

The American Tradition of the Gingerbread House Comes Alive in Bedford

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Commentary

BEDFORD, Pennsylvania—On any given day, walking into the main entrance of the Omni Bedford Springs, the grande dame of American historic hotels, is always a welcoming and breathtaking embrace of the past. Walking in during the Christmas season is even more extraordinary, as you are immediately dazzled by the nostalgic and warm scent of gingerbread, thanks to a life-size carousel constructed by executive pastry chef Harshal Naik.

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The carousel is extraordinary and so detailed that the horses with white chocolate piping in the display whimsically move up and down to the delight of young and old.



Naik said he came up with the design over a year ago with some inspiration from his daughter. It took two months, 450 pounds of



gingerbread dough, much of which was used to construct the 5,100 gingerbread bricks used in the structure, as well as 150 pounds of white chocolate and an equal amount of marshmallow.



Naik turns to a dozen students from Bedford County Technical Center, dressed in white smocks and aprons, and thanks them for their tireless work in making the display for the past two months.

They beam with pride. So does the Bedford Springs head engineer, who guided them along the way, and the Bedford County Chamber of Commerce. They came to celebrate not just the gingerbread accomplishment but the way the hotel pulls the entire business community together to give everyone a stake in the success.

Nestled in the Allegheny Mountains, part of the Appalachian range, Bedford County is mostly bucolic, filled with rolling farms, dense forests and picturesque towns such as Bedford. Despite its remoteness from the bigger cities of Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, Bedford County is the fastest-growing county in the state. A big part of that growth has to do with the restoration nearly 20 years ago of this hotel whose history began at the same time as the founding of the country.

Throughout American history, few things have connected us more than food. Whether it is a traditional savory dish or pastry, different and exotic scents and presentations of a meal or a confectionary can draw people together in a way that teaches us new tastes and experiences. You enjoy what is shared with you and, perhaps, learn how to prepare the dish yourself.

What is unique about the Omni Bedford Springs is the connectivity it has with the Bedford community. The annual gingerbread display isn't just about the profitability of the resort. During the entire week, local small businesses set up tiny booths in the lobby for guests to either try their unique offerings or find out how to visit them in town the next day.

Gingerbread displays in America began with the influx of German immigrants to the commonwealth over 200 years ago. The practice of making tiny homes out of gingerbread reportedly began with the dark "Hansel and Gretel" fairytale that had a witch, a house made out of gingerbread and other decadent confectionaries, and lessons about not trusting strangers and about the importance of sibling unity.

Other food historians claim gingerbread homes predate the Grimms' fairytale, pointing to medieval Europe, where the exotic spice was celebrated at gingerbread festivals and fairs. Although people did not make houses from the rich spice, the fairs, like today's gingerbread houses, did bring them to get together to indulge in a delicious treat.

In America, the tradition of building gingerbread houses quickly became a cultural touchstone. Initially, local churches, schools, inns and community halls started holding gingerbread displays and, in the true American spirit, gingerbread home competitions.

The Omni Grove Park Inn, the Omni Bedford Springs' sister historic property in Asheville, North Carolina, traditionally hosts the National Gingerbread House Competition, whose gingerbread displays are elaborate, beautiful and often just plain otherworldly. They range from detailed castles to log cabins. Alas, because of the tragic devastation of Hurricane Helene still ravaging the residents of the

area, the Grove Park Inn has decided this year to cancel its competition.

Instead, the inn in Asheville found a new way to keep the spirit of the tradition intact by creating the Gingerbread Trail of Giving, in which gingerbread artists display their creations at local businesses throughout the Asheville community.

The Omni way seems to be the same across all its properties. The company, of course, painstakingly restores these American treasures so that future generations can step back in time and experience a part of American history. The company is also clearly invested in truly being part of the surrounding communities.

The entire town of Bedford, just over 1 mile from the resort, is a step back in time. There are several blocks of small businesses that include an Italian epicurean shop, a dazzling women's clothing store, arguably the best homemade candy shop in the country, an Alpaca shop, several farm-to-table restaurants, traditional diners, three very unique museums, two art galleries and a two-story antique store that was once a Murphy's, just to name a few. There are no meters when you park—instead, there are wrought iron horse hitching posts, with evergreen wreaths hanging from the vintage light posts along the sidewalks.

The resort itself employs more than 400 people from the county—400 jobs that weren't there when the 240-room hotel, a primarily wooden structure built when Thomas Jefferson was president, sat vacant and decaying for nearly two decades.

You do not have to stay at Bedford Springs to come and enjoy the festive decorations, take in the gingerbread display, or stop in at the new speakeasy, hidden behind a French door in the tradition of the Prohibition era of secret doors, passwords and elaborate 1920s decor. And on Sunday, the town will feature the lighting of the massive Christmas tree, yet another sign of renewal.

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Salena Zito has held a long, successful career as a national political reporter. Since 1992, she has interviewed every U.S. president and vice president, as well as top leaders in Washington, including secretaries of state, speakers of the House and U.S. Central Command generals. Her passion, though, is interviewing thousands of people across the country. She reaches the Everyman and Everywoman through the lost art of shoe-leather journalism, having traveled along the back roads of 49 states.

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