

a swell noël

Chef, cookbook author, and master entertainer Alex Hitz hosts a Christmas Eve dinner for 40 in his Los Angeles home



By **KAREN CARROLL**
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After a final check of the tables before guests arrive, Alex Hitz pauses to make sure everything is in order sartorially, too. | Photo by Iain Bagwell.

You could say Alex Hitz inherited his love for throwing a good party. His mother, Caroline, a consummate hostess, and his stepfather, the famed conductor Robert Shaw, “entertained constantly,” he says. Hitz continues the family tradition, and sets Christmas Eve aside to share a sparkling evening at home with friends. No surprise, food is paramount, but the atmosphere he creates is equally delicious.

A PARTY IS THEATER. It’s all about timing and the components that go into it—the props, if you will. If you have delicious food and it’s served hours late, it’s going to ruin the evening. If you have horrendous food that’s served on time, that will too. And nothing kills a mood faster than a room lit for surgery. I always dim, dim, dim, and then use long tapers and votives everywhere.

BRING OUT THE REALLY GOOD STUFF. I’ve been fortunate to inherit some fine tableware, and I’m a firm believer in using what I have as often as possible. As Joan Didion once said, “Every day is all there is.”

THE HOLIDAYS ARE NOT THE TIME TO BUCK TRADITION. For Christmas I unapologetically go for red, and what's on the table reflects my sense of tradition, style, and family history. Floral designer David Jones used carnations in three shades of red, pavéd them, and made them look fabulous. I piled apples in gorgeous silver bowls for other simple and pretty centerpieces. I like a high/low combination. The silver is first-rate, but I mixed in gold trees I purchased at an after-Christmas sale.

YES, 45 MINUTES IS GRACIOUS PLENTY FOR COCKTAIL "HOUR." My party begins at 7:30. I'll pass Champagne and sparkling water. If guests desire something even stronger, my homemade eggnog is decadent and lethal. I don't serve hors d'oeuvres. Why ruin your appetite for the main event? We sit down at the table by 8:15.

PLAN EVERYTHING OUT, BUT STAY FLEXIBLE (AND CALM). Go to town on the details, but know that things will happen. Children will run through the dining room, and a Baccarat glass will surely get broken. What are you going to do? The more stressed you are, the more uncomfortable your guests are going to be. A party is like a watch—you just have to wind it up, and then let it go.



"For Christmas Eve dinner, I always want the flowers to be super special. These were done by my talented friend David Jones," says Hitz.
