

PARTIES WITH PANACHE

THREE VETERAN
GAINESVILLE HOSTS
SHARE THEIR SECRETS OF
SUCCESSFUL HOLIDAY
ENTERTAINING

STORY BY KATE BARNES
PHOTOS BY ERICA BROUGH

WITH THE WINTER holidays bearing down like the Polar Express, it's tempting to believe that it's too late or too stressful to throw a party. But experienced party-givers insist this just isn't so. With a bit of planning and a well-directed effort, even a full-scale bash with a hundred guests can be a success.

THE PLAN

However sketchy, there has to be a plan that breaks down the elements of the occasion into manageable bites. Interior designer Donna Cohen calls this "a kind of template I keep in my head that can be adapted to fit the occasion. Then it's a matter of carrying out the plan."

Cynthia Chestnut, retired public health administrator and former Alachua County and Gainesville city commissioner, holds the family's Christmas dinner for more than 30 people each year in her Duck Pond home. "Never having the luxury of time during the holidays," she says, "I make a detailed shopping list well in advance and begin before Thanksgiving to stock non-perishable ingredients and supplies whenever I do my normal family shopping."

In contrast, County Commissioner Paula Delaney admits to rushing around in the days ahead of her large family holiday dinner, "throwing things in the shopping cart" just before she begins to cook. But she has a mental list of the dishes she will prepare that "somehow works as a plan," she laughs.

INTERIOR DESIGNER DONNA COHEN SAYS HOSTING LARGE, BUFFET-STYLE HOLIDAY PARTIES FOR FRIENDS AND CLIENTS IS EASY WITH A LITTLE PLANNING.





ABOVE: CYNTHIA AND CHARLES CHESTNUT III COOK A "SOULFUL CHRISTMAS DINNER." AT LEFT: COHEN'S FESTIVE DÉCOR INCLUDES CHINA AND GLASSWARE FROM A NEIGHBORHOOD EXCHANGE.



THE DÉCOR

Every year at the holidays, Cohen gives large, glamorous parties for a mixture of friends and clients. With a background in catering as well as decorating, and a house designed for her style of entertaining, Cohen pulls off the most elaborate of events with aplomb.

"Since I was raised Catholic and my husband is Jewish, we celebrate everything," she says, and she always tries to "honor both of our cultures" in her decorating. She likes to mix Hanukkah wine glasses with Christmas china and menorahs with church candles. One year she "snuck a few branches with white lights on each side of the doorway, which isn't customary for Hanukkah, but my husband loved it."

Chestnut invites a few women friends over the day after Thanksgiving for some wine and a blitz of decorating. They festoon the house with family heirloom decorations and even put up the Christmas tree. "Once they've been here,



DELANEY

it's done," says Chestnut, "and I don't touch it till it's time to take it all down."

Delaney usually sets up her "baroque" buffet and tables a few days before her event. She, too, has family decorations, china, and flatware in abundance, and likes to decorate each table in a different color theme. Her pride and joy is a gift from her father ... a set of china with gators painted on it that she mixes with red and green plates to create a "Gator Christmas" that she says "is right out of *Southern Living*."

Cohen belongs to an informal neighborhood exchange of serving platters, china and glassware that she taps into for her larger events, "so nothing is plastic." Delaney and Chestnut also borrow and swap with family members to round out their settings and décor.

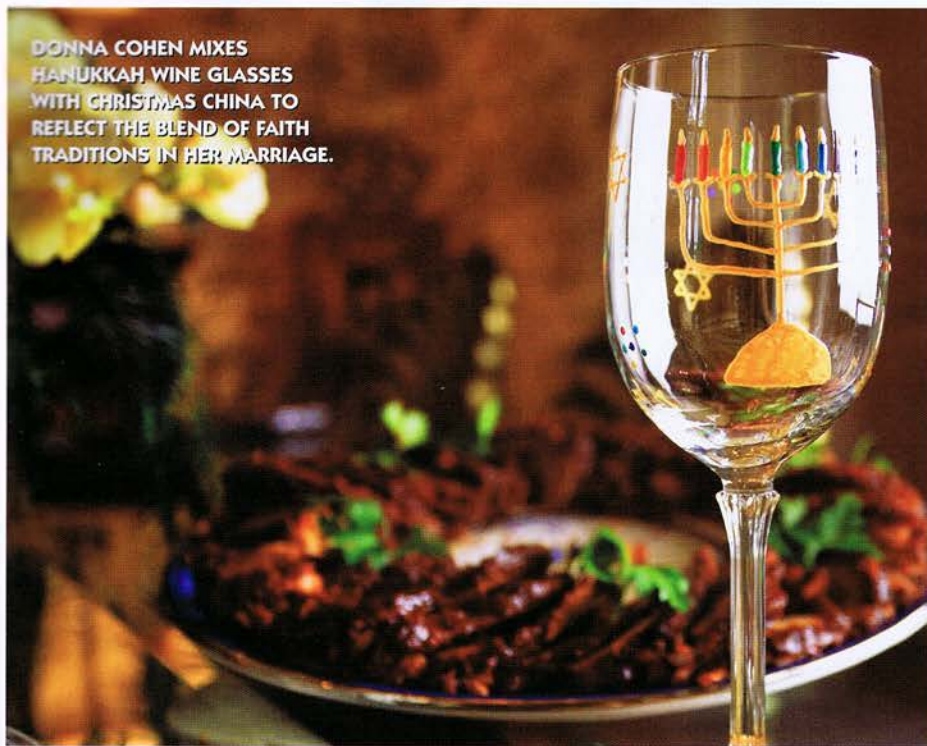
THE FOOD

Christmas Day dawns early for Cynthia Chestnut, who still cooks the main elements of her family's traditional Southern dinner herself. The turkey and ham go in the oven, and the

SCALLOPED OYSTERS

Courtesy of Donna Cohen

DONNA COHEN MIXES HANUKKAH WINE GLASSES WITH CHRISTMAS CHINA TO REFLECT THE BLEND OF FAITH TRADITIONS IN HER MARRIAGE.



- 2 pints (or more) oysters and liquor
- 4 cups cracker crumbs (Ritz or saltines)
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon cracked black pepper
- 1 cup butter
- 2 cups heavy cream
- 1 teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
- 6 drops Tabasco sauce or cayenne pepper
- 2 cups fresh breadcrumbs

1. Butter a 3- or 4-quart casserole. Put a layer of cracker crumbs on the bottom. Cover with half of the oysters. Sprinkle with salt and pepper and dot with butter. Mix the oyster liquor, heavy cream, nutmeg, Worcestershire sauce, and Tabasco sauce together.
2. Pour half of the cream mixture over the first layer, followed by a layer of breadcrumbs. Cover with the remaining oysters, the cream mixture, salt, pepper and dotted butter. Add the rest of the breadcrumbs and then the cracker crumbs. Dot generously with butter. Bake at 400 degrees for 30-40 minutes or until bubbly.

collard greens are washed and set to simmer for hours, since, says Chestnut, "the number one ingredient in Southern cooking is patience." Charles Chestnut prepares his family's favorite, white acre peas, with secret spices that also take hours of slow cooking. There's a sweet potato casserole and a favorite dressing that need only to be warmed up before serving.

Family members begin arriving about noon, and the formal dinner on family tableware is served when all have gathered. Some guests have brought extra side dishes and desserts, and Chestnut has commissioned red velvet and pound cakes from neighbors who bake. "Sweet iced tea is the beverage at each place, but spirits flow freely throughout the day," she says.

For the rest of the afternoon and evening, the family is more than entertained by their own "talent show," featuring a James Brown impressionist, dance lessons from the younger set, carol singing and even a make-up demonstration.

Paula Delaney also serves her family's holiday dinner at formal tables "set everywhere as needed," and a buffet so her guests can sit where they choose — even outdoors. "This arrangement doesn't take much help," she says, "but historically every teen in sight is commandeered into service."

With family members following diverse diets and health restrictions, Delaney puts on a spread that guarantees no one will go home hungry. She maintains the stalwart family favorites, like roast beef, a baked rice dish, squash casserole, creamed spinach, her husband

Bruce's lima beans, and pickled or marinated vegetables. Then she adds a seafood entrée, a big salad with a fresh citrus dressing, fruit, deviled eggs, and a selection of other hearty dishes "that everyone loves and that can't be killed by overcooking."

Delaney puts out a dessert buffet that includes traditional homemade favorites like pumpkin pie, cheesecake, and apple crisp, but always includes some sugarless options and, if she has time, her own "pot de crème au chocolat." Her décor and her food is "mix and match, a little of this and a little of that," she says.

Donna Cohen's large holiday party features a complete buffet in the dining room, and "pass-along hors d'oeuvres" as well as a bar in the courtyard that connects the home's interior to outdoor entertainment areas. Young relatives serve among the professional wait staff, who keep guests' plates and glasses full and table spaces orderly.

The arrangement is designed to allow guests to flow through the whole space and not collect in awkward knots. "The point is that nothing is worse at a party than standing in line," she says.

On the buffet, Cohen juxtaposes foods from her family's diverse holiday traditions...brisket of beef and scalloped oysters; rich and sweet kugel and crawfish au gratin as dips for chips.

Rounding up all the ingredients for a great party and then carrying out a sensible plan allows anyone to entertain with panache, even during the busy holiday season.

BEST EVER BEEF TENDERLOIN

Courtesy of Donna Cohen

- 1 trimmed 4-6 pound beef tenderloin
- 4-6 ounces of prepared Dijon mustard
- 3-4 cloves garlic, crushed

1. Mix together the mustard and garlic and spread thoroughly over entire roast. Wrap the roast tightly in heavy duty aluminum foil and refrigerate for at least 24 hours.
2. Bring the roast to room temperature; then bake it in a 450 degree oven for 30-45 minutes, depending on individual preferences for doneness. Serve with horseradish if desired.

THE BEST BEEF BRISKET

Courtesy of Donna Cohen

- 4-5 pound beef brisket—flat or first cut
- 2 tablespoons paprika
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 2 tablespoons cracked black pepper
- 2 large sweet onions, chopped
- 1 package Golden Onion Soup mix
- garlic to taste
- 3 carrots, sliced
- 1 bottle prepared chili sauce
- 1 bottle very dark beer

1. The night before serving, combine the paprika, salt and pepper, and rub thoroughly over the brisket. Refrigerate overnight. In the morning, bring the meat to room temperature and preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Meanwhile,



**DONNA COHEN'S BEST
BEEF BRISKET.**

saute the chopped onions in a little oil until they are translucent and golden in color. Spread the onions over the bottom of a roasting pan.

- Place the brisket on the bed of onions, fat side down. Combine the onion soup mix and all the remaining ingredients and pour over the brisket. Cover tightly and bake for 1 hour.
- Uncover the brisket and baste with the juices, then turn the oven down to 325 degrees, re-cover the brisket, and bake an additional 2-3 hours, basting occasionally. Serve warm with gravy on the side.

PINEAPPLE AND RAISIN KUGEL

Courtesy of Donna Cohen

- 2 cups ricotta cheese (whole milk or part skim)
- 12-ounce package egg noodles, cooked and drained
- 1 cup sour cream
- 5 large eggs
- 1/2 cup milk
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1 tablespoon vanilla
- 2 teaspoons cinnamon
- 1 cup raisins
- 20-ounce can crushed pineapple
- 1/2 stick plus 1 tablespoon butter, melted

- Grease a 13x9x2-inch glass baking dish with 1 tablespoon of butter.
- Whisk together Ricotta, sour cream, and eggs until smooth. Stir in the milk, sugar, vanilla, cinnamon and raisins. Mix in the pineapple and the 1/2 cup of melted butter and stir until evenly blended. Stir in noodles.
- Pour the mixture into the baking dish and bake at 325 degrees for 45-55 minutes, until

set and slightly golden on top. Serve hot or at room temperature as a dessert topped with whipped cream, or as a dip with Frito Scoops.

CRAWFISH AU GRATIN

Courtesy of Donna Cohen

Note: This is an elegant version of a Cajun classic, served as a dip for crackers or corn chips.

- 2 tablespoons butter
- 1 bunch green onion tops, chopped
- 2 tablespoons flour
- 1/2 cup whipping cream
- 1/2 cup white wine
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 1/4 teaspoon Tabasco sauce
- 1/4 teaspoon garlic powder
- 6 ounces American cheese, grated
- 3 ounces Swiss cheese, grated
- 1 pound peeled crawfish tails

- In a hot skillet, saute the onions in the butter for 3 minutes. Stir in the flour, then the cream, wine, salt, pepper, Tabasco sauce and garlic powder to the onion mixture and cook on high for 1-1/2 to 2 minutes.
- Stir the cheeses into the hot mixture until melted, then stir in the crawfish tails.
- Cook, covered, on high heat for 6 minutes, stirring to keep the mixture from sticking to the pan. Serve hot.

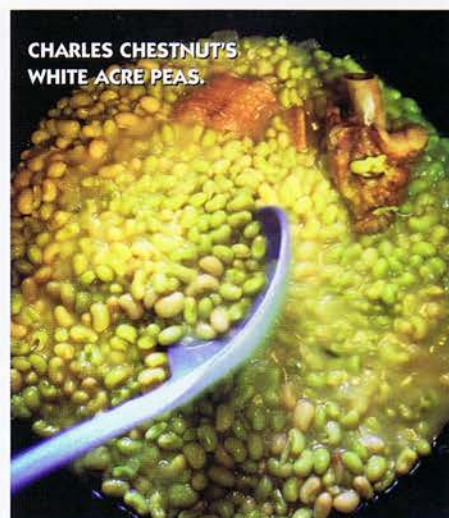
CYNTHIA'S COLLARD GREENS

Courtesy of Cynthia Chestnut

- 2 packages pre-cut fresh collard greens
- 5 to 6 cups water
- 3 large smoked ham hocks (turkey necks or

- medium-sized neck bones)
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil or bacon fat

- Thoroughly wash pre-cut collards three or four times in cold water.
- In a large pot bring 5 cups of water to a boil, add 1 tablespoon of salt. Reduce heat to low, place ham hocks in salted water and cover. Cook ham hocks until tender, approximately one hour.
- Remove ham hocks and slice as much as possible; return all to large pot.
- Add collard greens and one tablespoon of vegetable oil or bacon fat. Cover and cook on low heat for 1-1/2 to 2 hours, until water reduces to desired level. Season to taste. Serve with pepper vinegar.



**CHARLES CHESTNUT'S
WHITE ACRE PEAS.**

CHARLES' WHITE ACRE PEAS

Courtesy of Charles Chestnut

- 3 medium ham hocks
- 3 small smoked turkey necks
- 1 small Vidalia onion, chopped
- 1 garlic clove, chopped
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon pepper
- 3 cups water
- 1 or 2 quart-size bags of fresh or frozen white acre peas

- Bring the ham hocks, turkey necks, onion, garlic and salt to boil. Reduce heat and cook on low for 45 minutes to one hour.
- After the water level has been reduced to mid-level of the ham hocks, add one to two bags of white acre peas to the mixture and bring to a boil. Reduce to low heat and cook for 45 minutes.
- Check occasionally for the desired texture and seasoning. Add more seasoning or cook longer to suit individual taste.