



'TIS THE SEASON

BY DINA LAURA

"Happy Holidays!" No matter who you are or what holiday you celebrate—if any—the phrase immediately causes a reaction when we hear it. Even if just a reminder of that rumble in your stomach as you look forward to chowing down on some Christmas ham, or the stress over what to buy Aunt Betty for Chanukah. The holiday season overall is a time for celebrations with those we love. But what about the folks in the service industry? The cab drivers, the retail workers, or the staff of your favorite food establishments and watering holes? What happens to their celebrations, given they are very often working through most of them? How do they manage to find the time and energy to enjoy some holiday cheer?

Kevin Farrell, a bartender at Astoria Tavern (33-16 23rd Avenue, www.theastoriatavern.com), is disappointed he missed Thanksgiving with his wife. "I've always loved Thanksgiving. It's like Christmas without the hassle of having to buy presents!" Ah, the Irish. The payoff—spending this Christmas in his native Ireland, where the entire country apparently shuts down for a week. Fear not—the pubs only close Christmas Day.

Bar owner Mike Krawiec finds holiday joy in making everyone who comes through his doors happy—whether it's at Sweet Afton (30-09 34th Street, www.sweetaftonbar.com) or the newly opened Bonnie (29-12 23rd Avenue, www.thebonnie.com). "To me, what makes this all worthwhile are the relationships you make with the customers as well as to each other." He ain't kidding—he introduced two of his customers who later married. That's what I call gracious hospitality.

Despite having to work Thanksgiving and Christmas, Igloo Cafe (22-26 31st Street, www.igloocafe.com) owner Lisa Panagiotopoulos loves knowing how happy she is making others. Daughter Christina helps out along with her grandchildren, who sometimes make coffee for the customers. Son, Harry, will be working a few doors down on Christmas at his sports bar and restaurant, the Sweet Spot (22-72 31st Street, www.sweetspotastoria.com). The family will gather for

a few short hours in between the madness to have some turkey and catch-up time. But Lisa doesn't complain. "I'm well. My children are well. Nothing else matters. It's a blessing." Amen to that.

Over at Martha's Bakery (36-21 Ditmars Boulevard, www.marthascountrybakery.com), working the holidays is simply a given. Thanksgiving and Christmas are Martha's two busiest days, and owner George Stertsios is pulling all-nighters on the eve of both holidays, and will remain to greet arriving customers the following mornings. But he loves it. "We make a lot of people really happy during the holidays. It's very, very gratifying." George's face lights up when describing his smiling customers, as they pick up their pies and assorted desserts. And boy does he make pies. His normal 300-400 pies per week increased to 4,000 the week of Thanksgiving at each of his three bakeries.

As a server, I'll be working Thanksgiving and Christmas, and since I'm a Jewish Italian, it's a double whammy of missed celebrations. The consolation prize? My second annual "Hallmark Holiday Movie Extravaganza," with my gal pal Betsy and her dog Hannabelle, where we will watch Hallmark holiday movies ad nauseam. My coworker Shaheen Ahmed, a twenty year Astoria resident and practicing Muslim, positively beams when discussing the holiday season. "I love the holidays! It's a celebration and it's a holiday, even if it's not my holiday. So we all get together—every time, every year, we choose one of our houses." And this year will be at Shaheen's house.

This holiday season, pay attention to that server handing you a goat cheese tartlet at your company's annual Christmas party or the salesperson who wrapped your Chanukah present for Aunt Betty so perfectly. Keep in mind what they are sacrificing to make sure you have a jolly holiday. Let them know they are appreciated for what they do. A heartfelt thank you to a service industry professional is a small price to pay for making their day brighter and a whole lot merrier. Peace!