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Contact Susan Nye at
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Like most people, I have many cherished Christmas traditions. Some have changed and evolved; others have become treasured memories. When I was little, my sister and I visited Santa every year. We would patiently or not so patiently stand in line to give him the rundown on our hearts' desire. Both Brenda and I were always dressed in our party best. Seeing Santa was an event, in and of itself, not a last minute afterthought on an already busy day. When we got older, we'd followed up with a letter. After all Santa's a busy guy, we didn't want to assume he'd remember every detail of our long lists.

Every December, my mother brought out a slightly worn but hardly forlorn book from her childhood. I love books and *The*

*Life and Adventures of Santa Claus** is one of my all time favorites. Each night Mom would read a chapter or two. We might beg for more but she had a plan and her timing was impeccable. She always finished a day or two before Christmas Eve because one and only one story could be read on *The Night Before Christmas*. Excited beyond imagination, my sister and I cuddled up with Dad in his big armchair for the reading and rereading of Mr. Moore's famous poem. Luckily my brother came along about the time we got too old or too cool to listen and we could eavesdrop. Now I eavesdrop while John reads the poem to his girls ... and I think I'm about due for a rereading of Santa's life and adventures.

Last month, I headed down to Florida to celebrate Thanksgiving and spend a few weeks in the sun. While I was there, my dad resurrected an old family tradition, the annual lights tour. A few flamingos were mixed in with the reindeer but it was a wonderful flashback.

Every year, a week or two before Christmas, Dad piled us into the family station wagon for a drive through town. We wove our way through the neighborhood and then checked out the brightly lit window displays downtown. Next we explored strange streets and unknown neighborhoods, winding our way throughout town. It was like a treasure hunt. We'd make a turn and hit an extravaganza of light and color; take another and get next to nothing. My sister and I were partial to splendiferous displays of multicolor lights and Santa riding high in a sleigh pulled by eight, tiny reindeer. Mom preferred the cool icy look of all blue lights. We would ooh and awe and constantly change our vote for best house. After the lights tour we always headed down Route 9 for a special family dinner at Ken's. Ken's was the site of most if not all of our out-to-dinner celebrations.

The decorations in our own yard were quite modest. Dad kept it simple with a spot lit wreath on the door and a couple of strings of multicolor lights draped over the bushes. Except for one year. That was the year, my grandfather decided that he'd had enough with decorating in the cold and snow and gave us all his outdoor lights. We had quite a display, truly spectacular, if only for a minute or two. Instead of going for breadth, Dad went for depth. The bushes and front doorway were laden with brightly colored bulbs. We all stood in the yard to watch the unveiling, he hit the switch and snap, crackle, POP, most of Grandpa's ancient bulbs exploded. It was a very good show while it lasted.

What are your favorite Christmas traditions and memories? Have a wonderful holiday with family and friends!

Bon appétit!

Susan

* *The Life and Adventures of Santa Claus* by Julie Lane is still or again available in bookstores and on-line.



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Contact me at
susannye@tds.net

603/526 7319

PO Box 1875 – New London
New Hampshire 03257

Mixed Greens with Roasted Grapes, Olives & Feta

This salad is a wonderful combination of sweet and savory. It is the perfect start to a special holiday dinner. It's on my menu for Christmas Eve this year. Enjoy!

Serves 12

1 – 1 1/2 pounds seedless red grapes, stemmed
Extra-virgin olive oil
Champagne vinegar
1 small red onion, cut in thin wedges
12 ounces mixed greens
Roasted Shallot Vinaigrette (recipe follows)
24 Sicilian green olives, pitted and quartered
4 ounces feta, crumbled
3/4 cup chopped pecans, toasted

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Put the grapes in a large, nonstick, ovenproof skillet, drizzle with 1 tablespoon olive oil and 1/2 tablespoon champagne vinegar, sprinkle with salt and pepper and toss to coat. Arrange the grapes in single layer and transfer to the oven. Roast the grapes for about 30 minutes or until they are shriveled and lightly caramelized. Reserve the grapes and liquid from the pan separately. You'll use the liquid in the vinaigrette.

Put the onion in a small, nonstick, ovenproof skillet. Drizzle with 1 tablespoon olive oil and 1/2 tablespoon champagne vinegar, sprinkle with salt and pepper and toss to coat. Roast the onions for about 15 minutes or until they are tender crisp and lightly caramelized. Reserve.

Put the greens in a large bowl and toss with enough vinaigrette to lightly coat. Arrange on a large deep platter or divide among individual plates. Top with grapes, olives and onions; sprinkle with feta and toasted pecans and serve.

It's best to prep the vinaigrette, grapes, olives, feta and pecans in advance. At the last minute, toss the greens with the vinaigrette and assemble the salad.

Roasted Shallot Vinaigrette

Makes about 1 cup

1 shallot, peeled and quartered
2 cloves garlic
Pinch dried thyme
Extra-virgin olive oil
Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper
4 tablespoons Champagne vinegar
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
1/2 – 1 teaspoon honey
1/4 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Place the shallot, garlic and thyme in a small oven proof baking dish (I use a custard cup), drizzle with olive oil and season with salt and pepper. Roast until the garlic and shallot are very soft, about 30 minutes. Set aside to cool.

Put the roasted shallot and garlic, liquid from the roasted grapes, vinegar, mustard, honey and Worcestershire sauce in a blender; season with salt and pepper and process until smooth. With the machine running, add 1/2-3/4 cup olive oil or to taste and process until smooth.

