

Yosemite's Bracebridge Dinner Christmas Old-School Style

By Michael Cervin

Since its inception in 1927, the Bracebridge Dinner, held each December at the Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite National Park, is a Yuletide pageant of food, song and spectacle; a unique and utterly incomparable holiday event.

Famed photographer Ansel Adams not only helped catapult Yosemite to a national audience via his haunting black and white images of the park, but he was instrumental in getting the Bracebridge Dinner off the ground as its director and performer. "Ansel had a great, fine eye for detail," says current director and actor, Andrea Fulton. "He would have a light changed by only an inch or two." The set-up was simple: when the Ahwahnee Hotel opened in 1927, designed for an upscale clientele, it was decided to offer a Christmas pageant to help lure in potential wealthy patrons who might ultimately help fund the park's meager budget. It had only received its national

designation in 1890 and was still difficult to get to.

So the Bracebridge Dinner was envisioned, a formal holiday pageant loosely based on Washington Irving's 1822 book, "A Christmas at Bracebridge Hall." The show has certainly evolved over the years into a one-of-a-kind experience in Yosemite, at one point being so popular they held a lottery to give out tickets. "It's on-going and ever changing," says Fulton. "It used to be a male-only chorus from the Bohemian Club in San Francisco. They were all prima donnas," Fulton jokes. Not part of the script nor show in the old days, Ansel Adams would show up to rehearsals with, "a case of scotch and a case of rye," Fulton says. It's a wonder the show ever came to fruition. It's no longer a male dominated show and the booze makes no appearance during rehearsals anymore (just closing night). Bracebridge has evolved just like its stunning surroundings into a show so integrated with the Ahwahnee that they are nearly inseparable.

Almost 90 years after the first performances, the dinner, offered only in December and for only eight performances and running at near capacity, is a four-hour, seven-course meal; a culinary and visual treat. Over 60 performers in sensationally detailed costumes (I visited with the costume designer and saw and felt the costumes up close and they are brilliant) and singers from the San Francisco Opera, combine to make this not only a feast for the stomach, but also a feast for eyes and ears as well. Rehearsals begin in September and many of the performers have been on this stage for a long time. Fulton in fact first appeared not as director, but as one of the "forest folk" when she was a mere five years old, giving her her 63 years as part of the show; another actor had performed for 52 years. "It makes the group cohesive and builds a great camaraderie," Fulton told me.

The dinner begins with guests dressed, most in formal attire, enjoying cocktails and Christmas carols at the two pianos in the Great

The Bracebridge Dinner AT YOSEMITE Christmas Dinner At Bracebridge Hall

December 13, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 25, 2013

The Ahwahnee
Yosemite National Park

The Relish

Baba Ghanoush
Olives, Sesame Flatbread

The Soup

Borscht Purée
Brioche Croutons, Chervil, Crème Fraîche

The Fish

Dungeness Crab & Ruby Grapefruit
Meyer Lemon-Olive Oil, Herb Cracker, Avocado Sauce

The Salad

Little Gem Salad
Spice Candied Walnuts, Dried Cranberries,
Citrus-Tarragon Vinaigrette

The Peacock Pie

Sonoma Duck Confit Strudel
Apples, Chestnuts, Braised Cabbage, Dried Stonefruit Chutney

Boar's Head and Baron of Beef

Roasted Angus Beef Tenderloin
Potato Purée, Glazed Squash, Kale, Truffle Sauce

Plum Pudding & Wassail

Brandy & Hard Sauces

Mignardise





Hall, the Ahwahnee Hotel's signature public space. Then, trumpets sound and guests are escorted to their tables in the dining hall. Their convivial conversation is interrupted as lights dim and a solemn chorus sings, its melodious voices filling the massive space. What ensues at the home of Squire Bracebridge is part musical, part farce and ultimately a whimsical celebration of the season, where no one is wrong and everything turns out right. The French Chef and Housekeeper battle over what foods to present to Squire Bracebridge for Christmas dinner, the jester deploys himself into the audience to prank unsuspecting guests (except for the year a ring-tailed cat wandered on stage, upstaging the jester!). Other characters in this flamboyant production include the woodsman, a courtesan, as well as a host of choral singers and an impressive peacock comprised of 1,300 feathers, all of whom intermingle to create a luxurious holiday show. Many props are original, dating from the 1920s including the boar's head, and baron of beef. But to keep the show more contemporary, Fulton updated it to be more reflective of current times



a few years back. Interspersed with the show are times for table conversation before the next short act of the pageant gets underway. The seven-course meal includes fish, duck and beef, all of which play an integral part in the show itself, and the dinner ends traditionally with wassail and plum pudding.

Ultimately fewer than 3,000 people get the chance to attend the event each year, which is part of its allure. The sheer pageantry is also due in part to the Ahwahnee dining hall, with its 45-foot ceiling, massive sugar pine timbers flanking the capacious room, and square cut rocks flanking the stage, heightening the drama of the evening. The pageant concludes with the traditional melody of Silent Night, sung en masse, which is surprisingly moving. Bracebridge is not exactly a once in a lifetime experience; in fact, many guests makes this an annual holiday event. But considering its price tag, \$389 per person, it is a vaulted bucket-list addition. You are not

obligated to stay at the Ahwahnee Hotel during the Bracebridge dinner. There are other properties within Yosemite Park like the Wawona Hotel, Yosemite Lodge, and Camp Curry. But the Ahwahnee Hotel, listed on the National Historic Register of Historic Places, is a fitting backdrop for the Bracebridge and they offer package deals. What Bracebridge does not offer is photography of any kind, so your memories will remain only with you.

Yosemite in winter is a stunning visual display, as snow and ice highlight the granite faces of Half Dome, El Capitan and flood multiple meadows with virgin white snow. There are fewer people in the park during the winter and there is skiing at Badger Pass, ice-skating, and snowshoeing to complement the Bracebridge. "There is an emanation in the heart of genuine hospitality which cannot be described, but is immediately felt and puts the stranger at ease," Washington Irving wrote in his "A Christmas at

Bracebridge Hall," book from 1822. And he captured so perfectly what makes the Bracebridge Dinner so special; an authentic sense of camaraderie and hospitality, goodwill, graceful moments, great food and wine and a celebratory spirit. If you're looking for a unique event to heighten the holidays, this just might be it. www.bracebridgedinners.com, or (801) 559-5000

Bracebridge Wassail Punch (yields ½ gal, 64oz)

1qt apple juice
1qt cranberry juice
5oz port wine
4 whole cloves
1 star anise
1tbsp dried Hibiscus
dried orange rind from ½ an orange
1 cinnamon stick
½ oz ginger, grated

Place all ingredients into a saucepot and simmer for 30mins, strain, serve.

