

Faithful Winter Traditions

Feasting and festing are holiday happenings

BY CAROL GOODMAN KAUFMAN



It may be cold and dark outside, but winter still offers splashes of bright color. Evergreen trees trimmed with new-fallen snow and crimson holly berries nestled in their glossy dark-green leaves can lift even the dullest mood. Winter festivals light up the night throughout the month, and the colors become even more vibrant as our neighbors of diverse backgrounds mark the various December holidays—and it's not just about getting presents.

Christmas, of course, is the most widely celebrated of the winter holidays in the United States. Aside from attending church services, trimming trees, and leaving cookies out for Santa, some of our fellow Berkshirites mark the holiday in unique ways.

Bob Salerno of West Stockbridge used to spend Christmas winter camping in the Adirondacks until he met his wife, Margie Skaggs. For more than 20 years now, the couple spends Christmas in New York, where they



The Kaufman family constructs a Hanukkah menorah every year, which makes the lighting during the eight-day festival more special.

PHOTO BY JAKE BORDEN

celebrate with close friends. Bob says that parts of the city, such as Greenwich Village and Tribeca, are quiet on the holiday, so they can appreciate the sparkle and charm and get into neighborhood restaurants without having to fight crowds.

Dedicated music lovers with eclectic taste, the Salernos pick a different church every year for its musical performance. So far, Bob says that they've visited "all the churches on Fifth Avenue and the Upper East Side, and we're now working on the Upper West Side." Among their favorite spots is the chapel at St. John the Divine, where early music is on the program Christmas morning.



Hanukkah, a relatively minor holiday in the Jewish year, is usually celebrated in December, although the eight-day festival's dates vary due to the lunar calendar. (This year, the first candle is lit on December 12; a few years ago, Hanukkah began on Thanksgiving.) Traditional practice calls for lighting oil lamps or candles, adding one for each of the eight nights of the holiday, and eating both cheeses and foods cooked in oil.

Pittsfield resident Ofer Kaufman grew up on a kibbutz in Israel that held annual Hanukkah contests in which families competed in building menorahs (candelabras). He and his wife, Dara, continue this practice with their own children in Pittsfield, every year constructing unique pieces from a variety of different materials. One was fashioned into a spinning dreidel (top), another was made from pipes topped with LED lights.

Cantor Robert Scherr, the recently retired Jewish chaplain at Williams College, says that because tradition calls for foods cooked in oil, the Hanukkah party menu, prepared by the students, consists of latkes (potato pancakes), sufganiyot (jelly donuts), and—the "hallmark" of the Williams Hanukkah experience—deep-fried Oreos. Some 100 eager students eat their fill in the flickering light of candles, then bring gift-wrapped books to area elementary schools that they read to the children. The new Jewish chaplain at Williams, Rabbi Seth Wax, will continue the tradition.

As with the Jewish calendar, the Islamic calendar differs from the Gregorian in that it, too, operates on a lunar cycle, although with a year of 355 days. In 2017, the one-day festival of Moulid al Nabi, the birthday of Mohammed, begins the evening of November 30 and continues through the evening of December 1.

Rabeh Elleithy of Pittsfield celebrates Moulid al Nabi. This traditional holiday consists of two main

practices. The first, which he follows at home with his children, is to study the Prophet's teachings and read stories about him in order to emulate his life, a legacy that includes giving to the poor. The other custom is to partake of sweets. Elleithy, who grew up in Egypt, reports that for hundreds of years it has been customary to give children toys fashioned of molded sugar: bride dolls for girls and horses for boys. Adults get to enjoy as well, exchanging candies made of sesame seeds and almonds.

Lama Nassif, of Williamstown, grew up in Damascus. Her family makes a big deal out of New Year's Eve. In the early evening, all the local relatives descend on the home of one of her aunts or uncles. They prepare a lot of food and keep eating and talking until around two or three in the morning, sometimes reflecting about the past year and expressing hopes for the new one.

Kwanzaa, celebrated this year from December 26 through January 1, is a relatively new holiday among African-Americans, so family traditions are still forming. Pittsfield's Shirley Edgerton says that the original intent of the holiday was to promote African-American history as part of the American story, as well as to celebrate the harvest season in Africa. In the Berkshires, the Women of Color Giving Circle has coordinated celebrations for over a decade.

Cultural rather than religious, the seven-day festival is celebrated by lighting candles of red, black, and green that embody the values by which African-American people are urged to live, as well as giving small presents that represent the ethic of the day.

For children, Edgerton might choose a book about self-determination, while for adults, a gift could involve tickets to a show that represents community. On the last day of the festival, families gather for a great feast called Karamu that features traditional African dishes and ingredients that Africans brought to the United States, such as peanuts and sesame seeds.

Regardless of religion or ethnicity, Berkshirites will have plenty of opportunity to partake of winter-festival joy and light, and perhaps this year will take part in another's traditions.

Take a Holiday Stroll

Head to Great Barrington Dec. 9, 2017 4-8 p.m., for storytelling, music, live shop windows, bonfire, Santa, menorah and tree lighting, fireworks, and Berkshire Children's Chorus.

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Today



Sun
03

Mon
04

Tue
05

Wed
06

Thu
07

Fri
08

Sat
09

11:15 AM - 12:00 AM

38th Annual Photography Show Call For Entry

3:00 PM

Holiday Jazz

3:30 PM - 5:30 PM

Cocoa & Crafts Family Event

4:00 PM - 5:30 PM

Seasons Readings at Pequot Library

4:00 PM - 7:00 PM

Robert Deyber Satirical Painter

4:00 PM - 5:00 PM

Percussion Concert in Litchfield

5:00 PM - 7:00 PM

Jason Griska Photographs

5:00 PM - 7:00 PM

Jessica Drenk Artist Reception

6:00 PM - 5:00 PM

Clay Art Center Presents Clay Holiday: Annual Sale and Studio Tour

Jivan Wolf MasterJewelry: In The Realm of Light

9:30 AM - 5:00 PM

Gunn Memorial Library Stairwell Gallery Art Exhibit

10:00 AM - 4:00 PM

Great Trains Holiday Exhibit

10:00 AM - 7:00 PM

Fall 2017 Weekly Adult Classes at Clay Art Center

10:00 AM - 4:00 PM

The Great War And The United States Home Front at Pequot Library

10:00 AM - 5:00 PM

New Works by Erin Nazzaro

11:00 AM - 4:00 PM

Miniature Masterpieces Holiday Art Exhibit

7:00 PM - 9:15 PM

Natalie MacMaster & Donnell Leahy – A Celtic Family Christmas

9:30 AM - 4:00 PM

Natural Beauty Workshop at Red Bee Apiary

Bricktacular at LEGOLAND® Discovery Center Westchester

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