

Warm and Cozy Kitchen Makeovers

AMERICAN HOMESTYLE & GARDENING

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CHRISTMAS TREE**
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pick-a-tree party

By combining two of the season's most joyous events—choosing the perfect Christmas tree and hosting a holiday party—this Connecticut family has created a new tradition for making spirits bright



Phoebe and Charlie Cole take an understated approach to holiday decorating. The front entry's French doors are framed with an aromatic garland of laurel, box and white pine; fresh limes and lady apples add a rustic touch to a pair of balsam wreaths. OPPOSITE: Walker (left) and his cousin Albion enjoy the mini forest of white spruce delivered to the Coles' backyard.

THE PERFECT TREE GUIDE

The idea was born five years ago, when a friend was admiring Phoebe and Charlie Cole's white spruce Christmas tree. After they explained that it was a gift from Paulie Tumel, an old family friend who had chopped down the tree and personally delivered it from his 60-acre property in northeastern Connecticut, their friend asked whether she could "put in an order" for the following year. By the end of that holiday season, a dozen close friends of the Coles' were pining for one of Tumel's handsome trees. So a year later, the couple and Tumel selected a weekend afternoon in mid-December to have an informal tree party. Everyone was treated to a taste of holiday cheer, with roasted chestnuts and hot mulled cider. "The next year we added more food and more friends," says Phoebe, "and the party just evolved. Now Paulie brings about 25 trees—which is as many as he can pile on his pickup truck."

The festivities begin at noon, when Tumel arrives with his trees; friends come by throughout the day, but those who want first pick make sure to show up on time. Charlie helps unload the trees, which range from 5 to 10 feet in height, then the two men line them up along wooden supports that Charlie has built especially for the occasion. After perusing the evergreen collection, each guest ties a brown-paper name tag (courtesy of the Coles' children, Sophie, 12, and Walker, 8) to a favorite tree to secure its selection. "There's never been any squabbling," says Phoebe, "though one year someone did accidentally walk off with my sister's tree!"

A soul-warming buffet is served from tables set up both in the kitchen and on the brick patio (weather permitting). Phoebe's menu has been consistent over recent years and features glazed ham, savory cheeses, country breads, poached figs and a host of cozy offerings in the form of finger food. Hot cocoa is doled out from a huge pot on the stove top, and a large jug of mulled cider is kept warm on the outdoor grill. Phoebe serves the fare from rustic wicker and metal baskets, platters and bowls of simple white china or terra-cotta and provides a stack of white hotel-style dinner plates. "I want the look to be festive but not fussy," she says. "It's a very low-key affair, focused around the trees and the gathering of our extended family."



When family friend Paulie Tumel's truck pulls up to the Coles' home, Charlie Cole takes a break from roasting chestnuts on the outdoor stone grill and lends a hand unloading the trees (above). Once the guests have selected their spruce, Paulie (left) and Charlie carry the trees to the cars and tie them to the roofs. BELOW: Family members and friends sample the outdoor offerings of Marmalade Glazed Ham with Cranberry Relish, Stilton surrounded by winter pears and Eggplant Caviar with Belgian Endive.



Phoebe Cole (far left) uses her sister, Mary, as taste-tester for the mulled cider. LEFT: An array of cookie cutters are reinvented as napkin holders, once the Coles have finished making the party's dozens of iced sugar cookies in holiday shapes (right).



OPEN HOUSE STILTON CHEESE WITH PEARS, EGGPLANT CAVIAR WITH BELGIAN ENDIVE, MARMALADE-GLAZED HAM WITH CRANBERRY RELISH, CHRISTMAS COOKIES, HOT COCOA WITH MAPLE WHIPPED CREAM AND HOT MULLED CIDER



The buffet table (left) is anchored by an artful assortment of red amaryllis, parrot tulips and pepper berries. ABOVE: Paperwhites complete the holiday theme.



Tree donations are collected in an old tomato can (left), with signage designed by Walker who, like his sister, Sophie (right), is a big fan of the candy canes paired with hot cocoa that's served in vintage, holiday-style enamelware mugs.



recipes

A buffet of festive, cold-weather fare is the perfect crowd pleaser for a holiday open house

PICK-A-TREE PARTY

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Eggplant Caviar with Belgian Endive

SERVES 25

- 4 large eggplants
- 1½ bunches Italian parsley, chopped
- 4 medium garlic cloves, minced
- Juice of 2 large lemons
- 2½ to 3 teaspoons salt
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground pepper, or to taste
- ⅔ cup olive oil
- 4 to 5 Belgian endives, trimmed, leaves separated

1. Heat oven to 375° F. Place eggplants on baking sheets, prick in several places and roast until soft, 45 minutes to 1 hour. Let eggplants cool, then stem, peel and chop flesh finely; place in a large bowl.

2. Add parsley, garlic, lemon juice, salt and pepper, and stir to combine. Stir in olive oil; adjust salt and lemon juice to taste.

3. Mound eggplant in a large serving bowl and place on a platter. Arrange endive leaves around bowl and serve.

Marmalade-Glazed Ham with Cranberry Relish

SERVES 25 TO 30

- ¾ cup thick-cut orange marmalade
- 3 tablespoons honey
- 1½ tablespoons grainy Dijon mustard
- Grated rind of 1 orange
- 1 whole, fully cooked spiral-cut ham (15 to 18 pounds)
- 1 star fruit, sliced about ⅓-inch thick, for garnish
- Cranberry Relish (recipe follows)

1. Heat oven to 325°F. In a small bowl, combine marmalade, honey, mustard and



ham generously with glaze.

3. Return ham to oven and bake uncovered, about 12 to 15 minutes per pound, or until an instant-read thermometer registers 120°F when inserted into the thickest part of the ham, close to the bone.

4. Remove ham to a platter, garnish with sliced star fruit and spoon Cranberry Relish around.

Cranberry Relish

- 12 cups cranberries, fresh or frozen
- 1½ cups orange juice
- ¾ cup firmly packed brown sugar

In a large saucepan, combine ingredients and bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Reduce heat and simmer, stirring occasionally, until cranberries begin to soften, 5 to 10 minutes. Let cool.

grated orange rind and stir until smooth; set glaze aside.

2. Place ham in a shallow roasting pan, cover with aluminum foil and bake 1 hour. Remove foil and brush

For their annual "pick-a-tree" party, which usually lasts all afternoon, Phoebe and Charlie Cole have found that a sliced glazed ham and finger foods make the perfect low-maintenance menu.

Hot Cocoa with Maple Whipped Cream

SERVES 25 TO 30

- 2 cups unsweetened cocoa powder, preferably Droste
- 4 cups sugar
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 7 quarts plus 3 cups whole milk
- 3 tablespoons vanilla extract
- 2 pints whipping cream
- 5 tablespoons maple syrup, or to taste

1. In a pot large enough to hold 8 quarts, stir together cocoa, sugar and salt. In another large pot, bring milk to a boil; remove from heat. Add 3 cups hot milk to cocoa mixture and whisk until smooth. Bring to a boil over medium heat, stirring constantly, then add remaining milk and heat until hot (do not boil again).

2. Meanwhile, with an electric mixer, beat cream until soft peaks form; beat in maple syrup. Ladle cocoa into mugs and top each with a dollop of maple whipped cream.

