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Get ready for a feast
Champaign Country Club executive chef Wes Robbins serves up a pair of recipes sure to impress your holiday guests.

She's got the look
Kristine Chalifoux's decorations are a wonderful mixture of family favorites and traditional classics.

Watch party
From 'It's a Wonderful Life' to 'Elf,' 10 local celebrities tell us their favorite Christmas movie.

Your table is ready
Amanda Jean offers tips for setting the perfect holiday table.

Ask Karen
Champaign designer Karen Devine takes questions each issue. Today: Am I really limited to red and green colors for Christmas?

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Downtown Champaign candle shop Fire Doll Studio a dream come true for owner Kayla Brown.

These lights are all right
On Greencroft Drive in Champaign, couple has taken their Christmas light game up a notch.

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On our cover
A decorated handrail is reflected in a mirror adorned with holiday whimsy in the entryway of Kristine Chalifoux’s home in Champaign. Photo by Robin Scholz.

Find more photos and feature content at news-gazette.com
“Home for the holidays” is taking on a new meaning in our house as three of our four birds have flown from the nest.

We’ve transitioned from kids (and a 100-pound golden retriever) jumping onto our bed to get Christmas morning started to the two of us (and a now gray-faced golden retriever) wondering if our nearly all-grown kiddos will wake before noon on Christmas morning. Our conversations have shifted from asking what toys they are hoping for to asking what days they’ll be “home for the holidays.”

This issue is all about the holiday comforts that make us feel like we are home again: a candle that smells like Grandma’s house, recipes for a family gathering, movies that we know by heart, and decorations old and new.

Kristine and Alan Chalifoux (empty-nest veterans) were great sports to decorate their historic home for this holiday issue photo shoot — in October!

Wedding planner Amanda Jean brings the same attention to detail for special events to decorating her own home for the holidays.

Wes Robbins (another empty-nest veteran) took time out of his busy schedule to not only share holiday recipe favorites, but he also prepared the dishes for a sneak peek.

Kayla Brown’s new candle shop (“chandlery” if you’re fancy), Fire Doll Studio, was filled with home scents and stocking stuffers.

There is something special about unpacking the same ornaments, garland and lights that have been the backdrop to years of holiday moments. But sometimes, it’s fun to shake things up, add something unexpected. Karen Devine (empty-nest newbie) takes us beyond the traditional red and green color scheme in a fun dining room twist for Ask the Expert.

No matter what stage of “Home for the Holidays” you are in, we are wishing you the twinkliest of lights, the brightest of candles, the yummiest bread puddings and a holiday movie marathon night with the ones you love.

Happy Holidays!

— Kerry Rosso
A After working at Kennedy’s restaurant in Urbana for several years, Robbins pursued a culinary arts degree at Western Culinary Institute in Portland, Ore. He worked at Atwater’s Restaurant in Portland for five years before returning home in 1999 to be near family and raise his two girls. After serving as executive chef at Urbana Country Club, he made the move to Champaign CC in 2016.

CHOCOLATE BREAD PUDDING

“It was on the menu at the club when I first started working here in 2001 when Doug Richter was the head chef so I’ll give credit to him. It has been a favorite at the club for as long as I have been here.”

— 1 quart and 1 cup heavy cream
— 1½ cups light brown sugar
— 1½ cups granulated sugar
— 2 oz cocoa powder
— 7 whole eggs, lightly beaten
— 1 oz. vanilla extract
— 3 oz dark chocolate
— 12 oz. bread cubes (brioche preferred)

Heat cream, sugar, brown sugar and cocoa until hot but not boiling.
Temper with eggs (add a little of the cream mixture to the eggs and then slowly incorporate the egg/cream mixture back into the cream) and pour over chocolate and vanilla. Pour cream mixture into a greased 9 x12 pan with bread cubes, stir, cover with plastic wrap and aluminum foil and bake at 325 approximately 1 hour

Gran marnier sauce:
— 4 egg yolks
— 2 tablespoons gran marnier
— ¼ cup sugar
— 2 cups heavy cream, whipped to soft peaks

Stir eggs, sugar and gran marnier over a water bath until sugar is dissolved and eggs lighten in color and thicken/become fluffy. Cool and fold in whipped cream

To serve:
Scoop bread pudding into a bowl or plate and top with the gran marnier cream. Top with fresh berries of your choice.
BRINED PAN SEARED CHICKEN
with roasted vegetables,
cranberry-mandarin relish and chicken jus

— Airline chicken breast, brined for 4 to 12 hours
— 3 cups white wine
— 2 ounces unsalted butter
— 2 tbsp. fresh Italian parsley, chopped
— 1 cup Brussels sprouts
— 1 cup baby carrots
— 1 cup fingerling potatoes
— 1 cup mushrooms
— 1 cup shallots

Add the four skin-on boneless chicken breasts to the brine for at least 4 hours and up to 12 hours.

Brine recipe
— 1½ cup apple juice
— 1 cup brown sugar
— ½ cups kosher salt
— ½ tablespoon whole black peppercorns
— 2 bay leaves
— 3 cloves garlic smashed
— 1 lemon cut in half
Bring all ingredients to a boil and simmer for 15 minutes. Add four cups ice.

For the roasted vegetables
Preheat oven to 450 degrees
One at a time, toss each vegetable with just enough vegetable oil to lightly coat and season with salt and pepper. Put on a sheet pan and roast in the oven for 10-15 minutes depending on the density of the vegetable. Once all of the vegetables have been roasted, they can be mixed together and held before reheating in the oven when it’s time to serve.

Cranberry-Mandarin Relish
— 12oz fresh cranberries
— 1 cup sugar
— 1 cup mandarin orange sections
— Zest and juice from one orange
— 2 cinnamon sticks
In a food processor, pulse the cranberries a few times until most are not whole but there are a few whole berries and mostly big pieces.
Add all of the ingredients to a sauce pan and heat until sugar has dissolved. Taste and adjust by adding more sugar if you prefer a sweeter relish. Cool until ready to serve.

For the Chicken
Remove the chicken from the brine and pat dry.
In a hot frying pan add 2 tablespoons of vegetable oil and one at a time add the chicken to the pan and sear until the skin becomes golden brown. Do not over crowd the pan. Work in batches of one or two pieces at a time. Once all of the chicken has been browned, finish cooking in a 400 degree oven for approximately 10 minutes or until the internal temperature reaches 160 degrees F. Pour any excess grease from the chicken pan and deglaze the pan with white wine. When the wine has reduced to 1 cup, stir in the butter, parsley and lemon juice. Season the sauce with salt and pepper to taste. Place the re-warmed vegetables on the plate and the chicken on top of the vegetables. Garnish the chicken with cranberry relish and pour sauce over the chicken.
Kristine Chalifoux lights the candles in the centerpiece on her dining room table at her home in Champaign.
The Chalifoux family has lived in their classic American Foursquare home in central Champaign for 21 years.

In that time, they have created traditions, made memories, and filled it with family and friends — especially at the holidays.

Christmas in particular is a special time for Kristine Chalifoux, a Realtor with Coldwell Banker Real Estate Group. She loves to adorn her home with the many sentimental ornaments and decorations she and her family have accumulated over the years, as well as bake and host gatherings with family and friends.

A “purist,” as she calls herself, Kristine doesn’t begin decorating until after Thanksgiving. She savorrs the process and takes an entire weekend to complete the transformation.

“I love my house, I love Christmas, and it doesn’t take that much time to decorate,” she says.

It helps that she keeps it simple, decorating only rooms that guests see and using what she already has rather than coming up with a new decorating scheme each year.

“I like the comfort of tradition,” she says. “It makes it easy to just enjoy the decorating rather
than stress about the style.”

Like many families, one of the joys of decorating is pulling out sentimental favorites.

“I have loads of old family heirlooms and family favorites that come out each year,” she says. “I definitely go for livable and classic that can last for years.”

Though her children are grown now, decorating for the holidays was definitely a family affair when her daughter and son, Maddy and Ryan, lived at home.

“When they were younger,” she says, “they would put up their ornaments. It was a nice way for them to remember each one and any story behind it, such as where it was from.”

Kristine and her husband, Alan, have given their children a meaningful ornament every year since they were babies. The idea being that one day, they would take those ornaments and put them on their own trees.

This was a tradition passed down from her own mother and father, who gave ornaments to Kristine and her siblings every year.

Kristine’s personal favorite is an Eiffel Tower ornament that her mom brought back from France.

Other sentimental ornaments include a wooden Santa ornament gifted to Kristine by her brother, and a lighthouse from the Delaware shore given to her by her husband. There are also the “cheap” bulbs she bought one year because Maddy said she wanted something shiny. The kids slathered those cheap shiny bulbs with glitter paint, and they bring a smile to Kristine’s face whenever she looks at them.

These ornaments and many more fill every available space on the Christmas tree in their living room, which is holiday central.

The living room also plays host to a small herd of elephants and...
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The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there.
Christmas books remind the Chalifoux of their younger days, and the Christmas tree is all trimmed in the living room.
Porcelain Nativity figurines — a wedding gift from Kristine’s late mother — sits in and around a creche purchased on a trip to Germany.
nesting snowmen on an antique chest of drawers in the corner by the window, needlepoint stockings and a string of paper stars hung on the fireplace mantle, and a stack of vintage Christmas storybooks on the coffee table.

The elephants are evocative of Kristine’s mother, who collected them. The nesting snowmen are from Alan’s business trip to Moscow. The stockings are suspended from hangers given to Kristine by her mother. Then there are the storybooks, which are vestiges of Kristine and Alan’s childhoods. One of them, Christmas Tree Farm by David Budbill, belongs to Alan and is a reminder of his time working on a tree farm as a teen.

In the foyer, a gathering of Maddy’s toys and dolls sit on the stairs and are also a reminder of her family’s travels, both near and far. The rightly dressed doll on the top step came from Alan’s travels in Russia, the little old couple on the floral couch are from Kristine’s travels in Germany, and the Raggedy Ann doll, fittingly, came from Arcola, the birthplace of Raggedy Ann.

Back in the dining room, a creche that Kristine bought when she visited Germany graces the sideboard. Because of her German ancestry, Kristine said it just “felt right” to purchase it there. Pale blue and white porcelain figurines of the Nativity scene, a wedding gift from her mother, are ensconced inside the creche.

On the dining room table is a particularly meaningful centerpiece decked out in holiday greenery: a candleholder made from
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bourbon barrel staves. It is the handiwork of their son, Ryan, who has a talent for woodworking. He made a second candleholder from the same material that sits on the hearth, as well as a live-edge side table in the foyer made from a slice of tree trunk, which is home to her mother’s Santa collection.

“This is the first year I have had them,” she says. “She passed away several years ago, and my father just moved and gave them to me.”

Once the decorations are in place, Kristine can indulge in her other favorite Christmas tradition: baking. Every year she makes a variety of cookies and traditional German sweets as a nod to her heritage, including stollen, spritzele cookies and gingerbread houses. When her children were young, they would often invite friends over to decorate the gingerbread houses she made.

It all culminates on Christmas morning when everyone gathers around the tree, and in a time-honored family tradition, celebrates the day by opening Christmas presents one at a time, taking a break only to eat a big breakfast before reconvening to finish opening their gifts.

Even when the season is over and it’s time to put away the decorations, Kristine enjoys the process because it gives her another chance to reflect on the history of each item before tucking it away until next year. If, as the saying goes, a picture—or in this case, an ornament—is worth a thousand words, then the Chalifoux home is filled with an entire volume of words that add up to the story of their family.
Holiday shenanigans, family traditions and a gorgeous old house are just three of the reasons my favorite holiday movie is “The Family Stone.”

We asked 10 familiar folks to share their favorite movie traditions with us. Snuggle up with the ones you love and enjoy this movie marathon!

CLIFF HASTINGS
Parkland College volleyball coach
We have three holiday favorites. “Elf” is a family favorite that the kids love. “A Christmas Story” and “Christmas Vacation” are the holiday musts for Ron and me.

LECONTE NIX
Champaign Central boys’ basketball coach
Easily my favorite is “Christmas Vacation.” I’m a big Clark Griswold guy. I watch it every year on Christmas Eve.

DEB FRANK FEINEN
Champaign Mayor
I hate to admit that our family favorite is “Christmas Vacation.” Our entire extended family can quote every inappropriate one-liner from that movie. It’s hilarious and we have so much fun laughing and watching it together every year.

JANET RAYFIELD
Illinois soccer coach
No contest — “Elf.” It’s fun, festive and a great sentiment!
SUE GREY  
President and CEO  
of United Way  
of Champaign County

My husband and I always watch “It’s a Wonderful Life.” The message is great, that no matter how bad things can get, family and community always come through.

STEVEN BENTZ  
Virginia Theatre Director

I hate to be so predictable, but I have to say the end of “It’s a Wonderful Life” never fails to get to me. It’s always going to be my holiday fave. As a person who has spent a day or two — OK, my entire working life — in spaces where community comes together, seeing all those folks show up at the end of the movie to throw their support behind something, that’s still moving to me. Completely coincidentally, we will be screening that picture at the Virginia as part of the News-Gazette’s beloved classic film series on Saturday, Dec 11. Now, would you like to hear my Jimmy Stewart impression?

BEN DYER  
Champaign County Circuit Judge

“Planes, Trains and Automobiles.” I think anyone who has traveled over the holidays can relate to this movie, which portrays an ill-fated attempt to return to Chicago for Thanksgiving. No matter how grueling your trip is, it probably is not as bad as the one endured by Steve Martin’s character, who is plagued by a perfectly cast John Candy for a travel companion. It’s also a nice reminder that the holidays are about more than just being somewhere at a particular time and place. I’ve never watched this movie without laughing.

ESTHER JANG  
Area Realtor

Every year after we put up our Christmas tree and decorate the house, we watch “How the Grinch Stole Christmas.” We follow up the movie with baking sugar cookies while listening to Christmas classics. It’s a day that would put even the biggest humbug in the Christmas spirit!

GIANINA BAKER  
Central Illinois Business’ Forty Under 40 Woman of The Year (2020)

“This Christmas!” My husband and I watch it every Christmas Eve while wrapping presents. As the years go by and our boys get older, we find ourselves able to watch more of the movie instead of wrapping! The music, the people, the story ... all seem familiar and it’s become a part of our holiday traditions.

ANDREA HUNT-SHELTON  
Champaign floral designer

“Emmet Otter’s Jug-Band Christmas.” It’s such a weirdo cult classic and I love that it’s in our families’ Christmas movie lineup every year. We were a big Jim Hensen/Muppets family and this is one of his earliest movies, released in 1977. It’s just so weird and funny and heartwarming and old. It takes me right back to our childhood Christmases, all snowed in and cozy. It’s a must.

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Amanda Jean is here to get you SET for the holidays

Story Alexis Castillo
Photos Robin Scholz
Whether planning the next wedding or decorating her own home for the holidays, Amanda Jean incorporates her expertise with individual style.

With a mix of traditional design elements and a modern twist, the founder of Savoy-based Inspire Your creates magic.

Her motto for her wedding business, “Let you inspire you,” also guides how she approaches decorating for the holidays.

“I always like to design around having style words and adjectives that describe the feeling I am trying to create,” she said. “For me that’s nostalgia, comfort, calmness, tradition and joy.”

Her choices are deliberate and rooted in personal and meaningful details to create spaces that bring back fond memories and set a beautiful backdrop for new ones.

A look at her holiday tablescapes makes that clear.

In one design, her approach is traditional minimalism. A green table runner, bottle brush trees, traditional plaid napkins and dainty tea lights lead to a nostalgic and cozy feeling.

Simplicity, warmth and elegance collide in her modern table setting which features blue hurricanes, sparkly stars and rich table linens with gold and silver metallic accents.

She suggests that people choose holiday décor that falls within their individual home style.

“I would always say the overall theme needs to fit into the style of the home,” she said. “You want the styles to complement each other. So, if you have a farmhouse, traditional home, modern, coastal, then create a holiday theme that fits within the overall look, so it seems seamless.”

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Karen Devine, owner of Devine Designs and a member of Central Illinois Business magazine’s Class of 2011 Forty Under 40, answers reader questions each issue. Submit them at karendevine@yahoo.com.
Q: I feel like shaking things up this year by also decorating my dining room but I don’t want to use the traditional red and green. Help?

A: Red and green for the holidays is very traditional but may not be right for everyone. Those traditional colors might not blend well with your current design theme, or maybe it’s just time for a change. There are many ways to bring the “merry” into your holiday decorating without using red and green.

The key: repetition. Whatever colors you use, use them throughout the entire home to create a theme. It’s all about the flow.

For example, if you fall in love with a decorative holiday runner with unusual holiday colors, use it as inspiration. Create a tablescape on your dining room table with the colors from the runner. Then, add the same colors to the garland on your entry staircase as well as your living room mantle and tree. Finally, you can incorporate your theme colors with your wrapping paper and ribbon to really pull the color theme together.

Christmas colors do not have to be just red and green. Some other fabulous color combinations to consider: blue and silver, purple and gold, white and brown, gold and silver, or (as shown here) pink and turquoise.

Creating new and resetting long-held traditions with a unique color theme can be an exciting way to bring new life to the Christmas season!
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“The ose knows nostalgia” ... words never truer than during the holiday season.

The smell of a fireplace, a pine tree, grandma’s house or maybe Christmas morning cinnamon rolls all evoke strong memories.

I had the chance to explore Fire Doll Studio, where it is socially acceptable to take big sniffs of the inventory!

Fire Doll Studio has grown from a nursing student’s dream in her tiny kitchen a decade ago to a beautiful candle shop (“chandlery” if you’re fancy!) in downtown Champaign.

“I'm just really excited to have an opportunity to invest in this beautiful town I love so much. I was born and raised here and I love to watch this community grow,” said owner Kayla Brown. “I hope that Fire Doll Studio can be a comfortable, inclusive and fun space for people to shop and create in.”
AT FIRST LIGHT

Story  Dave Hinton  Photos  Robin Scholz
There’s no mistaking the home of Keith Smith and Timothy Denoyer at the corner of Greencroft Drive and Prospect Avenue. It’s lit. As in light-up-the-neighborhood lit. See-it-from-outer-space lit.

Smith does most of the Christmas-light decorating on the project that uses more than 30,000 lights.

While most people started to hunker down for the winter in mid-November, Smith starts to work outdoors to prepare for the first lighting, which traditionally takes place the Saturday after Thanksgiving.

He spends about 80 hours on the exterior project, which he and Denoyer have named “Lighting up the Croft.” They also do a lot of decorating indoors.

Smith added a red, white and blue touch last year. An American flag — 17 feet wide and 9 feet high — was placed atop the roof of their...
California-style ranch house just south of the Champaign Country Club.

Smith said there was more of a buzz last year.

“I don’t know if it’s because of COVID. We put up a bunch of window displays for the first responders,” he said.

The flag was another way to honor the responders and the military.

“It’s (a means of saying thanks) in reference to work they do,” Smith said. “I’ve got a niece that’s a nurse and a sister that’s a nurse. I know several people that work for the Champaign County Public Health District and a brother, formerly in the Air Force, now retired.”

To make the flag, Smith sketched it out and figured how many lights would be needed (more than 300) and went online so he could keep it to scale. He said he has received a number of positive comments about the flag addition.
Keith Smith shows how the computer works the music and lights.

Smith sees the outdoor lighting as a way to give back, saying, “It started out this was for family and friends and then the community, and now it’s really (the other way around). I really just want to give people some joy; especially living through this craziness, we need some more joy and kindness in our lives.”

The 60-year-old Smith has been a victim of some of that craziness himself. He had to shut down his Cameron’s Catering business, which he had operated for 26 years, due to the pandemic, and he decided in 2020 to permanently close it.

He has since become a licensed real-estate broker and is affiliated with Keller Williams.

The Smith-Denoyer house is more than a visual treat. It’s also an auditory celebration of
the season. Its lights are synchronized to a variety of Christmas songs that people can listen to on 106.5 FM.

The system, which Smith bought in 2013, employs 48 channels to control the lights by dimming, turning them on and off, flickering and regulating all of the action.

“It’s pretty sophisticated,” Smith said. “It’s all connected to computer cables driven by a laptop” with a 20-song, 40-minute run-through.

People come and park for one song or two, while some stay the entire 40 minutes. Smith tries to cater to all musical tastes and ages.

It’s all Christmas/holiday music with songs ranging from the traditional “O Holy Night” and “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” to the more secular “The Chipmunk Song” and Mariah Carey’s “All I Want for Christmas is You.”

The “Amazing Grace” sequence is one of Smith’s favorites. “It’s honestly a lot of work,” Smith said of lighting up people’s lives. “The hardest part is not actually the lights. It’s laying out the electrical. Every light has a different electrical supply.”

Smith sees his electric bill jump $300 to $400 a month during the Christmas season, but that’s not as bad as the $1,000 jump before he switched many of the incandescent lights to LEDs.
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