

photos by Romeny Caruso





Jeaneen Rouse's Cheesecake

WHAT YOU WILL NEED

FOR THE CRUST

- ½ cups graham cracker crumbs
- ½ cup finely chopped toasted pecans
- 4 tablespoons sugar
- 4 tablespoons salted butter, melted

FOR THE FILLING

- 2 8-ounce packages cream cheese, room temperature
- ½ cup sugar
- 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
- ½ teaspoon grated lemon peel
- ½ teaspoon vanilla
- 2 eggs, separated

HOW TO PREP

Heat oven to 325 degrees. Prepare a 9-inch springform pan with butter-flavored cooking spray.

In a small bowl, combine graham cracker crumbs, pecans, sugar and butter; using a fork or spatula, press the mixture into the pan. Bake for 10 minutes on the center rack. Remove crust from oven and reduce temperature to 300. Place a pan of water on the lowest oven of the rack (this will minimize any cracks in the cake).

While crust is cooling, mix cream cheese, sugar, lemon juice, lemon peel and vanilla in a mixing bowl. Mix at medium speed with an electric mixer until blended. Add egg yolks, one at a time, mixing well after each addition. In a separate bowl, beat or whip egg whites until stiff. Gently fold into cream cheese mixture. Pour filling over crust. Bake on the center rack of the oven for 55 minutes or until center is set.

Unwrapped

with Bryan Batt

I love the holidays. So when Rouses called, I jumped at the chance to write about my favorites. On the Gulf Coast, especially in my home state of Louisiana, we celebrate life with a passion, from christenings to funerals and everything else in between. Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Eve are the star attractions, and over the years I've come to appreciate more and more the effort, care, and love that is shared on these special days.

The fact that the holidays will be here in no time at all may push your panic button and raise your stress level, but don't get your tinsel in a tangle! There is nothing you can do to stop them, the Grinch tried and look what happened. So, take a deep breath, a sip, count to ten, and embrace. If you are hosting the family meal or party, find ways to make it a little bit easier on yourself, like ordering a prepared dish or two from Rouses. And, if you are the invited guest, offer ways to assist your hosts. Plan, organize, and schedule all you can, but once the stage is set, and the players arrive, let it go. The best celebrations evolve organically. Always keep in mind the 70's funk hit, "If It Don't Fit, Don't Force It."

Thanksgiving

I think Thanksgiving is my favorite. It's the one true American holiday. There's no pressure to find the perfect gift or deck the halls. The last Thursday in November is all about GRATITUDE and FOOD. No matter what kind of drama is appearing in your life, you can always find something to be grateful for. If you'd like, you may now sing "Count Your Blessings" (If you have never heard of the song, look it up, and start memorizing!) The day is for everyone, so involve everyone. Have the little kids create place cards, extra hands are always needed in the kitchen, and teens can't text or take selfies when they are peeling potatoes. Entice the gents to gather outside and share their personal pointers on the art of grilling or smoking the beef or bird. Positive reinforcement, compliments, and libations will ensure a dedicated work force. The focus is the meal and the table setting.

Like a great party tape or cocktail, I love the good mix. Your Thanksgiving table can reflect that. Mix the high and low, formal and informal. I collect fun salt and pepper shakers, so they are definitely put to use. My mother



“... don't get your tinsel in a tangle!”

collected Louisiana's famed artist Clementine Hunter's paintings, so when I saw plates and service ware inspired by her work, I had to incorporate them in my turkey day table. Their vibrant and beautifully simple style looks great along side ornate silverware. And the cornucopia centerpiece of colorful Rouses produce is not just a beautiful display — the bounty has an additional purpose by providing additional meals over the weekend!

As wonderful as the mix can be, sometimes certain family members and friends don't mix so well. This is why God created buffers, those old friends who may not have a place to dine, distant relatives or even clergy that you invite whose mere presence assure that everyone plays nice. Don't forget to spend time on the blessing, maybe go around the table and have your guests chime in on what they are grateful for. Who knows, their comments could spark some lively conversation. Just a little gratitude hint ... never pass up the opportunity to make someone else feel good.

Christmas

Christmas is all about tradition and, of course, food, but as families grow and change, so can our gatherings. Growing up, Santa always visited my grandmother's home on Christmas Eve, where there would be a great casual home cooked meal (however, I'm pretty sure the finger sandwiches were pre-ordered), and aunts, uncles and cousins exchanged gifts. The next day, even more family and friends would convene, this time at our home for dad's famous ham, and prime rib with various scrumptious side dishes of the “tried and

true” or “you've gotta try this new recipe” variety.

After my grandmother passed away, the whole family valiantly tried to continue the tradition, but with so many new additions

and added in-law commitments it grew virtually impossible for everyone gather on December 24th. So my clever mother and her sister decided to create a new holiday on the night before Christmas Eve, and my brother smartly named it, “Christmas Adam,” because Adam came before Eve. Now all the generations gather as before with casual fare, just a day earlier. The reigns of Christmas day are now in my lovely sister-in-law and brother's hands, and they host a big, glamorous, close family breakfast, then an open house. The table is always set to perfection and welcoming to guests bearing goodies.

Everyday white tableware mixes great with holiday china. Jazz up candlesticks with glitter candles and berry bobèche, which can also be used as napkin rings. This is the holiday to pull out the stops on your table ... trees, holly, pine, ornaments, angels, reindeer, elves... anything that goes rooty-toot-toot and rummy-tum-tum, bring it on! Oh, and not that you asked, but here's my philosophy on Christmas trees: If we are going to cut down a perfectly good piece of nature, light and decorate it to the max! Send that baby out in a blaze of glory! You can always find another spot for an ornament (make sure to really twist the wire hanger to hold the ornament on, use floral wire to lift up sagging branches, and if your tree is in a corner or against a wall, use fishing or floral wire to secure it to a nail in the wall. No one is happy if the tree goes down.) When in doubt, Egg Nog and Brandy milk punch can't hurt.





New Years Eve & The Batt In A Hat

While living in New York, I quickly grew tired of big New Year's Eve blowouts, and the pressure to have a 'great' time. We would always party hop and end up stuck far away from home after the ball dropped, freezing with not a cab in site! Years ago, a big snowstorm was en route, so we decided to stay home and have a grown up dinner party. A small group of close friends were invited to dress up and just show up. My husband, Tom, is a great cook, so that part was taken care of. I quickly set the table and then with the extra time I decided to test the limits of my hot glue gun and make fun hats. The new tradition was a hit, especially the crazy hats made with collected sale ribbons and ornaments. In the passing years there would be various color schemes or concepts (you should have seen the millennium hats, or should I say headdresses). Now, every guest arrives on time in order to get first dibs on their favorite chapeau. Some years the feel is a little more casual, but honestly, everyone prefers the glitz and glamour ... and sometimes the exotic, so the table setting reflects it.

Chef Brian Landry at Borngé came up with a delicious take on turtle soup made with alligator (find it at www.rouses.com). I would accompany his alligator soup with a bedazzled gator napkin ring, and haul out all of the china, crystal, and silver to add to the show. In recent years, I've called Rouses and ordered a deluxe sushi tray. The display is always so colorful, special, and is usually the first thing to be gobbled up!

A final reminder for all of the holidays, one you can take into King's Day and Carnival ... dismiss all hopes of perfection — it's impossible, the only thing we humans are perfect at is being imperfect, so let go, live, laugh, and love. When all is said and done, remember you are not just decorating your home, setting a table, or preparing a meal ... you are doing something that kind of borders on the magical ... you are creating memories! Enjoy and celebrate that unique and special gift!



> About The Author

Broadway and *Mad Men* star Bryan Batt and his husband Tom Cianfichi own Hazelnut (www.hazelnutneworleans.com) in New Orleans. The store offers a stylish, eclectic blend of fine gifts and elegant home accessories, some of which are featured on these pages. Bryan is also the author of *Big Easy Style*, *Creating Rooms You'll Love To Live In*, and a memoir, *She Ain't Heavy She's My Mother*.