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A COUNTRY PICNIC FOR 200

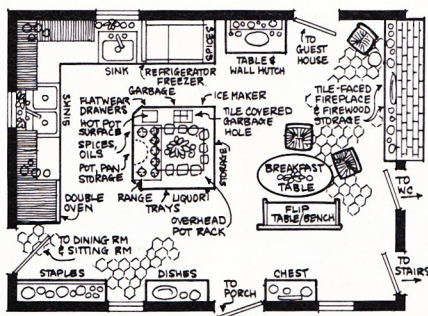
Robert L. Green Does It With Planning and Style

BY ZACK HANLE

TOLLGATE FARM IN THE heart of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, is an eighteenth-century showplace—and its owner, Robert L. Green, is, in fact, a showman. Known as Robert L, arbiter of taste in all areas of good living, he is an editor, writer, designer (often seen on TV talk shows) and a devout believer in the celebration of life and the pursuit of happiness. To him a party is a theatrical production. There is an opening act, a series of scenes, a closing, fleshed out by carefully chosen music, stunning props, and a glittering cast of guests, some of whom double as “stage-hands” to help get the show on the road. Above all, there is food—good food—which, he says, “must feed the eye first and be plentiful. I work on the Oliver Twist theory that everybody wants *more*.”

The curtain has not yet gone up, and Robert L is reviewing the set for his charity benefit picnic for 200. A scant few hours before guests are scheduled to arrive, an infinite lineup of picnic tables is already in place, many tables covered with cloth bordered in a hand-screened lily design. (Lilies are the “trademark” of Tollgate Farm.) A long trestle table near the kitchen is filled with hundreds of loaves of bread, baked ahead and frozen, and now set out to thaw—dark, chewy breads, cheddar cheese buns made from a recipe given the host by Vivien Leigh’s cook, puffy buns with crisp golden crusts, fruited and sweet breads.

How can he possibly get it all together for that many guests? “The key is planning. Ahead. Far ahead. The bread, for instance, was started three months ago. Dozens and dozens of ducks were roasted a month ago. And very important is having enough helping hands. When I do a party of this scope, I fill the house with weekend guests who are willing to pitch in. The rest is just a matter of organizing—and staging. For instance, Act I, Scene I will take place in my ‘party garden.’ There will be an open bar with wines and all the mak-



OPPOSITE: Robert L. Green at work on his cold rice salad. FAR LEFT: Garnished and ready for the buffet are (1) Crab Mousse in a ring mold, (2) Clam Mousse in a shell mold, (3) Cucumber Mousse plumped with grapes in a fruit mold, (4) a pair of Tollgate Meat Loaves and (5) cold rice salad with marinated beans, bean sprouts and vegetables of the season. ABOVE: Tollgate’s kitchen, the spacious heart of the farm in Bucks County, Pennsylvania.



ABOVELEFT: "Robert L" prepares frosted grapes to garnish Ham en Croûte with Madeira. TOP RIGHT: The buffet table stretches to infinity. ABOVERIGHT: The 200 guests will sweep the platters clean, but "seconds" are waiting in the kitchen.

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ings for the tall drinks of summer. I'm partial to California's grapes, so there will be Cabernet Sauvignon, Petite Sirah, Gewürztraminer and Grey Riesling, served as is or spritzed. Down in the pagoda at the end of the garden there'll be a string quartet playing, and up here I'll have a wandering minstrel in costume. There'll be cheeses and fruit for nibbling before Act II, when the main dishes will be brought from the kitchen."

On the kitchen porch, baskets of greens, fruits and vegetables are stacked high, while helpful guests are cutting cucumbers, lemons, oranges, mushrooms, tomatoes. "That's the garnish assembly line," Robert L points out. "Then there are the unmolders, the garnishers, the servers—all organized for smooth presentation."

The kitchen itself is bustling with more helpers. Redolent now of slow-cooking beans in molasses and Robert L's famous Tollgate Farm Meatballs and

Sauerkraut (bubbling in a gigantic stockpot), it is a kitchen of warmth and friendliness. One is immediately at home among its English and American country antiques, beamed ceilings, ox-blood red wooden cabinets and terracotta octagonal floor tiles (from a company in Pennsylvania that has been producing them continually since 1781).

The huge fireplace at one end evokes snug wintry evenings when guests are entertained and fed beside it. Designed in the manner of a Colonial keeping kitchen, it has a cooking island built for many hands, two ovens, seven burners on the surface units, three sinks—one for drink-fixers, close to the icemaker. Outsize copper pots hang over the island in happy profusion and drying herbs are suspended from the beams.

Robert L moves to the simmering meatball stew and tastes. "Another hour. I must tell you how this came about. It was born of necessity. One Saturday evening a carful of guests suddenly arrived just as I was thinking about making a small dinner of meatballs in sour cream. I hadn't expected

anybody at all, but there they were, dressed to the nines for a party—for the *wrong* weekend! There was but one thing to do. Wing a dinner with those meatballs, hardly enough to go around, really. So with a bit of frantic improvising, the meatballs were extended by layering them with sauerkraut, apples and seasonings and topping with sour cream at the end. The dish was a triumph and it's been in my repertoire ever since."

This brings Robert L to some philosophical advice on cooking:

"We should be more innovative and creative. Have the courage to try blending the improbables. That's the way masterpieces are born. My mousses are never twice the same. All you need is a good basic gelatin salad formula and you can play as many variations on the theme as a composer—from pâtés to cheeses, meats and fish and shellfish to vegetables and fruits."

He pauses to prepare bunches of grapes to decorate a ham *en croûte*. "I like to do this for celebration dinners. I call them my shake-and-bake grapes.



ABOVE LEFT: Months of baking and freezing yield hundreds of loaves of bread, here warming in the sun. TOP RIGHT: Guests carry aperitifs to the pagoda at the end of the garden, where a string quartet awaits. ABOVE RIGHT: Helping hands replenish the supply of lemons, mushrooms, cucumbers, parsley.

It's really so easy. First a bowl of unbeaten egg whites to dunk the bunches in and coat all over. Then into a brown paper bag of granulated sugar. Shake gently and place the coated grapes on a rack to dry. Easy but spectacular. You can use black or purple grapes. I use green ones because the color just happens to be my own name."

He winks at his joke and continues: "There is no need to be fearful in the kitchen. If and when I write my cookbook, it will be called 'Courage in the Kitchen.' It will be a no-nonsense book on how to achieve great and delicious food without mumbo-jumbo."

Downstairs there is a second kitchen—Robert L's "baker's paradise" with a long, cool marble counter for kneading dough. Here he puts together his cold rice dishes for the party. "These also have so many variations on the theme. Sometimes I put shrimp and bean sprouts and mayonnaise and seasonings in the rice; sometimes I make it with nuts and raisins and use pimiento for color."

Preparations are now reaching fever

pitch, but they're highly organized down to the minutest details. Mousses and aspics are being unmolded onto platters, then returned to refrigerators to keep their cool until serving time.

Outside, old wooden garden carts are heaped high with apples, nectarines, oranges and bunches of grapes. The garden is full of surprises, and lush with flowers—the result of Robert L's avid and knowledgeable passion for gardening. Lilies do not become just a riot here, they become an acreage of tawny to rose to yellow; 50,000 have been planted to bloom over a four-month period.

"The farm" is Robert L's childhood fantasy come to life, and it once belonged to William Penn's equerry. There are barns and stables and a dreamlike pond; there are horses and dogs and vegetables planted both by Robert L and a tenant farmer. There is a historic tree from William Penn's time. And everywhere on this sun-dappled day there is the feeling of the good earth, lovingly tended. It is the quintessential Bucks County "plantation."

Now the master, right on cue, arrives to greet the first guests. Attired like a true lord of the manor in putty-colored riding pants, gleaming black boots, white shirt with ascot and walking stick, he stands under a giant mulberry tree at the entrance to Tollgate.

Ladies and gentlemen of the world of fashion and interiors, architects, show-business people, celebrities and just good friends arrive by twos and threes. An unruffled Robert L greets them warmly, secure in the knowledge that everything backstage is going well. Soon, scattered about the grounds on benches or gathered round the string quartet in the pagoda downslope, guests laze happily, sipping aperitifs.

Now it is time for Act II. The master claps his hands and it's "Up trays, and away." A brigade of helpers and volunteers among the guests is cheered as the parade of spectacular foods is placed on the mile-long buffet table. Each dish is as photogenic in its presentation as a high fashion model at an opening. A hungry horde descends on antique bathtubs piled high with cold roast



ABOVE LEFT: Bobby Short and backup entertain "on stage" at the entrance to the barn while guests laze on the lawn after feasting. ABOVE RIGHT: The party's over, friends have pitched in with gusto and all's clear and ready for tomorrow's tea by the fireplace in Robert L's charming country kitchen.

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duck quarters, giant hams *en croûte* with Madeira flavoring, and roasts of beef. There is a veritable cookbook of mousses in every shape, size and flavor, jewellike jellied fruits, potato salads in molds with green asparagus and purple grape garnish, a pyramid of crabmeat and lobster salad, a savory bean-and-lima casserole ("the secret is slow cooking, 24 hours, actually"), a mini-procession of cold meat loaves, chicken curry with walnuts and giant casseroles of the famous meatball creation.

A fashion designer, munching on roast duck, remarks, "I'd sell my soul for this duck." Bobby Short: "Just one bean and a little ham, please." (He goes lightly; he will be Act III of the party.)

Soon it's time to move to the barn site where, with coffee or cool drinks in hand, the guests find sunny or shady spots and stretch out on the lawn. Bobby Short and his combo, sitting on bales of hay, tinkle Cole Porter tunes to the delight of everyone.

The guests are exhorted to sing-along the old, familiar tunes—"At Long Last Love," "I Can't Get Started with You." It is a scene of infinite peace with good food, good entertainment, a cloudless blue setting. Even the flowers are preening for the show. As twilight nears, the guests disperse in twos and threes, filled with a sense of the goodness of the earth and the hospitality of a perfect host. Curtain.

RICE SALAD-DIP WITH MARINATED VEGETABLES

20 to 25 servings

2 cups sliced zucchini

1 cup coarsely chopped green beans
1 cup sliced crookneck squash
1 cup sliced carrots
1 cup diced jicama
2 tablespoons chopped red onion
1 cup Vinaigrette Dressing*

8 cups cooked rice, chilled
1 3/4 cups sour cream
3/4 cup mayonnaise
3 garlic cloves, minced
Salt and white pepper

Potato chips (garnish)

Parboil zucchini, green beans, squash and carrots 5 minutes in small amount of water. Drain and cool slightly. Add jicama, onion and dressing, toss lightly, cover and refrigerate overnight.

Combine rice, sour cream, mayonnaise and garlic in large bowl and mix well. Add salt and white pepper to taste. Form into ring on large serving platter.

Just before serving, place vegetables in center of rice mold and surround rice with potato chips.

*Vinaigrette Dressing

Makes 1 cup

3/4 cup vegetable oil
1/4 cup vinegar
1/2 teaspoon dry mustard
1/2 teaspoon salt
Freshly ground pepper
Freshly snipped dill

Combine all ingredients in small bowl and blend thoroughly.

CLAM MOUSSE

10 to 12 servings

2 envelopes unflavored gelatin
1/2 cup cold water
1/2 cup boiling beef or chicken stock

5 6 1/2-ounce cans minced clams, drained
2 cups finely chopped celery
2 cups mayonnaise
1 cup half and half
1/4 cup lemon juice
2 tablespoons prepared creamy horseradish
2 tablespoons grated onion
2 teaspoons salt
Lettuce
Sliced tomatoes, green grapes, pimiento strips, parsley (garnish)

Lightly oil 2 1-quart molds or 1 2-quart mold. Soften gelatin in cold water, then add to boiling beef or chicken stock and stir until dissolved.

Thoroughly combine remaining ingredients except lettuce and garnishes. Add dissolved gelatin and blend well. Pour into prepared mold(s) and refrigerate overnight, or until firm. Unmold on lettuce-lined serving platter and garnish with sliced tomatoes, grapes, pimientos and parsley.

CUCUMBER MOUSSE

10 to 12 servings

1 envelope unflavored gelatin
1/4 cup cold water
1 beef bouillon cube
1/4 cup boiling water
1/2 cup mayonnaise
1 tablespoon grated onion
1 tablespoon vinegar
1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
1 teaspoon salt
White pepper

3 1/2 cups seeded, diced cucumber (about 3 medium)
1 cup whipping cream, whipped
Lettuce, cucumber slices, lemon slices (garnish)

Lightly oil 6-cup mold. Soften gelatin

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in cold water. Dissolve bouillon cube in boiling water and add gelatin, stirring until gelatin dissolves. Cool slightly. Add mayonnaise, onion, vinegar, Worcestershire, salt and white pepper to taste. Blend carefully and chill until thick, about 5 to 10 minutes.

Remove from refrigerator and beat well. Fold in cucumber and whipped cream. Turn into prepared mold and chill until firm. Unmold onto bed of lettuce and serve garnished with cucumber and lemon slices.

CRAB MOUSSE

10 to 12 servings

- 2 envelopes unflavored gelatin
- 1/2 cup cold water
- 1 10³/₄-ounce can cream of mushroom soup
- 1 3-ounce package cream cheese, room temperature
- 1 16-ounce can crab meat or 1 pound fresh or frozen crab meat, drained, shell bits removed, flaked
- 1 cup mayonnaise
- 1 green pepper, diced
- 1 4-ounce jar whole pimientos, drained and chopped
- 1/2 cup diced celery
- 1/2 cup diced cucumber
- 1/4 cup chopped green onions
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/8 teaspoon white pepper
- Lemon wedges (garnish)

Lightly oil a 6-cup mold. Soften gelatin in cold water. In top of double boiler, heat soup to boiling; add cream cheese and stir to blend. Add softened gelatin and mix well. Remove from heat and refrigerate until mixture just begins to thicken.

In large bowl, combine remaining ingredients except lemon wedges. Add thickened gelatin mixture and blend gently. Pour into prepared mold and refrigerate overnight, or until firm. Unmold onto serving platter and garnish with lemon.

HAM EN CROUTE WITH MADEIRA

10 to 12 servings

- 1 5-pound canned ham
- 1/3 cup Madeira
- 2 11-ounce packages pie crust mix
- 1 egg white

1 teaspoon water Frosted grapes (optional garnish)

Place ham in shallow baking dish. Using metal skewer, make about 20 holes in top of ham. Pour Madeira over ham, a little at a time, so Madeira penetrates meat. Cover and marinate in refrigerator, preferably overnight, turning several times.

When ready to bake, preheat oven to 350°F. Prepare pie crust according to package directions. Roll out into large rectangle about 1/4 inch thick. Pat ham dry with paper towels and place on center of rectangle. Wrap pastry around ham, as if wrapping a package. Cut away extra pastry and pinch seams together.

Make egg wash by mixing egg white with water. Use to seal "package" together, smoothing out seams. Brush top and sides lightly. If desired, use leftover pastry to make flowers or other decorations and place on top of ham; brush with wash. Return ham to baking dish and prick pastry in several places to release steam. Bake about 1 hour or until pastry is golden brown. Garnish with grapes, if desired.

TOLLGATE MEAT LOAF

6 to 8 servings

- 2 pounds ground beef
- 1 cup Italian seasoned breadcrumbs
- 1 small onion, finely chopped
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 3/4 cup beef stock or broth
- 1/4 cup dry red wine
- 3 tablespoons tomato puree
- 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
- 1 tablespoon steak sauce
- 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground pepper
- Salt to taste

Preheat oven to 350°F. Combine all ingredients and mix well. Pack mixture into 4x8-inch or 9x5-inch loaf pan and bake 1 hour. Remove from oven and baste off juices. Serve hot or, if serving cold, cool completely before slicing.

TOLLGATE FARM MEATBALLS AND SAUERKRAUT

8 to 10 servings

- 1/4 pound slab bacon
- 2 27-ounce cans sauerkraut, squeezed dry
- 2 cups chicken broth
- 1 cup dry white wine
- 1 bay leaf
- Salt and pepper
- 2 pounds lean ground beef
- 2 eggs, lightly beaten
- 1/2 cup soft breadcrumbs

- 1/4 cup diced onion
- 2 teaspoons chopped fresh tarragon or 3/4 teaspoon dried
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
- 1/2 teaspoon pepper
- 1/2 cup bacon drippings
- 3 cups tart apples, peeled and thinly sliced
- 1 cup chicken broth
- 1 pint (2 cups) sour cream

Simmer bacon in water 10 minutes; drain and dice. In heavy Dutch oven, combine bacon, sauerkraut, broth, wine and bay leaf. Bring to boil, cover and simmer gently about 1 hour. Check liquid level occasionally to make sure it doesn't get too low; add water or more broth, if necessary. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

While sauerkraut is simmering, make meatballs. In large mixing bowl, combine ground beef, eggs, breadcrumbs, onion, tarragon, garlic, salt, Worcestershire and pepper. Mix lightly with hands. Form into 18 to 24 meatballs. Heat bacon drippings in large heavy skillet, add meatballs and brown quickly and evenly on all sides but do not cook through.

To assemble: Alternate layers of sauerkraut, apples and meatballs in Dutch oven or large heavy casserole, ending with sauerkraut. Add remaining broth, cover and simmer 1 hour.

Just before serving, top with dollops of sour cream.

DESSERT CAKE LOAF

10 servings

- 2 cups flour
- 3/4 cup sugar
- 1 tablespoon baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/2 teaspoon baking soda
- 1/2 teaspoon nutmeg
- 1/4 teaspoon allspice
- 1 cup chopped pecans or walnuts, toasted
- 1 cup crushed pineapple, plus 1/4 cup juice
- 1 egg, lightly beaten
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon grated lemon peel

Preheat oven to 350°F. Grease 9x5-inch loaf pan. Sift dry ingredients into large mixing bowl. Stir in nuts.

Mix together pineapple, egg, oil and lemon peel. Add to dry ingredients and blend. Pour mixture into prepared pan and bake 50 minutes, or until toothpick inserted in center of cake comes out clean. Cool on rack. □