

### THE RITZIEST OF HOLIDAY CELEBRATIONS

By Diana von Welanetz Wentworth

KNOWN AS THE GRACIOUS GRAND DAME of Newport dining, the Ritz Restaurant and Garden is *the* place to celebrate the holidays in Newport Beach.

Festooned with opulent, over-the-top Christmas décor, she welcomes her loyal clientele to the holiday spirit a half hour earlier than usual for both lunch and dinner. Insiders know reservations are essential, and so great is the demand that the Ritz has had to resort to assigning confirmation numbers.

As a cookbook author and travel writer, I'm curious about what makes any restaurant so popular. The friendly bar just off the entry keeps spirits high with seasonal eggnog and hot buttered rum. Many are there sipping the Ritz Chocolate Martini, a shaken mixture of Three Olives Chocolate and Skyy Vanilla Vodkas, and De Kuyper Crème de Cacao Blanc, served in a large martini glass rimmed with Godiva chocolate.

"I love the New York café/martini bar ambiance," says Pat Rypinski. I always feel welcome when I walk in and get caught up in the happening feeling. Alan and I go there two to three times during the holidays! Her favorite dishes? The Mariner's Salad — a bounty of seafood that is actually more crab and lobster than even I, Diana, can eat in one sitting — Liver and Onions and Sauerbraten.

Cathy Thomas, beloved food editor of the *Orange County Register* goes to the Ritz for Traditional Roast Christmas Goose with Lingonberry Sauce. "Crisp skin, succulent moist meat — it's perfection."

My husband, Ted, says, "The Ritz is much livelier than most restaurants and private clubs, and it's been a magic place for me. I created a tradition at my firm that whenever things got slow I'd take my whole team there to a 'Going Out of Business' lunch! After a great meal topped by Profiteroles with Extra Belgian Chocolate Sauce, business improved immediately." Ted claims to have a separate dessert tummy that is always empty. "I always have room for their smashing holiday special, Roasted Hazelnut Soufflé sauced tableside with Frangelico Crème Anglaise."

Most prefer the main dining room, the Escoffier Room, with its extravagantly warm peach decor. I'm partial to the Gallery, a medium-size room where walls are enlivened by the whimsical culinary art of Guy Buffet and where French doors open onto the garden. We prefer round tables — they're available here for parties up to twelve — so that conversations include every guest. Private parties for up to thirty-two are booked in the wine cellar.

Owner Fred Glusman, a Las Vegas legend for his celebrity-packed Piero's Restaurant, was chosen by the late Hans Prager to carry on the great traditions of the Ritz. Since taking over in 2002, he's added tasteful touches of his own and has done a splendid job of scanning every room to make sure all is up to his own high standards.

#### MY OWN FAVORITES?

The Small Plates menu served between the closing of lunch and dinner time Monday through Friday, including Fresh Stone Crabs flown in daily and served with the Ritz version of tangy

mustard mayonnaise made famous at Joe's Stone Crab in Miami.

The Ritz Egg, a dinner appetizer of softly scrambled eggs and chived smoked salmon that are returned to the shell and topped with caviar and complimented with a shot of vodka.

Mr. G's Potatoes, named for Mr. Glusman, are individual servings of a variation of Pommies Anna, paper-thin layers of potato slices, buttered and seasoned, then arranged in individual copper baking pans to emerge from the oven brown and crisp on the bottom and sides. Their secret ingredient is a spoonful of cheese and sautéed onions in the center.

And oh yes, that Chocolate Martini — it doubles as dessert!

#### CREAMED CORN À LA RITZ

8 generous servings

- 2 tablespoons butter, melted
- 2 tablespoons flour
- 2 20-ounce packages frozen kernel corn
- 1 cup heavy cream (whipping cream)
- 1 cup whole milk
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- Pinch of white or cayenne pepper

#### Optional topping:

2 to 3 tablespoons freshly grated Parmesan cheese

Stir together the butter and flour and set aside. Combine the remaining ingredients in a heavy saucepan or sauté pan of at least four-quart capacity and bring to a simmer. Lower the heat and cook, stirring often, for five minutes. Whisk the butter and flour mixture into the simmering corn, letting it cook briefly to thicken and remove from the heat.

Transfer the mixture to a shallow heat-proof casserole and sprinkle evenly with grated Parmesan. Just before serving, place under a hot broiler until evenly browned. **GT**

#### Ritz Restaurant and Garden

880 Newport Center Drive, Newport Beach

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Holiday hours: Monday through Friday, Lunch 11 am to 3 pm, Dinner 5:30 to 10 pm (to 11 pm Friday and Saturday and to 9 pm on Sunday)

Diana von Welanetz Wentworth has enjoyed a career as an author of nine award-winning books and as a popular public speaker and television host. Her books include *Chicken Soup For The Soul Cookbook*, *The Pleasure Of Your Company* (winner of the French Tastemaker "Cookbook of the Year" award), *The Art of Buffet Entertaining*, *L.A. Cuisine*, and *Celebrations*. [Diana@endurancemom.com](mailto:Diana@endurancemom.com).

