FEAST for the EYES

Faux food forms the lusciously realistic foundation of stunning holiday spreads at historic Brandywine Valley estate museums.

BY KAREN JESSEE

In the Brandywine Valley, holiday celebrations abound. But none are as lavish as those found in historic estates, from the iconic du Pont family to prosperous early merchants. During the holidays, the homes are bedecked with lights, garlands and Christmas trees. Look a little closer, and you’re treated to a visual feast of carefully crafted faux foods so realistic and transportive you can almost hear the laughter and clinking glasses of guests gathered for holiday celebrations through the years.

Here’s a look at four major displays.

FINERY & FRITOS

Today known as the Nemours Estate, Alfred I. du Pont’s 47,000-square-foot home has over 70 lavish rooms. During the holidays, it’s the dining room and its table that truly shine. Getting it to that point takes significant effort. “We have shopping lists and seating charts, but we don’t have any menus from this house detailing exactly what was served historically, so the foods on our tables are open to interpretation and a lot of creativity,” says Paula Phipps, the museum’s supervisor of interpretive programs.

When Phipps started over two years ago, director John Rumain tasked her with creating much of the faux food, which he hoped would create a welcoming environment.

Her displays include magnificently sculpted food from clay, paper and plaster, which embellishes the main dining table and the social areas around the house. “We knew that a favorite snack here was Fritos, which came on the market in 1932. I couldn’t find a fake version online, so I had to figure out a way to make them,” she says. “I used thin sheets of Styrofoam, painted them, and heated them until they curled. It was the first thing I ever made.”

After the faux Fritos, Phipps created vegetables, condiments, main dishes, tea sandwiches, desserts and even champagne. Made of Styrofoam and clay, her pineapple upside-down cake is so realistic it’ll leave you drooling.

To easily replicate a shape, Phipps has created casts from myriad objects. “I used a dog’s toy to make a cast for the lamb chops, which can be displayed individually or as a rack of lamb,” she says.

Fried chicken is made of plaster using latex molds of real pieces. A ham is made of a papier-mâché-covered plastic bottle that was painted and texturized. Ice cream and mashed potatoes come from a recipe of cornstarch and hair conditioner.

Phipps’ hopes for the future are ambitious. “I would like a steak, pig’s feet and more breakfast foods,” she says. And a turkey.

Visit nemoursestate.org.

OYSTERS & ALL

The sprawling childhood home of Henry Francis du Pont was elegant and festive year round, but never more so than at Christmas. More than 175 years later, the festivities continue—but none of the food is edible. “This is our 40th anniversary of Yuletide at Winterthur,” says Catherine Westbrook, the museum’s interpretation and collections assistant, of the annual holiday celebration.

Westbrook has made much of the faux food used in displays over the past 25 years. “Forty years ago, the food would’ve been real, sitting on period dishes,” she says. “The staff refrigerated and changed out the foods frequently, which also meant washing and drying table settings that were part of the historic collection. The potential for damage was considerable.”

With innovation, curators seemingly minimized the hassle by using freeze-dried foods, but even that had its limitations, as evidenced by the thawing and subsequent reconstitution of a freeze-dried piglet named Portia. “By 1990, Winterthur’s conservators banned fresh foods that could attract moths and bugs,” says Deborah Harper, Winterthur’s senior curator of education and Yuletide tour coordinator.

Today, they make, order and store faux food for the lavish displays. “The goal isn’t just to make food—the goal is to make the food look historically accurate,” says Westbrook. “Chickens of yore were smaller and scrawny and far from perfectly smooth. Apples and other fruits weren’t the colorful beauties we expect in our grocery stores today, so we have to steer away from the contemporary sensibilities and be historically true to not only what foods were being eaten, but what they looked like.”

continued on page 74
(Clockwise from top left) Tea and baked sweets are among the delicacies at Historic Odesse; the dining room at Nemours; a curator used real oyster shells for Winterthur’s display; cookies and Jello desserts tempt the eyes at Hagley Museum.
Finding and creating those authentic displays requires ingenuity, since catalogs and movie prop companies offer foods that are “too bright and have to be repainted,” says Westbrook.

To ensure a period match, much research must be done before mock-ups ever reach the table. Old recipes and books on hearth cooking give creators a chance to make the real foods first, so they know what the finished products should look like before trying to reproduce them from inedible materials. Among the decadent displays at Winterthur are the infamous peacock, elegantly displayed in the center of the table, a bevy of savory desserts, and a display of oysters. “A local restaurant gave me a bag of oyster shells, which I had to boil numerous times, scrub and then soak in bleach,” says Westbrook.

The result is uncannily realistic—and it’s not Westbrook’s only trick. The tea and coffee, plain and with cream, are actually round Mylar inserts that sit inside the cup just below the rim.

Elsewhere, there’s game pie, pig’s foot and petit fours, plus turkey. All are so real looking that they can only be considered works of art, which is appropriate given their surroundings among one of the most prolific collections of Americana artifacts from 1640-1860. “The perfectly roasted turkey was made so long ago that no one remembers who made it or what the exact process was,” says Westbrook.

Winterthur goes to great lengths to protect it. After all, it is an essential. “Come the holidays, every museum needs a turkey,” says Harper.

Visit www.winterthur.org

SUGAR & SPICE
Sweets are the centerpiece at Eleutherian Mills at Hagley Museum, which offers twilight tours during the holidays. E. L. du Pont loved a good party, and the holidays were no exception.

“We do a traditional Twelfth Night display of desserts because we know from our archives that Twelfth Night parties actually took place here,” says Debra Hughes, the curator of collections and exhibits.

It’s quite a change from what visitors see the rest of the year, when “the tables present the French porcelain and cutlery used by the family in the early 1800s,” Hughes says. “Come holiday time, though, the festive foods come out of storage and cover the tables in faux decadence.”

A Styrofoam cake covered in artificial raspberries gets a break this year, replaced by a traditional Twelfth Night cake, which usually contains small gifts or trinkets for guests. Surrounded by faux sugar ladyfingers, the cake is a masterpiece. Made of painted plaster, it rests on a more contemporary cake plate that can take the weight, as faux foods are often heavier than period tableware can handle.

Elsewhere, there are glasses of colorful gelatin made with plastic inserts and artificial topping, plus plates of petit fours and fruits. Wedges of faux sweet potato pie look equally delicious. “Once upon a time, several of these desserts and fruits would’ve been real,” says Hughes.

But that’s no longer the case. Hughes now orders items from catalogs or even picks them up at craft fairs. “If someone has made a very real looking ceramic cherry or apple pie, I buy it. We’re always looking for foods to stockpile and to help us switch out our displays.”

This year, Hagley’s theme is “Christmas Past and Present.” To make the displays come to life, Hughes spends considerable time in her kitchen garnishing Frosted Boxwoods that resemble dusty miller plants. The recipe comes from the 1837 archival records.

Hughes begins by cutting and cleaning sprigs of boxwood. The leaves are then dipped in slightly beaten egg whites, dredged in granulated sugar and baked until the sugar has crystallized. “The baking dries them out and preserves them, keeping the sugar from being a tempting treat for pests,” she says. “But these garnishes are still kept aside, remade and refreshed when necessary.”

Like the foods that once adorned the table, Hughes’ faux versions are a labor of love.

Visit www.hagley.org

PEACOCK PIE, OH MY
Since 1986, the historic Delaware community of Odessa has welcomed holiday visitors with a nostalgic journey through classic children’s literature. Guests can explore historic estates like the Corbit-Sharp House, a National Historic Landmark that dates back to 1774 and exhibits furniture and household goods from 1818. There’s also the Wilson-Warner House, which is on National Register of Historic Places and was built around 1769.

Each year, the Historic Odessa Foundation decks out one such home, giving visitors a real feel for life in the 18th and 19th centuries. “We choose foods for the table and decorate one of these homes based on themes from children’s tales and poems,” says Brian Miller, an associate curator and former high school art teacher who oversees the décor and exhibits for Historic Odessa. “We feel that a presentation with food on the table makes a room come alive. It’s more welcoming.”

Past year’s themes have ranged from “Sleeping Beauty” to “Peter Pan” to “Hansel and Gretel.” This year, it’s “The Secret Garden.” “Usually, we have foods just in the kitchen to mark the seasons,” Miller says. “Come the holidays, faux feasts appear on main tables and faux fires are in fireplaces throughout the houses open to visitors.”

Odessa boasts a remarkable collection of faux foods to furnish those displays, including pieces of a peacock pie, a dish that dates back to medieval times. “I’ve made a few things, but it’s a lot of work and messy,” admits Miller. Last year, the foundation inherited nearly 50 items and molds—including Rockefeller, meats and vegetables—from a former staff member at Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia. They also turn to artists specializing in period foods.

While museums typically discourage torching, visitors can get their hands on some of Historic Odessa’s faux foods on the Curator Candlelight Tour, held the last Thursday before Christmas. For that, Miller selects plaster and clay delicacies from the tables for guests to examine. Certainly no feast for the stomach, they are a feast for the eyes—and the imagination.

Visit www.historicodessa.org