

Obama Christmas: no small feat

Preparations begin as early as October



First lady Michelle Obama, right, with her daughters Sasha and Malia, right, as they stand with the White House Christmas tree as it is delivered to the North Portico of the White House in Washington, Friday, Nov. 27, 2009. With the Obama's are Eric and Gloria Sundback, left. (AP Photo/Pablo Martinez Monsivais)

AP

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WASHINGTON — Christmas at the White House isn't for sissies.

Take quantities that might work in a private home — guests, cookies, parties, cards, whatever — and add some extra zeros to get a feel for a White House-sized holiday season.

As in 50,000 guests, 28 parties and open houses, a couple hundred thousand holiday cards and untold quantities of cookies, cakes, brownies, truffles and the like to feed the Obamas' holiday throng.

"They eat like crazy," says former White House executive chef Walter Scheib, who cooked for the masses under presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. "Christmas at the White House is the single most mentally and physically challenging thing that you can do."

Scheib said the staff used to joke during the holidays about "White House flextime" — when "you can work any 100 hours you want this week."

As far back as October, pastry chef Bill Yosses' team was plotting strategy and going over drawings for this year's gingerbread house — a 390-pound behemoth whose construction required the use of a band saw. Before Halloween, Yosses already was joking about doing "mental push-ups" to prepare for the coming holiday season.

Yosses' shop stockpiles mounds of cookie dough in the freezer to keep up with day-to-day demand for holiday sweets.

His rule of thumb for receptions: four bite-size dessert items per guest. (Some of which are discreetly slipped into purses and go home as souvenirs.)

This year's menu for the White House dessert buffet table: lemon layer cake, brownies, assorted cookies, pecan pralines, pumpkin pie, chocolate truffles, and more.

Roland Mesnier, one of Yosses' predecessors, says he always tried to sock away enough dough for 120,000 cookies and sweets by Dec. 1.

"If I did not have that, I would be in trouble," Mesnier said.

Michelle and Barack Obama, meanwhile, might want to stockpile hand sanitizer: There's a whole lot of handshaking going on at all those parties and receptions — although White House aides say the Obamas are doing away with formal receiving lines and posed photos with each guest at some events to accommodate more people.

The jockeying for a White House invite is intense enough to sorely test any host's holiday spirit. Speculation over who'll get to attend the president's Hanukkah party, for example, has been swirling in Jewish publications since mid-November, along with grouching that the party's size is down from last year's 800 guests. About 500 will attend this year, about the same number as in earlier years in the Bush administration, according to White House aides.

Overall, about the same number of guests will visit the White House this holiday season as in years past, although there will be a slightly smaller number of parties and receptions, according to White House aides.

One complicating factor this season is tighter scrutiny of who's getting in the door. Washington still is abuzz over how a couple of aspiring reality TV stars managed to talk their way into the first state dinner of the Obama White House last month. After investigating what went wrong, the White House promised to station its own staff at checkpoints to help the Secret Service determine who is cleared for entry.

Also new: This year's party schedule has been adjusted to accommodate a first family with young children. There are fewer weekend parties and more daytime receptions during the week, when 8-year-old Sasha and 11-year-old Malia are off at school.

And, in tight economic times, it wouldn't do to look too extravagant. So this year's trees feature "recycled" ornaments from presidents past that were shipped all over the country to community groups, which redecorated them with scenes of local landmarks. It was part

of what staff described as an effort by the Obamas to ensure a frugal and environmentally friendly holiday season.

Overall, there appear to be fewer trees and decorations this time than in some over-the-top years past, and the same is true of the Christmas card list. Several hundred thousand have been mailed out, paid for by the Democratic National Committee. That compares with 1.5 million sent out by George W. Bush in 2003, paid for by the Republicans.

Mrs. Obama's office did not reveal the cost of this year's holiday festivities, but said a standard amount for holiday entertaining is set aside in the White House budget. And each year, costs are held down by a host of volunteers clamoring to help dress up the White House. This year's volunteers included Simon Doonan, creative director of Barneys New York. He helped design the displays.

Like the Obamas, past presidents and first ladies have set a thrifty tone in austere times. Betty Ford went with a patchwork-trimmed tree for 1974, and distributed instructions so families around the country could make their own decorations. Pat Nixon cut way back on Christmas lights during the energy crisis in 1973.

Over the decades, though, White House holiday festivities generally have become more elaborate, according to Jennifer Pickens, whose new book "Christmas at the White House," details how holiday celebrations have grown.

The pasty chef's creation of a gingerbread house, for example, began in 1969 with a simple A-frame built with 16 pounds of gingerbread and six pounds of icing. This year's 56-inch-by-29-inch re-creation of the White House weighed in with 140 pounds of gingerbread coated with 250 pounds of white chocolate.

Jacqueline Kennedy in 1961 began the tradition of establishing a decorating theme for White House Christmases, selecting "The Nutcracker Suite."

This year's theme is "reflect, rejoice, renew," which is embroidered on the blue ribbons used to hang ornaments.

It's all a long way from the days of Abigail and John Adams, the first couple to spend Christmas at the White House. Mrs. Adams burned more than 20 cords of wood during the first White House Christmas party to try to keep her guests warm, Pickens said, but it wasn't enough and many chilled guests left early.