

A California Holiday Feast

Traditions of Europe meet West Coast organic sensibilities in this festive and flavorful meal.

BY SUSAN KOSTRZEWA

PHOTOS JON VAN GORDER

For most families, the holidays are a time to celebrate tradition at the table, and Chef Gia Passalacqua, co-owner of Dry Creek Delectables in Healdsburg, Calif., says she's the first to agree.

"The holidays are the perfect time to bring out your once-a-year traditions," she says, but adds, "It's also a fun time to try a new twist and create new traditions."

As a personal and professional chef, Passalacqua's passionate about sourcing local ingredients—a philosophy now spreading beyond West Coast tables to kitchens nationwide. "Your dishes will be tastier, fresher and it also builds community as you support local farmers and purveyors," she explains. "You may not be able to source everything locally, but start with one or two things." She also recommends growing fresh herbs in your front or back garden, or "even on the windowsill if you're in an apartment or small place. Even that will make a big difference in the flavors of your food."

Past-meets-present culinary approaches and a focus on local products fueled Passalacqua's preparation of the Boisset/Gallo feast (see page 52)—an endeavor she says had special meaning beyond the fact that the dishes represented the iconic foods of France and

Italy. "Gina and I love to cook and are good friends, and I know the recipes they passed on to me are near and dear to hers and Jean-Charles' hearts," Passalacqua explains.

The menu's diversity—lighter, simply assembled fare paired with rich, more indulgent dishes—makes for a meal that will appeal to varied palates, tastes and even ages, she says, a reflection of the large gatherings for which they were prepared in Gina and Jean-Charles' time growing up.

In addition to offering a fun, family-friendly menu to guests, Passalacqua also says to consider the surroundings. For wintertime holiday gatherings, "consider what's in season," not only in the dishes, but in your décor, too. "Set your table by bringing the seasonal outdoor inside," Passalacqua says. That can be in the form of leaves, branches, berries or fruit. "The ambiance you create is so important and it complements the food and wine you are serving."

Passalacqua also suggests capturing the delicious flavors of summer at your holiday table by pickling peppers and vegetables while they're in season. "I use my larder so that I have dried beans, sun-dried tomatoes and even fennel pollen for dishes throughout the year," she says. The novelty of warm weather vegetables adds a thoughtful flair to a festive party or dinner.

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Claudine Boisset's Braised Rabbit a la Moutarde

"Also from my mother, this dish is also fantastic with Pinot Noir," says Jean-Charles. "It has a creamy sauce but is still light and not too filling."

A rabbit of about 2.5 pounds, cut in pieces*
¼ cup olive oil
¼ cup flour, or enough to coat the pieces of rabbit
¼ cup Dijon mustard
2 to 3 shallots, minced
Laurel
Thyme
Rosemary
Salt and pepper
Domaine de la Vougeraie Clos Blanc de Vougeot (or Russian River Chardonnay)
5 tablespoons crème fraîche (or substitute sour cream)
Parsley, chopped

**Available through Devil's Gulch Ranch, devilsgulchranch.com*

In a Dutch oven, preheat olive oil. Lightly coat the rabbit pieces with flour then thickly with mustard.

Brown the pieces in the Dutch oven, a few at a time to be sure they are evenly browned, and not crowded. Turn often so that they do not burn. Once all are browned, place them all into the Dutch oven and add minced shallots. Add herbs (and salt and pepper if needed). Add a little water so that it will not burn.

Cook, covered, for approximately 20 minutes then check and turn the rabbit pieces delicately over. Add some white wine if you wish, but not so much that the rabbit becomes washed off and white. Simmer for 15 minutes more and remove rabbit onto a warm dish; cover to keep warm.

Slowly add the cream to the drippings in the Dutch oven, stirring to create a sauce. Ladle sauce over rabbit just before serving. Decorate with chopped parsley. *Serves 6.*

Wine recommendation: Delicate but layered, this dish pairs well with Pinot Noir or bigger wines such as the 2005 Gallo Family Estate Cabernet Sauvignon or 2005 Raymond Vineyards Napa Valley Generations Cabernet Sauvignon.

