

Dressed for dinner

The staff at Ballyfin country house share their secrets for creating the perfect Christmas dinner table. By **Alanna Gallagher**

Make Christmas dinner extra special by trimming the table as well as the tree, something the staff at Ballyfin in Co Laois know all about. "Christmas isn't just Sunday lunch," says the country house's managing director, Jim Reynolds. "It's about family and friends getting together to enjoy each other's company and celebrate. It's about bringing the good pieces to the table."

To create drama, plan ahead, he says, suggesting candlelight, because "it will add immediate theatre to the scene". At Ballyfin, the five-arm silver candelabras are so heavy it takes two hands to lift them. To recreate the look, Bushell Interiors has a dramatic nickel-plated five-arm candelabra (right) for €265, or a more low set and modern copper centre-piece (below) from Article, Powerscourt Townhouse Centre, costs €39.

When it comes to flowers, keep it simple says Ballyfin's in-house florist, Miriam Sands. She uses flowers from the estate to dress the lavish Regency rooms. For Christmas she suggests classic red and green, using foraged cypress, ivy, rosehips and twisted willow to add texture to simple blood-red rose arrangements.

A festive decoration in the centre of the table sets the tone. Holly branches with berries are traditional, or for something more contemporary, drape ivy and other greenery around votives.

Ballyfin avoided clunky, bland sets, opt-



ing for Flora Danica, one of the world's most prestigious porcelain collections, dating from the 1700s. The pattern was created for makers Royal Copenhagen by Johann Christoph Bayer as a gift from royalty to royalty.

The set in Ballyfin is mid-20th century, and the addition of a tureen and vegetable dish create a sense of occasion. The pieces are shockingly expensive, but less fine porcelain dinnerware can be found at auction houses and curios shops. You can combine them with new pieces like this talking-point swan soup tureen (above) from Zara Home (€59.99 plus delivery, zara-home.com).

Anthropologie's Bronze Age cutlery (below right) is plated with 24-carat gold and will add warmth to the table. It costs £28 (about €33, anthropologie.eu) for a five-piece set. Or create a mismatched set of cutlery buying silver-plated knives, forks and spoons online or from curios shops. Better still, ask your guests to bring the best cutlery they have and mismatch to give the table a shabby chic look.

Inexpensive tree decorations can make sets pillar candles into mossy-bedded hurricane lamps, adding pine cones to the table to affix simple name tags. "Get the kids involved," she says. "They can lay out the tendrils of ivy and write the place settings."

heavyweight linen napkins look festive. The team at Ballyfin draped little red bells on theirs. Caterhire (caterhire.ie) provides heavy duty, restaurant-quality starched and pressed linen napkins. These can be deliv-



ered or collected on December 23rd or 24th and kept for New Year's Eve at no extra charge. They cost €1.15 each. A large 12ft by 6ft tablecloth costs €9 to hire.

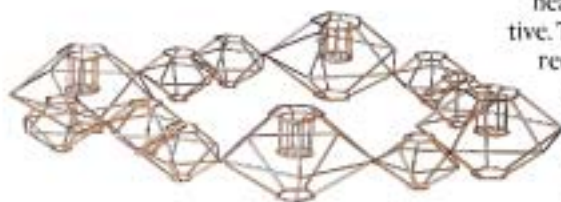
If your festive celebration is a smaller affair, set the table in a romantic fashion, adding a decanter of fine wine that's been allowed to breathe and coloured water glasses such as the blue William Yeoward ones pictured. You could also serve small gifts to start.

After dinner, nothing beats

the smell and look of a real fire to retire to, Reynolds says. At Ballyfin they burn wood from the estate and turf from local farmers. Dried orange peel studded with cloves will also add a festive scent to fires.

It's all about feeding the eye, says Reynolds. "Half of the fine food experience is that first look at the table, when you see the lengths the host has gone to on your behalf to create something that feels special, that reflects the sense of occasion."

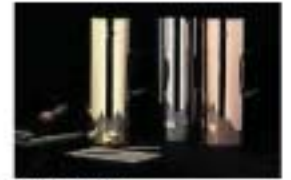
And for those who are already breaking out in a cold sweat at the thought of the Christmas Day preparations, he says: "Half the fun of preparing for such an event is the journey. The arrival is not necessarily the most important part."





FIVE OF THE BEST GIFTS FOR THE HOST

1 For the caffeine addict... a vacuum jug from Stelton in brass, copper or mirror finishes, €119, Article, Powerscourt Townhouse Centre (article.dublin.com)



2 For the baker... hedgehog measuring cups, £32 (about €38) plus delivery (anthropologie.eu)



3 For the collector... hummingbird bell jar, €47.50, Marks and Spencer



4 For the connoisseur... liqueur glasses, €6 each, Article

5 For the Christmas nut... a robin doorstep £9.99 (about €11.80) plus delivery, mollieandfred.co.uk



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