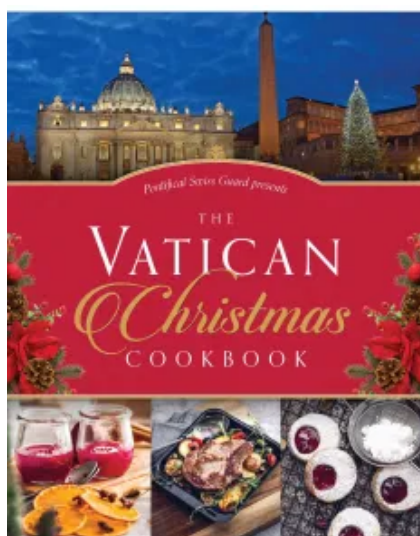


THE VATICAN CHRISTMAS COOKBOOK

by Lucy Gordan | Food | 0 comments

THE VATICAN CHRISTMAS COOKBOOK



Last week I received a press release from Sarah Lemieux, the Publicity Coordinator of Sophia Institute Press about its recent publication, *The Vatican Christmas Cookbook*. It's the sequel to the Institute's best-seller *The Vatican Cookbook*, I reviewed on June 16, 2018. Since home-prepared food may be the only solace of 2020's holiday season, I thought Epicurean-Traveler readers might enjoy owning or gifting this beautifully produced volume. Like its predecessor, *The Vatican Christmas Cookbook* is sponsored by the Pontifical Swiss Guards and The Holy See of the Vatican City State and co-authored by former Swiss Guard David Geisser, one of Switzerland's leading chefs and TV cooking show hosts. In between these Vatican volumes Geisser has written three more cookbooks, but they're available only in German.

In this second Vatican volume Geisser researched and created the some 70 recipes (many not unexpectedly from Swiss and Italian kitchens). Instead, his American co-author Thomas Kelly, a resident of Cleveland, told me in November 21 e-mail that he'd transcribed Geisser's recipes and had written the interval texts about the legends, traditions, and history of Christmas in Vatican City and around the world. "Together," Geisser had already explained in an e-mail a few days earlier than Kelly's, "we narrowed down the list of my recipes and chose those we felt most appropriate for Christmas and the Vatican. We'd already worked

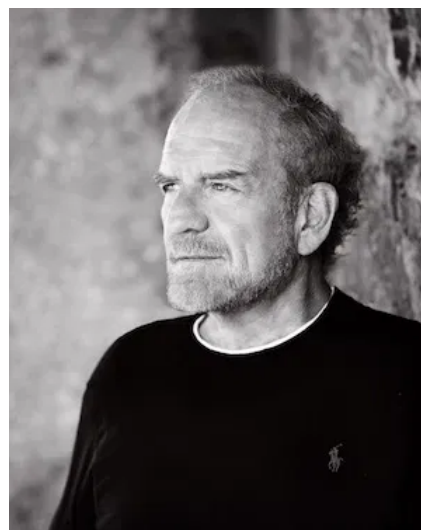


similarly on The Vatican Cookbook's production. Tom had also organized and accompanied me on the promotional tours for The Vatican Cookbook in the United States and we've been close friends ever since."



David Geisser

The



Thomas Kelly

splendid images of food are by the Swiss photographer Roy Matter, who has previously collaborated with Geisser on three of his best-selling cookbooks. Matter took the photos, Geisser had explained in his e-mail, "in my cooking studio near Zurich. There I host a lot of events, photo shoots, VIP events, and record my TV show (<https://davidgeisser-kochstudio.ch/>). We chose the photos together." The Vatican Christmas Cookbook, available from Amazon (\$34.95), follows the Christmas calendar: Advent, Christmas Eve, Christmas, and Epiphany. Other chapters are "Dishes on the Side" (all featuring potatoes or rice), "The Joy of Fondue", "Christmas with the Popes", "Christmas Desserts" (a vast selection, "particularly Swiss because after all," explained Geisser, "the book is sponsored by the Guards and is about Christmas in The Vatican". Nonetheless, I found it odd that *Panettone*, *Pandoro* and *Panforte* were missing not to mention Plum Pudding and Gingerbread, but Geisser pointed out that the latter two had been included in the Vatican Cookbook), "Christmas Prayers and Graces", "Christmas Around the World" specifically on the traditions in Argentina, Egypt, The Philippines, and Switzerland, but including recipes from many countries. Sadly some are missing captions, which would have specified their nationality.

In the Introduction Geisser explains that he included recipes for fondues and fajitas "because these dishes are meant to be shared at the table among friends, family, and guests. These are the best of meals because they encourage and emphasize the human touch." Then at the beginning of the chapter "The Joy of Fondue" he confesses that he couldn't omit fondue because it's a Swiss specialty. In fact, in his e-mail Geisser wrote that in his family "we always eat "Fondue Chinoise" on Christmas Eve. And to my question about Pope Francis'





Apple Bread for Advent

favorite recipes, he answered: “I don’t know his favorite Christmas recipe, but I’m pretty sure his favorite dish is “Dulce de Leche, (listed in the original Vatican Cookbook,



Roasted Trout with Fennel and Baguette
for Christmas Eve

which I’m sure he eats during the Christmas season.”

Although I would have expected Kelly’s chapter on “Christmas with the Popes” to be longer, he recounts the holiday of only four years: 451 AD, 592 AD, 1919, and 1981.

By 451 the ferocious barbarian warrior Attila the Hun had invaded most of Asia, Eastern Europe, Gaul (today’s France), and northern Italy. Rome was his next objective even though the Roman Empire was collapsing and the plague and famine had left this once world-dominating city virtually defenseless.

Nonetheless, the fearless Pope Leo I (r. 440-61), later known as Leo the Great and sanctified, traveled with an unarmed delegation of bishops and priests to meet Attila, flanked by his



entire army, near today's city of Mantua. It seems Pope Leo asked Attila for mercy, but there are no official reports of why Attila had a change of heart, withdrew his troops, and retreated to the north. According to legend, during the meeting with Pope Leo, he was shaken by a vision of St. Peter and St. Paul brandishing swords in the sky. "Thus without Pope Leo's courage," explained Kelly, "there would have been no Christmas in 451 and practically-speaking no Christmases ever again if Attila had destroyed Rome."



Christmas Day Chocolate Cake Surprise



Pope Leo I Meets Attila (fresco in Vatican's Raphael Rooms)

Although I couldn't find a reason for Kelly's choice of singling out the Christmas of 592, there's no doubt that Gregory the Great (r. 590-604), who'd been born into a wealthy and politically powerful Roman family, was one of the most admirable early popes. For soon after his mother became a nun, he put aside his political career for a life of monastic piety. Although never wanting to be pope, particularly noteworthy during his reign were his land reforms to support Rome's poor and his diplomacy. For example, his closest advisor, the missionary Saint Augustine of Canterbury (not to be confused with his more famous namesake) converted the Anglo-Saxons. He expanded and unified the Christian world. Therefore, not surprisingly Gregory was sanctified immediately after his death. Today he's best known as a music lover and the promoter of plainsong, later named the Gregorian



Chant.

The chronological gap between 592 and 1919 seems excessive even if the moral fiber of many popes during the Renaissance and the Baroque was dubious. However, 1919's Christmas was an appropriate date to celebrate. The First World War had ended the year before and the Spanish flu was de-escalating even if only briefly. For three years later Pope Benedict XV (r. 1914-1922) succumbed to the disease.

Christmas 1981 was certainly a date to celebrate. Pope, now Saint, John Paul II had recovered, if never completely, from Ali Acġa's assassination attempt on May 13 of the same year.

"Sadly, the book's production was complicated by Co-Vid," explained Kelly, whose favorite recipes are Christmas cookies no matter where he is, "and had to be condensed to meet the Christmas season deadline so some of my "Christmas with the Popes" stories as well as other sections had to be deleted."

"Nonetheless," wrote Kelly, "through some of the photographs and first-hand accounts of Pope Francis' activities we've tried to give an inside look into the Vatican at Christmas today. I think we've been successful. David and I are working on another Vatican cookbook to be published by The Sophia Institute Press, but it's still a 'Vatican secret.'"

David was a bit more forthcoming. He said that the next book "will focus on a different season but still thrill foodies." So be on the lookout.

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