

A&E

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Local Chefs Celebrate Loved Ones with Holiday Traditions

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SPECIAL TO THE INDEPENDENT

Long after our parents and grandparents have left us, our family traditions continue. Traditions—the things that outlive any material object we might buy while roaming the malls during the holidays. Simply put, our traditions—and the memories that uphold them—are priceless.

During this time of year, we reminisce about the recipes that unite us in collective memory at the dining table. Passing on family recipes and preparing them together creates eternal bonds, immortalizing our loved ones for generations to come.

Four local chefs recently shared their holiday family food traditions with the Indy.

Chef Leo Bongarra of Saline at Hotel Joaquin in North Laguna reflects on his diverse food experience growing up in Buenos Aires, Argentina:

I was born and raised in Buenos Aires, Argentina by my Ukrainian mother and grandmother. My grandmother, Esperanza (Nadia) Sivak, was a professional chef with a long list of traditional recipes that she brought with her from the Old World.

Throughout my childhood, on every Christmas and New Year's Eve, and for special birthday parties, my grandmother made this simple, but exquisite Russian influenced dish called, "Varenyky." This delicate, handmade, half-moon shaped pasta is filled with ricotta, onions and potatoes. She would top it with crispy, savory lardons (chunks

of slab bacon) and a dab of sour cream. The taste was pure heaven. This

has to be one of my favorite meals of all time! In memory of my mother and grandmother who are no longer with us, I lovingly recreate this dish at Christmas and on New Year's Eve.

I came from a huge family, and gatherings were often held on Sundays with 20 or more people at our home, so leftovers never lasted more than a day. No matter the occasion, when grandmother would ask if we wanted something special, of course our response shouted out in unison was always, "Varenyky!" I love to make them for my family and hope you will enjoy them, too.

Chef-Proprietor Craig Strong of Ocean at Main carries on his family tradition of building homemade, edible gingerbread houses:

One of my favorite holiday memories is of my mother making gingerbread houses for my seven siblings and me when we were kids. We would come home from school and she would have a gingerbread house baked and ready for each of us to decorate, with candy and decorations laid out on the table. She and my dad also decorated a house. The next day, we would bring our colorful, decorated houses to school and give them to each of our teachers as gifts. My parents' gingerbread house stayed at home with us until New Year's Eve, when we would break it open. I began this tradition last year with my own daughter and included our friends' children, too. It was so much fun having all the kids over decorating the gingerbread houses in our home. It truly brought me right back to my childhood.

A newer food tradition I have come to love during the holidays is from my wife's side of the family. I cannot wait to indulge in the wonderful homemade ta-



Chef-Proprietor Craig Strong of Ocean at Main carries on holiday traditions with his daughter, Scarlett.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CRAIG STRONG

males prepared by my mother-in-law at Christmas. She uses a delicious chicken mole inside, which is a combination of chili peppers and chocolate, balanced just right. And, they're a bit thinner than the traditional tamales, so on the lighter side. I can never get enough of them! I love blending my wife's and my own family's holiday traditions together for our daughter, Scarlett, to experience.

Chef Amar Santana of Vaca and Broadway by Amar Santana cherishes the unique accents of growing up in his native Dominican Republic.

The most vivid, heartfelt food and drink memories I remember growing up were drinking the Dominican Republic alcoholic eggnog topped with rum, while experiencing that feeling of anticipation roasting the spit-roasted pig, knowing when it was finally ready, it would be so

tasty. We would patiently roast it outside as a family and sometimes a community. I treasure those times. During the holidays, we would party and celebrate the whole month of December.

Remembering Christmas in my country inspired me to bring those flavors to Orange County, and last week at Vaca I prepared my family's traditional spit-roasted pig recipe, and our guests devoured it. Preparing and cooking a whole pig can sound like such a challenge, but I've been told that when I was little boy of only 6 years of age, I was already cooking pasta with tomato paste and butter. All my life I just wanted more when it came to food, so I reached out. Learning my family's recipes at a very young age was something that I was

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CURTAIN UP

A Christmas 'Beauty' at the Playhouse

South Coast Rep has its "Christmas Carol" and Segerstrom Center has its "Nutcracker," but Laguna Playhouse has established a holiday tradition of its own with its annual presentation of an elaborate "panto" courtesy of Lythgoe Family Panto.

Panto, short for Pantomime, is a musical comedy stage production developed in England and mostly performed during Christmas and New Year season. These interactive productions involve audience participation and broad humor, both of which are

abundant during the Laguna Playhouse staging of "Beauty and the Beast: A Christmas Rose," which runs through Dec. 30.

Written by Kris Lythgoe and directed by Sheldon Epps, "Beauty and the Beast: A Christmas Rose" stars Ashley Argota, Thomas Hobson, Heath Calvert, Riley Costello, Andrew Barnicle, Roland Rusinek, and David Engel. The show is a modern version of the classic fairytale where the audience is encouraged to cheer, boo and sing along with popular songs such as the Bee Gees' "Staying Alive," The Chainsmokers & Coldplay's "Something Just Like This," and Edith Piaf's "La Vie En Rose."

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Chef Leo's Ukrainian grandmother made a Russian-influenced dish called Varenyky—half-moon shaped pasta filled with ricotta, onions and potatoes.