



Lessons FROM AN INNKEEPER

In the early 1980s, Julee Rosso's pioneering *Silver Palate Cookbook* helped change the way we entertain, and her New York food shop practically invented the elegant take-out meal. Since then, her warm, relaxed style and her creative approaches to food have captivated guests at her Wickwood Inn in Saugatuck, Michigan, especially during the holidays. As the cookbook's 25th anniversary edition shows up in kitchens, we asked Julee (*above*) how she does it. You'll love her fresh, memorable strategies—and that they're all doable in your home. (For recipes, turn to page 142.)



CREATE A WARM WELCOME

Julee and her husband, Bill, bought the Wickwood Inn, a renovated 1930s white-frame Colonial, in 1991. Since then, the bed and breakfast has welcomed 100,000-plus guests and appeared regularly on lists of top inns (including ours!). Even after that parade of visitors, Julee's No. 1 hosting rule remains simple: Show people how much you care. Her favorite strategies:

Set the stage. Decorations, candles, a fire and music combine to create a mood and tell guests how important they are. Aromas matter, too. No matter what time of day guests enter the inn's front door, they're greeted with scents of good things cooking: cinnamon, coffee, cloves, chocolate. It should bring back good feelings and memories every time you step in the door. During the holidays, food aromas mingle with the fragrances of evergreen boughs placed in vases and strewn across the fireplace mantel in the sitting room.

Get everyone involved. Greet each guest personally, graciously. Make the first drink for everyone, introduce them around and then tell them to help themselves. People want to do something so they don't feel awkward being waited on. Having access to the bar or coffee pot makes guests relax. People gravitate to the kitchen; let them in. That way, the cook can join in the fun!



Surprise everyone! Give a small, thoughtful gift to each guest. People love to open something. Keep it simple and functional—not just more stuff. Give homemade brandy (I share my mother's damson plum brandy), tomato sauce from last summer's garden, recipes on hand-decorated cards, a bag of homemade cookies tied with satin bows. Arrange gifts at place settings...just something special for each person. They can be all the same and silly and childlike, or individual. Do secret Santas, sending each guest another's name for a series of tiny presents. Then the Santas are revealed at the holiday party with nicer gifts.

Create intimate spaces. Small round tables are better for talking, and smaller rooms bring people together. Sitting on hassocks, on the floor by the fire, on the arms of chairs, guests have no choice but to interact. And they can move from one conversation to another more easily. **Have fun together.** Be sure there's something to do, besides eating and watching football. Get out the cards or board games, play touch football, go sledding or tell stories. At the inn, I arrange for horse-drawn sleighs to appear after dinner. (If that's not possible, use a couple of cars to take guests on a neighborhood lights tour.) **Be the life of the party.** If the hostess is having fun, it's infectious. I invite guests to take off their shoes, because I don't wear them at home. Having fun requires being comfortable.



CELEBRATE WITH FOOD

Since 1982, the Silver Palate Cookbook has sold 2.5 million copies and been inducted into the James Beard Hall of Fame. Julee's specialties have continued to evolve. The inn's menus show it. Breakfast and afternoon appetizer buffets blend fresh and simple with lavish and festive. Julee's philosophies infuse every meal. Her advice for holiday cooks:



Combine traditions. Celebrate your family's history. Make those treasured recipes in memory of those who aren't there—scalloped oysters from Grandma, Uncle George's applesauce. These connections are especially important during the holidays. Ask family members to volunteer to bring a dish for the big holiday meal. It makes everyone feel involved. **Make it memorable.** Set aside an evening or weekend for the family cooks (all ages welcome) or a flock of good friends to bake Christmas cookies together.



Make enough to share. Send guests home with leftovers from your holiday meal, maybe in a special container or on a plate that doubles as a gift. Then those who didn't cook don't feel like orphans once they're home. Throughout the season, remember an elderly relative, neighbor or sick friend. Frozen soups, stews, pasta sauces and one-dish meals make thoughtful gifts.

Be creative. Hold on to traditions, but add some pizzazz. Our menu changes all the time. A favorite right now: a big berry salad. (For some of Julee's recipes, turn to page 142.)



Lighten up. Simpler is always best. There's no reason to stuff your guests at holiday time. Save that for the turkey! Instead of two kinds of potatoes, serve more vegetables or even wild rice. Begin with a soup—squash, roasted beet, potato, leek or broccoli. Brush the turkey with olive oil instead of butter. Try roasted winter veggies brushed with olive oil and sprinkled with herbs. Serve an interesting salad of micro-greens scattered with mango or pomegranate. Then let everyone go for a walk together, or organize a caroling expedition.

Keep it fresh. Start your meal planning in the produce section. No longer are we charmed by eating everything, anywhere, all the time. We want to eat only food at its freshest and best.





TRIM EVERY ROOM

Julee and Bill and their Wickwood Inn staff string more than 100,000 lights and decorate 14 trees, including one in each of 11 guest rooms. Try a little holiday sparkle in your guests' private spaces (along with some homemade cookies, another feature in every Wickwood room). More of Julee's ideas:

Make everything sparkle. Many guests arrive around dusk, so the living room's decorations must make a stunning, glistening first impression. I might use fishing line to hang silver orbs from the ceiling. A towering Christmas tree sits in the corner near the fireplace. One year, it had blown-glass ornaments of red and white snowmen. This year, it will have purple hydrangeas, silver-painted dried artichokes and pinecones and mercury glass ornaments. I love the dancing light from votive candles everywhere.



Use things you love. Objects stir memories about good times, great people and fond feelings, so surround yourself with things that make you feel good. If they are meant to be used, use them every day from Thanksgiving right through the holidays—fine china, your grandmother's silver, linens that you've collected.


Trust your instincts. Avoid trying to match everything or making a room look too planned. When you choose a decoration, a piece of art or furniture, or food or wine because you love it, it works. That's true style—for the holidays or anytime. Plus, when you love the things around you, you're constantly nurtured as you go through a day.



Let nature inspire you. I use loads of natural/found objects for their interesting textures and shapes (even if they must be made to sparkle and dazzle at night). This means a trip to the local farmers market. I always find inspiration and things that suddenly seem perfect: dried artichokes (baby and grand), nuts in their shells, chestnuts, blue hydrangeas. We also decorate with sage, bay leaves, rosemary, rose hips, holly, juniper, pine, blue spruce, pinecones, all kinds of eucalyptus and loads of small dried gourds and pods, natural and painted (shiny red, gold or silver). Then, wherever we can, we add all kinds of evergreens to faux garlands and trees.

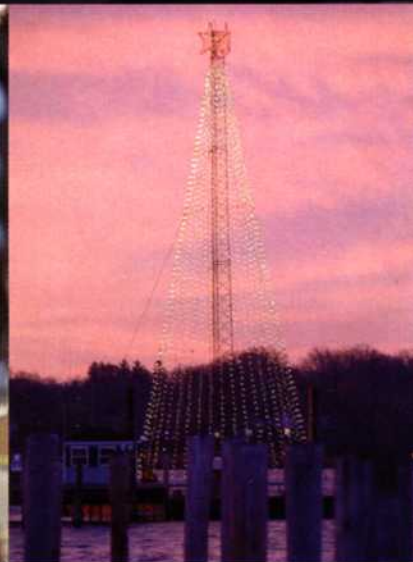


SAVOR THE SEASON



Be ready with a list of must-see stops for your holiday visitors. Julee offers her Wickwood Inn guests tips for exploring Saugatuck, an enclave of artists' studios and shops along Lake Michigan. (To plan your trip, turn to page 175.)

Do the town. We're so lucky in Saugatuck. So much is clustered downtown. When I send guests out exploring, I want to go with them! I have my favorites: Goodgoods, The Butler Pantry, Brigadoon for women's clothes... well, I could go on and on. In Douglas, our neighboring town, and in the area, there are Amsterdam Art & Science, Constance Petter and Water Street galleries, Possessions, the Journeyman Cafe. And we're blessed with Oval Beach for miles along Lake Michigan. In winter, it's well worth a blustery stroll.



And just remember. While walking the dogs this morning with Bill, I thought: We cannot emphasize enough at holiday time that "less is more"—for all of the obvious reasons, but also to reduce stress. Look around at what you already own and use it in a new way, remember familiar and loved recipes and tap into nature. Give treasured possessions of yours to people you love. Give of yourself! Don't just buy. If we remember it's all about love and laughter, and helping others, we'll all get so much more from the holidays! ■