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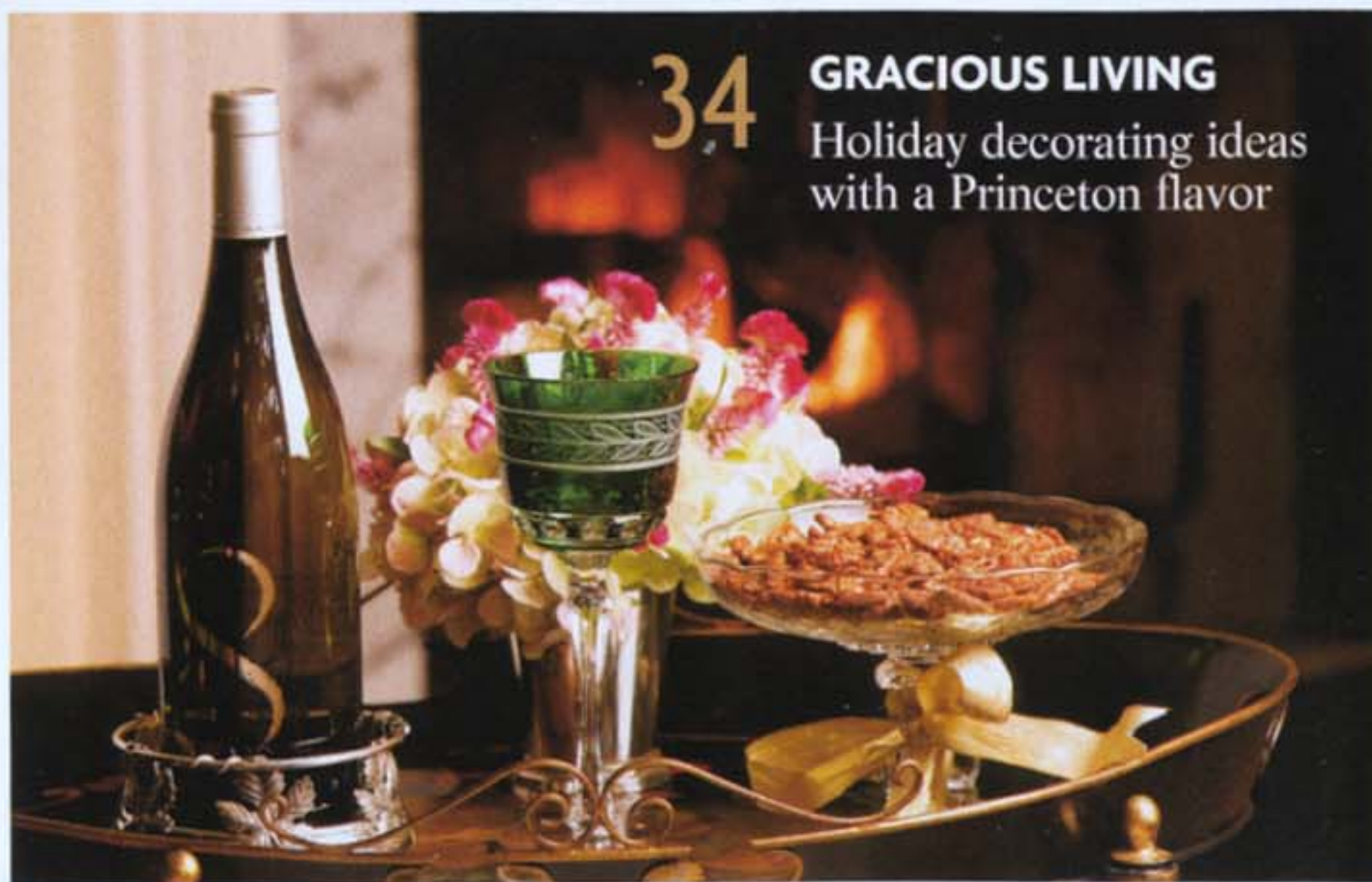
HOLIDAY 2005

Caviar torte served up by one of
Princeton's favorite party planners

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ON THE COVER: Caviar torte by Nassau Street Seafood, Princeton; selection by party planner Debbie Tunnell of Recipes 4U, Princeton. Photographed by © RicardoBarros.com

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FOR THE HOLIDAYS
—Simply gorgeous—rituals and memories—

BY ERIN MURPHY SANDERS
PHOTOS BY @RICARDOBARROS.COM



When the people are dear, the space inspired, and the food glorious the setting is ripe for a celebration. Princeton's Debbie Tunnell shares her "sacred space" with us this holiday season.





A “sacred space,” according to Debbie Tunnell, is a place that symbolizes the owner’s innermost self. For her book *Sacred Spaces: Princeton Parties, Gatherings, and Celebrations*, Tunnell, along with co-authors Dale Engelbert and Susan Szymanski, designed and organized gatherings in eight one-of-a-kind places that their owners were passionate about and wanted to share with others (see page 71 for details).



A native Texan, Tunnell is passionate about the home she and her husband, Doug, purchased in 1988, transforming it into a space where they can share meaningful, beautiful, and unforgettable moments with family and friends. A casual elegance permeates the house—the live magnolia wreaths and garlands (Go for Baroque, Princeton) on the door, the welcoming smell of a gingerbread house in the foyer, tiers of candles on the piano, and a sumptuous bow on the banister. She says she

learned how to create a comfortable, beautiful, and welcoming space from good friend Donna Gasior of Gasior’s Furniture, Belle Mead.

Over the years, Tunnell has developed a recipe for the holidays that focuses on the people and things she loves. So as not to eclipse Thanksgiving, she waits until the first weekend in December to trim the tree. She cherishes decorations that remind her of the

important people in her life. Nutcrackers (handpainted by her son) guard an end table, stockings (made by Grandma Tunnell) hang on the mantel, and the angel that she and Doug bought for their first Christmas crowns the tree. Each year brings another nutcracker kit and a custom gingerbread house from Annie B’s Confections in Newtown, Pa. The highlight of the season is Christmas Eve dinner, where the menu is always the same, because like everything else in her home — it’s just right. ➤







IF YOU HAVE NICE THINGS, USE THEM —

A philosophy she learned from her mother. And if you don't have enough to fill your table? Beg, borrow and almost steal, says Tunnell, who enjoys reciprocating the favor.

Each year, friends stop by for champagne and a caviar torte from Nassau Street Seafood before the family sits down for a leisurely Christmas Eve dinner. (Clockwise from left) Tunnell says her Lynn Chase Winter Game Birds china is perfect for entertaining, from Thanksgiving through Valentine's Day. Dale Engelbert created the Swiss-inspired chandelier ornament wreath. Antique silver candlesticks, Buccellati silver napkin rings, William Yeoward Chloe champagne flutes and Britannia water goblets, and Mottahedeh Emerald Vine crystal available at Hamilton Jewelers, Princeton. Leonidas roses with seeded eucalyptus and hydrangea by Jardiniere Florals, Princeton. The sienna napkins and crimson silk tablecloth overlaid with embroidered espresso organza are from Special Occasions Table Linen Rentals (Lancaster, Pa). Petite croquembouche in spun sugar nest from Annie B's Confections (Newtown, Pa). ▶



(Clockwise from left) Grandma Tunnell made stockings for the entire family. Spiced pecans and a cockscomb and hydrangea bouquet (Jardiniere Florals, Princeton) accompany a 2001 Vineyard 7 Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon, compliments of Princeton's Weezie and Launny Steffens' Napa Valley-Spring Mountain District vineyard (Princeton Corkscrew Wine Shop); Mottahedeh crystal and Sandra Jordan wine coaster (Hamilton Jewelers).

Douglas fir tree from Bear Swamp Christmas Tree Farm, hammered pewter candle sticks on the piano available at Go for Baroque, Princeton.



EVERYTHING DOESN'T HAVE TO BE RED AND GREEN.

For the holidays, Tunnell brings out items that she loves, and accents rooms with live flower arrangements, candles, nutcrackers, candies, ribbons, and throw pillows. She doesn't rush the tree trimming. Each ornament box, labeled and dated, holds precious memories of those that made or bought them. Finding just the right spot for their more than 50 nutcrackers (some painted by her son) is also a cherished ritual.





DON'T GET STRESSED, ORDER OUT.

Gingerbread house decorating parties in the kitchen hold special memories and capture the magic of the season for Tunnell. Her first party for 20 children in the basement spiraled into sugar-charged chaos. The next year she moved the party into the kitchen and limited the guest list. Though her sons, Christopher and Travis, have outgrown the parties, she's discovered that adults enjoy this finger-licking, bon-bon popping activity too. Hosting the party is a snap with gingerbread house kits that come with assorted hard candies and a recipe for meringue-based royal icing (Annie B's Confections). Tunnell loves baking cookies (note the super-sized glass canister of cookie cutters), but she doesn't hesitate to order delicacies from local purveyors to ease holiday stress or supplement her menu. Here she's serving Annie B's handmade fondant covered gingerbread and sugar cookies and decorated chocolate glaze-dipped cupcakes, using Porcel's Noel china collection (distributed by Mottahedeh), a Juliska cake stand (Matteo & Co., Princeton) and Santa mugs from her mother's "ceramic phase." And what more appropriate backdrop than Lawrenceville artist, Fay Sciarra's confection of a painting, "Holy Cannoli"!