

out, giving you precious free time to surf Expedia looking for last-minute plane tickets to Fiji.

### Step 2: Traditional menu

Christmas dinner is no time to experiment.

Trust me when I tell you that, while friends and family are flying thousands of miles, they're still expecting turkey and fruit cake, not hummus and kale.

One year, I got the notion to break from tradition and present a Mexican feast to my out-of-town guests.

My wife and I toiled all night and into the next day over tamales, re-fried beans, fresh salsa and guacamole.

Proudly presenting the fruits of our labor, you'd have thought we served boiled tree bark on death row. It probably didn't help we served it on paper plates.

"You really shouldn't have," one guest said, which is Midwestern for "You really shouldn't have."

Another year I served salmon, a beautiful, mouth-watering filet from Ecola Seafoods. I assumed it would be a fantastic introduction to local cuisine.

"Too fishy," one guest complained with a sour expression. This from someone who defines "fresh caught" as eating at Red Lobster.

One attempt at rebellion I've kept, however, is my centerpiece, which features a collage of empty Ft. George beer cans, sand dollars and driftwood bits. Martha Stewart would cringe, but a guest actually asked me to make him one.

"Sure thing," I said as I shoved him towards his waiting taxi.

One caveat: If you are committed to cooking a big dinner, have plentiful snacks on hand for the inevitable power outage, something that is commonplace here but not so much in the Midwest.

There are only so many times you can assure your relatives the power will be on soon before facing a mutiny.

Yes, traditional holiday dinner is a lot of work, but it always makes my guests feel at home.

When they feel at home they're happy, which means I'm happy.

### Step 3: Hit the town

Now it's time to introduce your visitors to the sights and sounds of your coastal village.

Consider this a near-repeat of Step One, but instead of taking in natural



beauty, you're being a local yuletide ambassador.

Whether it's strolling Commercial Street, Broadway, Hemlock or Laneda, there's miles and miles of sidewalk with which to awe your guests.

There will be plenty of shops and restaurants open and decorated with festive lights.

I enjoy taking my charges on a beer tour, which is, admittedly, more for my benefit than theirs.

Nothing injects holiday cheer into a family gathering faster than a locally brewed beer.

A go-to spot is the Columbia River Maritime Museum, where miles of fascinating exhibits can occupy even the most skeptical Midwesterner for a minimum of three hours, more than enough time for me to revisit parts of my beer tour that need further attention.

Luckily, there's also plenty of local events scattered throughout December: Holiday Tea and Plum Pudding at the Flavel House Museum (Tuesday through Saturday, Dec. 26 through 30) and a Winter Holiday Concert with The Trail Band at Coaster Theatre (Wednesday, Dec. 27). Each will appeal to families looking for a little tradition.

Plus, it's always fun to wander the streets and shops of the North Coast, rain or shine. An added bonus: It's always amusing to see the confusion on my relatives' faces when they aren't charged sales tax.

Finally, I usually hit a home run when it comes time to exchange presents.

I only give items that are unique to the North Coast, and there's nothing more satisfying than seeing my visitors gleefully decked out in a Public Coast Brewing hat and a Goonies t-shirt while paging through a copy of Don Berry's "Trask."

### Adieu

All things — good and stressful — must end.

Each year, as my guests pack up and prepare for the trek back to the wintry Midwest, I realize how much I've enjoyed playing Christmas host.

As I consider the sprawling mess they've left behind, it occurs to me that I miss the laughter, the packed house, even the complaints about rain.

"I can't wait until next year," I always tell my wife.

She smiles lovingly.

"Neither can I," she always responds. "Because you're taking me to Hawaii." 

