



Monica Pitrelli sits down with Chef WOLFGANG PUCK to talk Christmas, hometown traditions and what type of bird he is cooking at home for the holiday (and no, it's not a turkey).

Photography by Michael Bernabe

An Honest Puck

What was a typical Christmas like for you as a kid?

I grew up in a village in the hills of Austria. On Christmas Eve, we would decorate the Christmas tree with lit candles, sing "Silent Night" and open presents. Then we had dinner and went to midnight mass. We had to walk half an hour through the snow in temperatures of minus 10 degrees Celsius to get there. On the way home, we always stopped at my parents' friends' houses for schnapps, tea and hot chocolate.

How many people lived in your town?

Altogether, maybe 30.

Thirty thousand?

No, 30 people! The town had about 11 houses.

What was one of your family's Christmas traditions?

We always got winter gear like skis, skates and ski outfits as presents. Since I was the eldest child, I always got new ones. It was hand-me-downs for my sister. My uncle was a ski-maker, and he would repaint old skis for us. My mother and my grandmother used to knit all of our sweaters. Of course, we always wanted store-bought ones. Now it's the opposite; something handmade is really special.

You understand the life of an expat, having left Austria for France and, later, the US. Has your view of Christmas changed over the years?

In France, Christmas is almost the same as New Year's because of the *réveillon de Noël*. Both are big parties, and food is everything. When I first moved to California it was 26 degrees Celsius outside, and I was so depressed. Sitting on the beach in Santa Monica is not Christmas! So we drove two hours up a nearby mountain called Big Bear to see the snow. We stayed about ten minutes.

Any other culture shocks that you recall?

For sure. I did not really like the food in France at the beginning.

Really?

Weiner schnitzel and goulash were my favourites. Beef *bourguignon* and *coq au vin* are good, but I was just not adjusted to the taste. In southern France, they drink *pastis*, an aniseed-flavoured liqueur diluted with water. Oh my God! I used to get goose bumps just smelling it. It was terrible. And then all of a sudden I started to like it. In 1974, I came to America, first to Indianapolis. The food was not that good. *[He laughs.]* It was not a good experience to go to a restaurant at that time. They didn't sell wine on Sundays. We had to go to a Hilton hotel, and who goes to eat at a Hilton hotel?

Do you spend Christmas in California now, or do you travel?

When I was married to my first wife, we would go skiing in Telluride. We stayed at a beautiful house owned by our friend; it was on the cover of *Architectural Digest*. I would pack ice chests full of food – smoked salmon, foie gras, caviar, lamb and steak, and we would cook every night. But then he sold the house to Jerry Seinfeld.

Did that put an end to holidays in Colorado?

No, now we go to Beaver Creek, which is near Vail. About ten years ago, I gave a speech at the Ritz Carlton in Beaver



Wolfgang with his wife of six years, Gelila Assefa

Creek. The food was terrible. My young boys wouldn't even eat it. How can a hotel by itself on a mountainside not serve good food? The next spring they invited me to speak at another Ritz Carlton conference, and I said, "You guys don't know how to operate a restaurant!" I really gave them a hard time. *[He laughs.]* So, the owners asked me to open a restaurant in the hotel in a space with deer heads watching you while you eat. I said, if I can bring in a designer, we have a deal.

You opened a Spago restaurant there, didn't you?

Yes, and it is beautiful. Now we can go skiing and have breakfast, lunch and dinner at the hotel. It is perfect. I stayed at the hotel for a few years, but this year I am renting a house next to the hotel. It has two storeys, wooden beams and a fireplace. Maybe I will have somebody decorate it a little so it feels like Christmas when we get there.

Do you cook Christmas dinner at home?

We used to have Christmas at home. We would close Spago on the 24th and 25th, and I would invite friends, such as Billy Baldwin and his wife, Jack Lemmon and his wife, a lot of Hollywood-type people. We don't have a staff at home – just two housekeepers – and all of a sudden I was cooking by myself for 30 to 40 people. I remember one time I decided to make roasted lobsters. I had to split 20 lobsters in my kitchen. Then we had venison and a cheese course. By one in the morning, I was so tired I had one glass of red wine, and I fell asleep on the sofa. I thought, "Why am I doing this?" That is when I decided to open the restaurant. This was in the mid-1990s, and it's been sold out ever since.

So no Christmas cooking anymore? Not even a cup of eggnog?

I'll have to cook *something* or else it won't smell like Christmas. Maybe I'll make some venison stew.

Is turkey a tradition in your home?

No, not really, though we do sometimes eat turkey. On Christmas Eve, I like to



cook Austrian goose. I separate the legs and the breasts, cook the breasts like duck breasts, and bone and stuff the legs with breadcrumbs, raisins, apricots, almonds, sage and other herbs. I cook the breast really slowly until it's medium rare. I'll make braised red cabbage like we have in Austria, some sweet potato puree and chestnut soup with black truffles. Maybe we'll start with smoked salmon and oysters.

And for dessert?

I'll make *bûche de Noël*, a Christmas log cake from France. It's meringue on the bottom followed by layers of vanilla or rum-raisin ice cream and chestnut cream, topped with whipped cream. I serve it with hot chocolate.

Tell us about one of the best Christmas gifts you have ever received.

I still remember when I got my first pair

of skis that were not made by my uncle. I was so excited. I finally had real skis.

Any bad gifts that stand out?

I don't remember really bad things. Because I grew up so poor, I was happy with anything we got. I remember when I was really young, all I got was crayons and a colouring book, and that was it.

Are you hard to buy for?

You know, I'm very easy to buy for. My wife buys me clothes, and she has very good taste.

What's on your Christmas list this year?

I don't need anything. If I see my kids and my wife happy, that's enough for me. 