

Make It Matter

Linda Harmon
and Doug Mack
at their inn in
Vermont.

Community Christmas

An annual holiday dinner feeds a town and
nourishes a tradition **BY ELLEN MICHAUD**

Pulling on his parka and stepping into the early-morning snowfall, Doug Mack, chef and co-owner of the Inn at Baldwin Creek in Vermont, walked quickly along the path between his home and the inn. Nestled into a curve of forest, the 1797 farmhouse is often a venue for weddings and romantic getaways. But this day was different.

It was 5 a.m. on the Sunday before Christmas. In six hours, some 200

people—elderly couples on fixed incomes, young farmworkers expecting their first child, single parents with balky teens—would begin to gather for a festive, free Christmas dinner. Any minute, a small army of volunteers would arrive to help prepare 18 turkeys, 10 hams, and all the trimmings. For 26 years, Mack and his wife, co-owner Linda Harmon, have been throwing open their door to celebrate Christmas with all of



Santa arrives
just in time
for dessert.

Bristol, a small town some 30 miles south of Burlington.

The tradition began with the couple's desire to live in a town where everyone fit in. In the late '70s, Mack, a photographer, was working his way through college as a chef in Ohio. He met Harmon, a restaurant manager in New Jersey. Soon love and food called more strongly than film. After finishing school, Mack headed for the Garden State to cook—and to marry Harmon. Within two years, says Mack, "a friend died of cancer, my father died of a heart attack, John Lennon got shot, and we said, 'Let's look for a place to put down some roots.'"

The pair roamed the country for six months, not sure what they were looking for until they reached Bristol, where they bought a tiny restaurant in 1983. "We just knew this was the place we were supposed to be,"

Harmon says. What's more, "there was always a farmer at the door trying to sell us fiddleheads or berries," says Mack.

As the couple got to know their neighbors, they saw how many were struggling. That first year, they decided to host Christmas dinner for everyone in Addison County. They would cover the expenses (close to \$1,000) and invite volunteers to help cook, serve, and clean up. They borrowed the school cafeteria and decorated it "so it wouldn't look

like, well, a cafeteria," says Harmon.

"I remember when they started," says Sister Isoline Duclos. "I'd pick up a few seniors, have dinner with them at the school, take them home, then deliver meals to the homebound. Still do. People are so grateful."

Eleven years later, Mack and Harmon bought a farmhouse a few miles outside town and turned it into the quietly elegant Inn at Baldwin Creek. The dinner and the volunteers went with them.

The affair is planned with military precision. Volunteers sign up a month in advance. About ten will prep vegetables, pop cookies and sheet cakes into the ovens, make stuffing and gravy, toss salads, and carve turkeys. Several more set the tables with linens and silverware. With three sittings of about 75 people each, 15 volunteers will work the five

dining rooms. Mack and Harmon reserve the toughest job—hauling coats up and down the stairs—for the teens. “They’re the only ones with enough energy!” says Harmon.

“There’s a real sense of camaraderie,” she adds. “Lots of our neighbors never get a chance to go out to dinner at a restaurant. This is our opportunity to make them feel very special.”

And so, every year by 11 a.m., men, women, and children start trudging through the snow to Baldwin Creek’s red front door. They arrive in their Sunday best or overalls (one guest in his 80s pairs his with a red velvet bow tie). A fire roars in the inn’s formal red dining room. Wreaths

sparkle with tiny lights. Buffet tables are loaded with platters of turkey and ham, mountains of stuffing and potatoes, and boats of gravy. Colorful mounds of squash and broccoli give off the rich, earthy scent of farm-fresh food.

Last year, Tom Verner mesmerized kids and adults with his magic tricks, an a cappella group from the high school sang Christmas carols, and violist Lausanne Allen and squeeze box player Rick Ceballos played Celtic folk dances that had everyone clapping and laughing. Children created paper snowflakes while eagerly awaiting Santa’s arrival.

When everyone was full, Harmon moved from table to table to sit and talk with her guests. “It’s my favorite time of the day,” she says.

After Mack and Harmon had fed more than 200 people, they sent a dozen volunteers out with another 125 dinners for those unable to leave their homes. Only after all the meals had been delivered could Mack relax.

Val Hunt brought her mother, 86-year-old Ruth Reich, to the inn. “The falling snow, the divine food, the crackling fire—it lifted her spirits immensely,” says Hunt. “She just went, ‘Wow!’ and kept smiling and commenting on everything. She may have short-term memory loss, but she remembers every minute of Christmas at Baldwin Creek.”



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Helping Hands

Many families are looking for ways to give back during the holidays. But the ultimate gift? Volunteer year-round.

> cardsthatgive.org Buy holiday (and greeting) cards from more than 100 nonprofit charities to help fund their causes. Designs are from relief organizations, children’s hospitals, humane societies, and museums.

> holiday-project.org Help brighten the holidays for people in nursing homes, hospitals, and prisons. Pay a visit, wrap gifts, or donate money.

> volunteermatch.org Type in your zip code and interests to find projects near you. Decorate a shelter for homeless children, collect and box food, or host a toy drive.

> welcomebackveterans.org Write a thank-you note or give a veteran a ride to a VA hospital.