

Taking Christmas on the Road, With or Without Reindeer



John Ricksen for The New York Times

MAKING A MOVE Kathy Braddock in the Naples, Fla., condo where her family is celebrating Christmas this year, rather than in New York.

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WHEN it came to celebrating the holidays, Kathy Braddock had been nothing if not a creature of habit. For countless Christmases she spent the morning at her Manhattan apartment opening presents with her husband (the two divorced in 2000) and their two sons, then walked the block and a half to her mother's house "to do Christmas there," said Ms. Braddock, 52, a real estate consultant.

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Chip Litherland for The New York Times

CHANGE IS GOOD Kate Moynihan moved her family's holidays to their Vero Beach, Fla., vacation home.

When her mother and stepfather bought a condo in Naples, Fla., as a winter escape, Ms. Braddock stuck firmly and faithfully to the Yuletide provender and purveyors favored by her mother: bagels and cream cheese from William Poll, coffee cake from Greenberg's, pasta or cold cuts for dinner. And so it went for years.

Her mother died in Naples in February 2008, "and I've had this thing that I didn't make the right choice of spending her last Christmas with her," Ms. Braddock said. "I had been in Florida but went back to New York to spend the holiday with one of my sons."

Consequently Ms. Braddock, who now shares ownership of the condo with her sister, decided this year to move her family's Christmas celebration down south as a way of honoring her mother's memory and to create a whole new slate of traditions (O.K., with maybe a few holdovers from New York — bagels, lox and whitefish salad and that great sticky-bottomed coffee cake from Greenberg's).

Ms. Braddock and her sons, now 21 and 23, had a long debate whether the first-annual Naples Noel would involve a big or little tree — small won out. But they readily agreed that it would be decorated with ornaments representing three generations of the family.

As for Christmas dinner, from now on it's going to be a barbecue.

"We have it all planned," said Ms. Braddock, who is expecting a contingent of friends and family. "I've already ordered a swordfish, tuna, a rib-eye steak and tons of vegetables. I've also called the Swan River Market in Naples for raw seafood. That's going to be part of the tradition too."

Some, like Ms. Braddock, who choose to spend the holidays at their vacation home see it as a way to escape familiar, but frankly wearisome customs observed at their primary residences, whether a large party, a large tree or a large rib roast. Other second-home owners see the holiday rituals established at their home base as sacrosanct and stick with them no matter the inconvenience.

Ms. Braddock's business partner, Paul Purcell, falls into the second category. "I slavishly try to maintain things," said Mr. Purcell, who until he bought a weekend house in Bridgehampton, N.Y., watched the yuletide come in at his Midtown Manhattan apartment.

The festivities there included a Christmas Eve open house with homemade eggnog, recordings of the "Messiah" by the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, as well as seasonal offerings from [Barbra Streisand](#) and Pavarotti. Christmas dinner would include homemade chicken-liver mousse; homemade "merry merry meatballs," a family specialty with tomato and chili sauce; chateaubriand (from Lobel's, the Upper East Side butcher) topped with béarnaise, (courtesy of a Knorr sauce mix); and a Yule log from the recently shuttered bakery Payard.

Now that Long Island is in the picture, Mr. Purcell has seen no reason to change his music or his menu. Yes, there are supermarkets and butchers and bakers on the East End, "but I want exactly the same tastes in the country," Mr. Purcell said. "So rather than going to King Cullen for the chateaubriand, I order it in advance from Lobel."

The large slab of beef is stowed in the trunk of the car along with the packets of Knorr ("I'm worried I won't find it in a Hamptons grocery store," he said), frozen meatballs, the mousse, the tree ornaments from Mr. Purcell's childhood, the holiday CDs and stocking stuffers like Metro cards and books of stamps. "Everything is written down, so I don't forget anything," he said.

Sentiment and stockings are a fine thing, but excuse Kate Moynihan for having left them both at home in Concord, Mass., when she and her husband, Tim, bought a vacation getaway in Vero Beach, Fla. "Having a

second home has made it easy to ditch some things I didn't want to do," said Ms. Moynihan, 51, who works in development for nonprofit groups.

Early on in the Moynihans' marriage money was tight and the tree ornaments were whipped up by loving hands at home.

"We strung popcorn, bought ribbons and made bows to hang on the limbs of the tree," Ms. Moynihan said. "It was very time-consuming."

Later on when there was discretionary income, family trips provided an opportunity to buy ornaments like a moose-shaped beauty from Alaska.

Even with such additions the couple's three children wanted to continue with the popcorn. "But then they'd go off somewhere, and I ended up stringing it myself," Ms. Moynihan said.

So when the kids wanted her to bring all the ornaments to Florida and buy a large live tree, she had a two-word answer: No way. "I bought a fake tree and the decorations to go with it," she said.

As for the stockings: No fireplace. No way. "That really saves time," she said.

But in the name of tradition she did bring to Vero Beach the ivory-and-gold angel ornament that has always been atop the family's tree. "It gives us continuity," she said.

There are also those who see in their second homes a prime opportunity to create simpler, more homespun traditions than those at their primary residences. Because their Gettysburg, Pa., vacation bungalow was built in the 1940s, Jolene and Bob Macks celebrate Christmas there with traditions in keeping with the period. These include collecting vintage postcards and war bonds and framing them for use as ornaments and making a tin-foil star for the top of the tree.

At the family's primary residence in York Springs, Pa., it's not the season to be jolly without a viewing of "National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation"; in

Gettysburg a 1937 Philco phonograph player spins big-band records while the family makes fudge and pulls taffy.

“I like the different ways of celebrating,” said Ms. Macks, 54, the mother of three. “It’s a way of experiencing the best of our two worlds.”

In McLean, Va., where Beth Russell is an entrepreneur and philanthropist, and her husband, Randy Russell, is a lobbyist, the holiday season is “a round of cocktail parties,” said Mrs. Russell, 46. “It’s hard to get into the Christmas spirit.” The artificial tree she bought pretty much says it all.

Seventeen years ago the Russells began renting a vacation getaway in Kiawah, S.C., (they’ve since bought a shingled beach house there), then in 1999 adopted a baby girl from China.

“Her first Christmas Eve here we took her to our favorite place on the beach on the most remote part of the island,” said Mrs. Russell, who adopted another baby girl from China almost six years ago. “It was our way of connecting with her and the spirit of the holiday. We now do it every year.

“From the beginning, being here was all about doing things differently than in McLean,” continued Mrs. Russell, whose roster of doing things differently includes buying a live tree and, with the help of her daughters and husband, decorating it with found objects like pine cones, twigs and shells.

And on [New Year’s Eve](#) “we all write down the things we want to let go of and the things we hope for, then rip the paper into little pieces and throw them into the ocean,” she said. “It’s a message out to the universe. I would never *think* of doing anything like that in McLean.”