

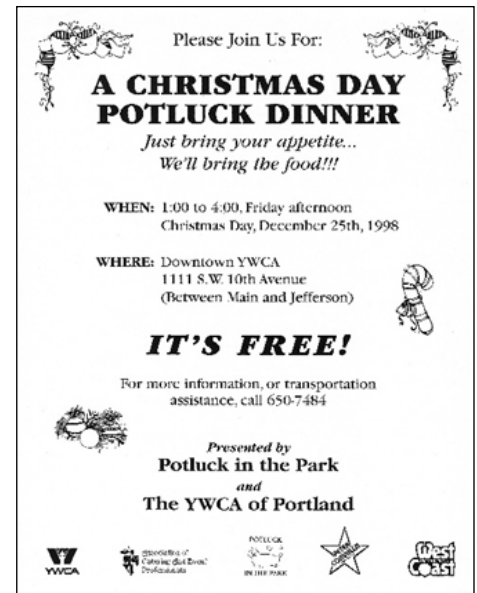
30 Years of Christmas Dinners – A History

1994 was the first year after Potluck in the Park started in 1991 that Christmas Day fell on a Sunday. David Utzinger, one of Potluck’s founders, didn’t want to break a streak of never missing a Sunday meal. But he didn’t really want to have to serve dinner outside on Christmas, either. “I took a walk around the neighborhood to see what facility might be available. I stopped at the YWCA just to see if they had any suggestions; not thinking they might have a space”. Kathy Batz, the Facilities Director said they had done lectures in their gym, “why not a Christmas dinner?”.

YWCA Years (1994 – 2013)

So, we held our first Christmas dinner at the YWCA. The next year Christmas fell on Monday, so we decided to serve Christmas dinner at the Y again, this time on Christmas Eve. That was enough to establish a tradition, and we could hardly say no the following year.

For 20 years, except for two years at the Crystal Ballroom during remodeling, the YWCA was our Christmas home. That first year we signed on equipment rental companies to donate the tables and chairs, pipe and drape and a whole lot more. West Coast Event Productions was one of two that first year. They have been a partner ever since - all 30 years. Peter Corvallis Productions joined a couple of years later and has stayed loyal for the last 28 years.



It was Kelly Bean’s idea the very first year to solicit greenery from the wholesale floral supply houses to decorate the gym. Product came from several sources in the early years. Most of what we get now is donated by Teufel Nursery. Kelly and her family gathered all that greenery themselves for 17 years before handing off the project. Kelly is now the Executive Director of a non-profit she founded, [African Road](#). Check it out.

Portland Art Museum Years (2014 – Present)

Around 2013 the YWCA was struggling financially and decided to sell their building. We approached the Portland Art Museum about possibly bringing Christmas Dinner to one of their ballrooms just across the street from the YWCA. Brian Ferriso, Director of the Art Museum, loved the idea from the start. In 2014 Potluck in the Park moved our Christmas Dinner to the Fred and Suzanne Fields Sunken Ballroom in the Museum’s Mark Building.

It was an immediate hit with guests, volunteers and Art Museum staff alike. This has now become a long-term relationship. This will be our 10th year serving at the Art Museum. The pandemic years were a challenge. We had to cancel entirely that first year in 2020. In 2021 we were able to serve take-out Christmas dinner meals in tents across the street using the Art Museum kitchen and ballroom only for volunteers to put the meals together. This will be our third year back indoors.



Food Prep

We started out cooking our turkeys and stuffing in large institutional kitchens; for many years in the Meals on Wheels central kitchen. The Association of Catering and Event Professionals, with Maxine Borcharding in the lead, were integral partners for many years. They brought their culinary expertise to our Christmas Dinner; cooking and carving turkeys and organizing the buffet lines. For quite a few years now Potluck Board Chair Steve DeAngelo and his employees at DeAngelo's Catering and Events have taken over turkey preparation in their kitchen.

In those early years, all of the other food items were acquired just as we did at the park – POTLUCK, with volunteers signing up to bring food prepared at home.

After 13 years we learned we had been serving home prepared food illegally. For liability reasons we had to stop. We were able to sign on two hotels, the Downtown Hilton and the DoubleTree at Lloyd Center, to donate and prepare the other food staples; mashed potatoes, yams, vegetables and salads. Home prepared baked goods were within the rules and we continue to get desserts and pastries from home bakers and other individual donors.

The Hilton remained a partner for more than 25 years, before stepping back three years ago. Even before providing food they were allowing us to brew our coffee at the hotel, maybe since the very first Christmas Dinner. The DoubleTree remains an unwavering partner today through four or five executive chefs. We have been reheating our turkey and stuffing in their bake shop kitchen Christmas morning nearly all 30 years.

Entertainment

David thought it would be a great idea to have live jazz for entertainment. He managed to make contact with Tom Grant, a prominent jazz pianist. Tom said yes right away and suggested asking Moe's Pianos for the use of a piano. Now doing business as Classic Pianos, Moe and Kathy Unis have been donating use of a grand piano for most of these 30 years. Over the years many pianists have donated their talents to play for our guests, but Tom, Ramsey Embick and George Mitchell have been our staples, each playing an hour most years. Patrick Lamb would frequently sit it on saxophone.



Tom Grant - 2023

Warm Wear

Another long-time tradition has been the gifting of warm wear to our guests. This started as a Christmas tradition even before our Christmas Dinner. Students at Cathedral Elementary School stuffed donated pairs of socks with toiletries, granola bars and other non-perishables. This became an all-school project that lasted for nearly 30 years. We need to find another school to take on the sock stuffing project, but we still give out socks, hats and gloves to our guests thanks to other generous donors.

Santa and Photographs



Santa George and wife Lyn

Tom Fryback came later and served until the COVID pandemic. Sadly, we have lost track of Tom since then. We are hoping the best for him, but he was already in his '80s.

Last, but not least, we have always been paid a visit by Santa Claus. Several Santas have graced our stage, but two in particular stand out. Each participated for more than 10 years. George Kinne was a Sunday park volunteer first, but also a professional Santa for 28 years. George was our first Santa and stood through the event for photos even after cancer treatments one year. George passed away around 2003.



Santa Tom and longtime Santa photographer Laura Modena

Sometime in the late 90s Potluck volunteer Jo Forter started taking photos of guests with Santa. This was before digital photography so she told guests she would bring the photos to the park meal on Sundays for them to pick up. This only resulted in maybe a third of the photos getting to the guests.

When digital arrived it only made sense to invest in digital printers so that we could give their photos to the guests before they left. This has been very popular with guests and is a major feature each year. We now have our own professional photographer. Victor Paru and his team make this happen every year.

How Important is This?

At some point, probably in the early 2000s, this event became Portland's largest Christmas dinner. As far as we know, it still is. We serve over 1000 guests most years, reaching a peak of 1300 in 2013. Even in the snow, ice and freezing rain of Christmas Day in 2017 more than 800 guests made their way to Potluck's Christmas Dinner.

It now takes more than 300 volunteers to set up, decorate, prepare, serve, tear down and cleanup after Christmas Dinner. Potluck acknowledges all of the individuals, groups and businesses without whom this undertaking would not be possible. All it takes to know that the effort was worth it is to see the smiles on the faces of everyone on Christmas Day and know that you have made their lives a little brighter.



AUTHOR'S DISCLAIMER

My apologies to every individual and business that I have left out that should have been in this history. Every time I thought I was near done I would think of someone else who should have been included. Maybe someday I can update this with another ten pages. I'd like to dig out some of the old and buried non-digital photographs from the earlier years, also. Alas, this is all I have time for now. I hope you enjoy this little bit of Potluck history.

David