light displays. The newspaper will publish a map with the homes. Many will have music, hot chocolate and goodies.

## Fast Holiday Faves

**Cookie:** Cream cheese spritz

**Cocktail:** Adult eggnog

**Carol:** "Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer"

**Movie:** "The Grinch"

**Gift to give:** Holiday cookies

**Gift to receive:** Who doesn't love money? Or a new car?

## Chef Moreno's Pie-Making Pointers

1. To achieve a beautiful shiny golden crust, mix one egg yolk with one tablespoon of heavy cream and brush the top of the pie before baking.
  2. When fruit is in season, stock up on it. Prepare it as you would the pie filling with all the ingredients and freeze for later use.
  3. Don't be afraid to use different spices than what the recipe calls for. Adding cardamom to an apple pie, for example, or adding lemon zest to a blueberry pie can give it a different and unique flavor.
  4. Roll out the pie crust between two sheets of parchment or wax paper making it easy to flip into the pie pan.
  5. Make your fruit pies ahead of time in a metal pan to bake another day. Wrap them up tightly in aluminum foil or plastic wrap, and freeze. Bake the pie straight from the freezer, adding 20 to 40 extra minutes of bake time.
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## Chef Justin Beckett of Beckett's Table and Southern Rail

**Favorite holiday tradition?** I am a huge fan of putting the tree up. The first night the tree comes home we always put on the white lights and lay underneath the tree. Sometimes it even involves a delicious lasagna.

**Cherished holiday memory?** I think the holidays are all about food and family. I have many happy memories, and they all involve both of these.

**Favorite foods to prepare during the holiday season?** My grandmother used to make popovers with homemade jam. I also love to eat panettone French toast (panettone is an Italian bread with dried fruits inside).

**Any new holiday food traditions?** I have noticed a lot more families going out for the holiday meals, and the next generation setting up their own traditions.

**Dishes at-home cooks should prepare this season?** I recommend trying all different types of roasted vegetables. Go to your farmers' market, and try veggies you don't normally choose. I have two tips for this: first, sometimes blanching the veggies ahead of time will help save you time during the roasting and well as keep the veggies juicy. The second is to always add in [an ingredient] that will enhance the flavor of the veggies, like lemon juice, apple cider vinegar, brown sugar, brown butter or herbs, to name a few.

**Tip for making holiday cooking easy for the at-home chef?** I would always recommend making sure your prep is done and cleaned up before your guests arrive. Then you can 'throw' together your meals or snacks in minutes while your guests are watching and enjoying wine in your kitchen.

**Ideas for homemade food gifts?** I think jams and spiced nuts are simple and delicious ways to share your cooking skills with your friends.

**Favorite spots to visit in the Valley during the holiday season?** We love to go to the Desert Botanical Garden for luminarias and up north to Flagstaff for snowball fights.

## Fast Holiday Faves

**Cookie:** Thumbprint cookies (a sugar cookie rolled in nuts and filled with jam)

**Cocktail:** Coquito (Spanish eggless eggnog)

**Carol:** "Little Drummer Boy"

**Movie:** "Elf" makes me laugh until I am blue in the face.

**Gift to give:** Cookbooks

**Gift to receive:** Gadgets and electronics

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## Chef Christopher Gross of Christopher's and Crush Lounge

**Favorite holiday tradition?** Coffee on Christmas morning with my partner, Jamie, and the kids. We all open gifts, lounge around and play

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games—it's as easygoing as it gets.

**Cherished holiday memory?** Christmas Eve dinner with Jamie, my mom and all the family. We usually have roasted turkey with vegetables and my grandmother's noodles, paired with the perfect Provence rosé.

**Favorite foods to prepare during the holiday season?** My grandmother's noodles! They are hand-cut and heavily dusted with flour, and then dried for an hour or so. After that, we cook them in chicken stock until the broth is thickened, almost like a gravy. She made them for me every Christmas because that was the only thing I would eat as a child, other than plain white turkey meat.

**Any new holiday food traditions?** Abandoning the turkey. This year we might do a roast pig or lamb over a wood fire to mix it up.

**Dishes at-home cooks should prepare this season?** Roasted chestnut soup. (You can find the recipe at [ChristophersAZ.com](http://ChristophersAZ.com).)

**Tip for making holiday cooking easy for the at-home chef?** Keep the party outside of the kitchen. Make charcuterie and cheese plates, and keep Champagne well-stocked in another room so guests mingle away from the kitchen. Socializing while cooking such a big meal can prove to be difficult

**Ideas for homemade food gifts?** Macarons are always a festive holiday treat, as are at-home chocolate truffles.

**Favorite spots to visit in the Valley during the holiday season?** The Coach House is a fun spot to kick back with a drink and admire their crazy light show.

## **Fast Holiday Faves**

**Cookie:** *Chocolate*

**Cocktail:** *Penicillin*

**Carol:** *You don't want me to sing!*

**Movie:** *"Bad Santa"*

**Gift to give:** *Laphroaig Whiskey* **Gift to receive:** *Laphroaig Whiskey*