

In exclusive

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INVITATION TO THE WHITE HOUSE BY HILLARY RODHAM CLINTON WITH CHERYL MERSE  
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## "Choosing a decorating theme is the first thing I have to do every year—and it is a closely guarded state secret"

**NOT LONG AFTER** my husband's first inauguration, with the after-Christmas sales just winding down, chief usher Gary Walters and then-social secretary Ann Stock sat down with me to deliver some surprising news: It was already time to start planning for the next Christmas season.

When I was a child, my family waited until Christmas Eve to put up our tree, and we usually didn't finish decorating until late that night. At the White House, however, there are dozens of trees and thousands of visitors to prepare for. I learned I was expected to oversee all the preparations—from selecting the overall theme of the celebration to menus, decorations, parties and music that make it all come alive.

Every detail has to be carefully planned and executed, with the help of a supporting cast of staff and volunteers, in order to make all the visitors who walk into the White House (and the millions of others who make a "virtual visit" to [www.whitehouse.gov](http://www.whitehouse.gov)) feel like they're at home—America's home.

Each First Family has made its unique mark on holidays at the White House. We've added to those traditions and started some of our own. The children from local schools who gather around Bill as he reads "A Visit From St. Nicholas" are following not only a family ritual (since we used to read Chelsea the same poem), but also a two-hundred-year-old tradition of filling the House with children during the holidays.

There are few events more special at the White House than the arrival of the official Christmas tree, carried up the back driveway on a horse-drawn cart and accompanied by the family donating it. Carrying on the tradition begun by Jacqueline Kennedy, we decorate the official tree in the Blue Room around one central theme, which we now also use for all the decorations throughout the House.

Choosing a theme is the first thing I have to do every year. It is a closely guarded state secret—never revealed to the press and public until the tree and House are fully decorated. In recent years, the White House has been transformed into various settings, including the *Nutcracker Suite*, which had special meaning for us because of the many years we watched Chelsea perform in this holiday favorite.

During this holiday season, more than 150,000 people of all ages, races and religions will visit the decorated White House. Many will take special candlelight tours, a tradition begun by Pat Nixon. Guests will see the White House tree illuminated by 2,700 lights, surrounded by a green velvet tree skirt made in 1993 by quilters from every state, and covered (continued on page 186)



Clockwise from top: The library; the State Dining Room; the First Couple, 1995; a festive menu; official Christmas cards from 1996 and 1998; a gala dinner in the Diplomatic Room



PHOTOS, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: SHARON FARMER; ROBERT CLARK; BOB MCNEELY, SHARON FARMER. MENU REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF THE WHITE HOUSE. CARDS, REPRODUCED WITH THE PERMISSION OF THE WHITE HOUSE. TOP



## DINNER

Basil Shrimp and Roasted Tomatoes  
 Marinated Artichokes and Sweet Pepper Salad  
 Curry Orange Barbequed Rack of Lamb  
 Crispy Rice Cake  
 Bok Choy and Gingered Vegetables  
 Spinach, Endive, and Mâche Salad  
 Red Stilton Apple and Walnut Tart  
 Port Wine Dressing  
 Coffee Mousse Christmas Log  
 Caramel Sauce



AU BON CLIMAT *Paris, France 1899*  
 SAINTSBURY *Paris, France 1899*  
 PHELPS *Essex, 1896*

The White House  
 Washington

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On November 9th,  
bring home your  
child's favorite  
gorilla.



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Pleasing green tea drinkers since 1892.

## CHRISTMAS AT THE WHITE HOUSE

Continued from page 144

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As much as Bill and I love our Christmas traditions, we wanted to be sure Americans of other faiths felt welcome during the holiday season. Beginning in 1993, we put a menorah in the West Wing lobby to honor the festival of Chanukah. The President also lights a very special menorah in the Oval Office, created by Maryam Baram, an Israeli craftsman who lost his young son in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. To commemorate the end of Ramadan, the holy month of prayer and fasting for Muslims, and to increase understanding of Islam, we also began hosting Eid ul-Fitr celebrations in 1996. [Editor's note: The date of Ramadan varies from year to year.]

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As in any house during the holidays, the air is filled with the smell of those irresistible sweets that we eat every December. Guests may sample one of some 100,000 cookies and pastries or a slice of one of 250 fruitcakes that have been marinating in our walk-in refrigerators since July, all made by White House pastry chef Roland Mesnier and his assistants. Roland's holiday baking requires approximately 500 pounds of sugar and 300 pounds of chocolate!

Some of the liveliest moments here, however, happen behind the scenes during the three days in early December when the White House closes its doors to be decorated. The elves who undertake the daunting task are volunteers—mostly professional florists and decorators from all over the country. The chief floral designer of the White House, Nancy Clark, started as a volunteer herself more than twenty years ago.

When they come together, it is

almost like a family reunion—only this one is spent putting up the ornaments, hanging more than 300 wreaths and stringing 720 lengths of garland. We love watching this transformation, and find time to drop by unannounced to visit with volunteers. Sometimes we even tiptoe downstairs late at night to sneak a peek.

And every year, after the official parties have ended several days before Christmas, we begin our own private celebration. Some things have changed in recent years—like the excitement of having our daughter home from college. But most of our traditions were passed down from our own parents or were launched during our first holidays together as a family. The President joins other last-minute shoppers at

local stores on Christmas Eve. We still bake cookies and sing carols. And every year we unpack all our ornaments, and, as Bill hangs them on our tree in the upstairs Yellow Oval Room, we retell the story and meaning behind each one. We have dinner together on Christmas Eve with family and friends before attending church services at the Washington National Cathedral.

On Christmas morning, after we open gifts and eat (too much), our home looks a lot like many others. All that is left are our memories and gifts, scraps of wrapping paper and bows, the laughter and excitement of family members and our gratitude for the spirit of the season.

That is, until February, when it begins all over again.

## THE BINGE GENERATION

*Continued from page 123*

be fatal. "If you did a random survey of teenagers, I'd estimate that no more than five percent know they could die from an alcohol overdose," says Mathea Falco, president of Drug Strategies, a nonprofit research institute in Washington, D.C.

Girls may be at the greatest risk. Today, drinking rates are rising faster among female adolescents than males in the U.S. More than half of all tenth-grade girls reported drinking in the past year—up 38 percent since 1993, according to a government study. "Girls say they drink due to stress and the desire to fit in, but they're also saying they drink to get drunk," says Falco. "This is an important health issue because research shows that the same amount [of alcohol] has a bigger impact on them than it does on boys."

Tracey Meyer of Lancaster, New York, started drinking when she was thirteen, shortly after her parents divorced. "I threw up and blacked out a lot, but I just kept drinking because I put no value on my life," she says.



Tracey Meyer drinking at school.

During her freshman year in high school, Tracey would bring beer or vodka mixed with iced tea to her locker so that she could drink during the day. After being suspended several times, she finally dropped out.

A counselor recommended that she check into a rehabilitation center. "I didn't really think anything would change," says Tracey. "But somehow, the people at the center got through to me, and I began to see that there could be a point to life." She completed the rehab program last February, and is now attending college. "I have a lot to live for now that I'm no longer drowning in drink," she says.

## REVERSING THE TREND

To combat the problem of underage drinking, experts say that the government and the alcohol industry, as well as individual parents must play a role.

Some critics believe that the alcohol industry must work harder to promote responsible drinking practices. "There's been a major effort by some in the industry to exclude

*(continued)*

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"There's no mystery to mouth-watering meals... anytime."

The secret's in the bag."



## Make-It-Easy Chicken Dinner

- 1 Reynolds® Oven Bag, large size (14" x 20")
- 2 tablespoons flour
- 1 envelope golden onion soup mix
- 1 cup water
- 3 medium carrots, cut in chunks
- 2 medium red potatoes, cut in wedges
- 1 medium green bell pepper, cubed
- 6 chicken pieces, skin removed
- Seasoned salt, pepper

PREHEAT oven to 350°F.

SHAKE flour in Reynolds® Oven Bag place in 13x9x2-inch baking pan.

ADD onion soup mix and water to oven bag. Squeeze oven bag to blend in flour. Add carrots, potatoes and green pepper to oven bag. Turn oven bag to coat ingredients with sauce. Sprinkle chicken with seasonings, add to oven bag. Arrange chicken and vegetables in an even layer in oven bag. CLOSE oven bag with nylon tie, cut six 1/2-inch slits in top.

BAKE 55 to 60 minutes or until chicken is tender. Easy Clean Up. Makes 4 servings.



For recipes and tips, call 1-800-745-4000, or visit [www.reynoldskitchens.com](http://www.reynoldskitchens.com).

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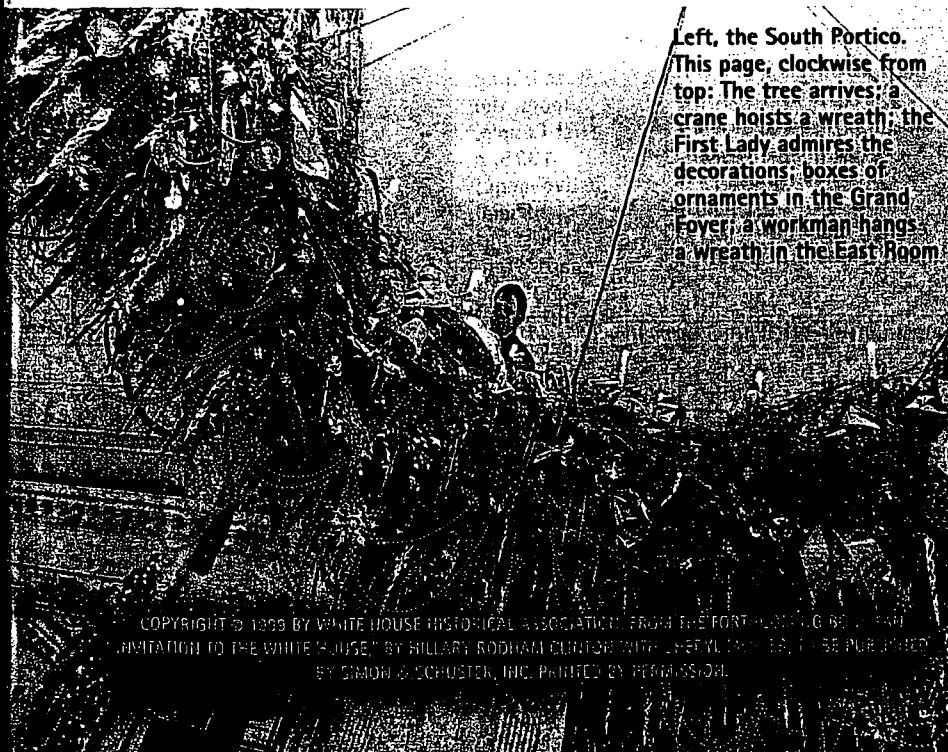
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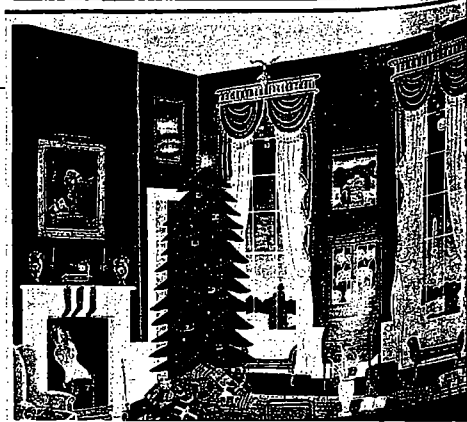
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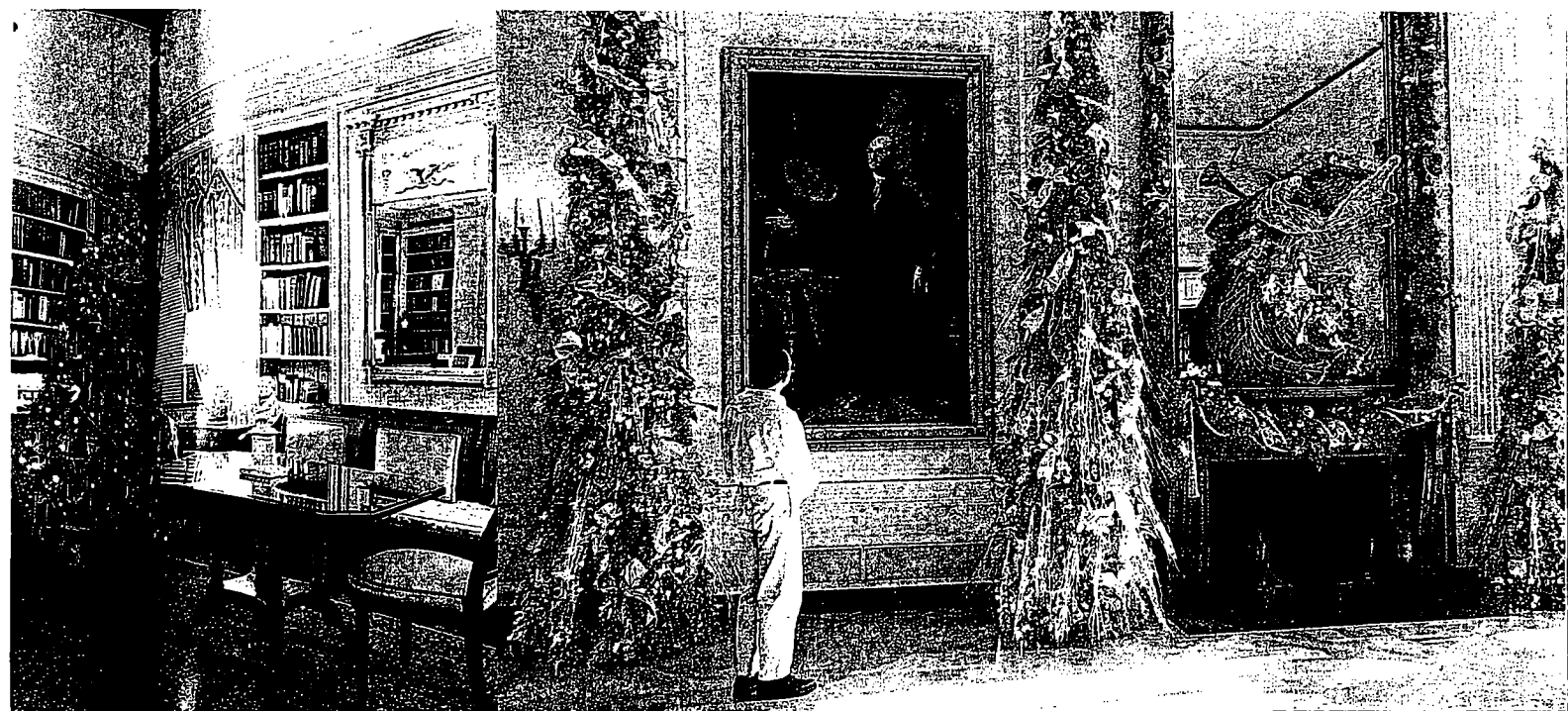
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Au Bon Climat *Pinot Gris* 1989  
 Saintsbury *Pinot Noir* 1995  
 Phelps *Travis* 1996

The White House  
 Washington, D.C.

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