

**the food issue** Local restaurants and caterers on great cocktail hours and at-home bar carts

# STAMFORD

## Time to Feel Inspired

Celebrate this year's Light a Fire philanthropy honorees

## Water View

SoundWaters's mission to protect Long Island Sound—and a peek at the new campus

## Holiday Shopping

Stylish finds that make amazing gifts

## The VILLAGE

Stamford's new destination for fun times, good food and big ideas

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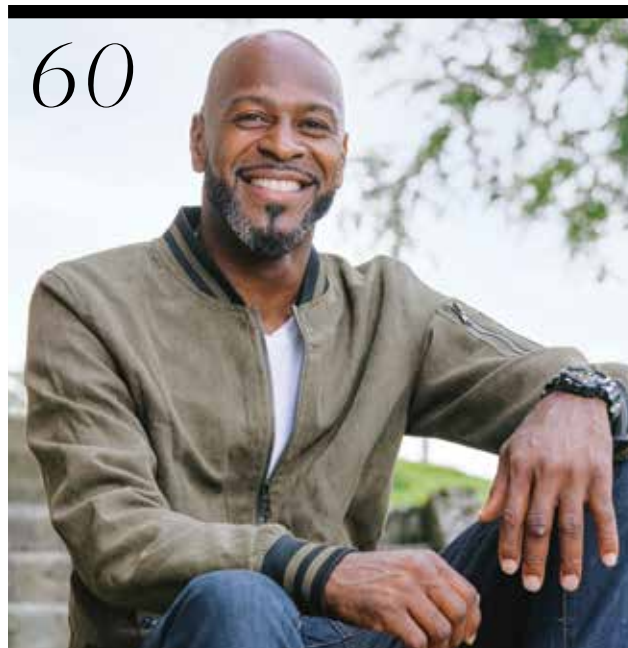
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# IN GOOD

*A Food-and-Drink Lover's Guide to Enjoying the Holiday Season in Stamford*

# SPIRITS

**T**he magic of the holidays isn't just in the candles and bows; it's also in the moments of togetherness. No matter how you choose to celebrate the season, restaurants and bars around town are here to make sure you have a good time with others. The comfort of home and our hometown, Stamford, always finds ways to lighten and brighten the mood and create the moments that bring meaning to these special days.

Sometimes that can be throwing your annual Ugly Sweater Party with close friends to take in some bartending skills at a neighborhood hotspot or making plans to meet up with someone special at a nearby restaurant for festive wining and dining. From big family bashes to little escapes, there's a place for everyone to grab a fun (and delicious) break from the mad holiday dash. Read on for our gift to you—a good-taste guide to good times close to home.

BY JOEY MACARI



**left:** The positions of the food tables and bars are key to a great cocktail hour.



**above:** For a formal sitdown dinner, guests will appreciate a thoughtful wine selection.

**left:** Be sure to offer a variety of beverages.



## Wedding Celebration on the Calendar

### Raise a Toast to an Open Bar During Cocktail Hour

When it comes to wedding planning, there's a lot to think about. Between who's making the cut on the guest lists to what color the bridesmaid dresses are going to be, it's enough to make I Do's seem like I Don'ts. Very good thing the pros at **WATERS EDGE AT GIOVANNI'S** ([watersedgeatgiovannis.com](http://watersedgeatgiovannis.com)) are experts on celebrating just about anything. Voted Best of Weddings by *The Knot*, and Moffly Media's own Best of the Gold Coast Connecticut winner for wedding reception venue in 2021, this renowned steakhouse and event space offers top-notch wedding packages housed in

their elegant and tasteful suite rooms.

Although the *pièce de résistance* of any wedding is typically the main course or the cake, the cocktail hour is just as important. Everyone knows that the cocktail hour sets the tone for the evening. With that in mind, JoAnn Latorraca, owner and banquet manager of Waters Edge, shares the secrets to the wedding cocktail hour just for *Stamford* magazine readers.

"The Waters Edge at Giovanni's cocktail hour is a person's first impression of your party," JoAnn begins. "It's about an hour long and designed for people to mingle and reconnect with those they have not seen in a long while—all before the partying starts. The cocktail party is one of the most important features of any celebration—the right drinks, the right food and the best atmosphere relaxes people and gets them in the mood to party."

JoAnn encourages a taste testing at Waters Edge so she can add some of her own creative

touches on the event. "I usually start by focusing on the wedding couple. I see what they like, what drinks are their favorites, etc. Then I try to incorporate a seasonal ingredient to the cocktail. I usually make a few and have the couple pick their favorite for their special signature drink."

Because cocktail hour is the acclimating period after the wedding ceremony, JoAnn suggests strategizing the arrangement of the food tables and bars that guests see when they first walk in.

"Our feng shui of party flow includes making our guest feel like family. We guide you towards the bar to grab a drink and, along the way, find an easy, light, small plate of food to nibble on with your drink. We have tables for seating or standing as we pass different hors d'oeuvres. These tables may be nestled in between interactive food stations. We love creating a natural flow and know how to create the best experience for all types of celebrations. We have on staff several

consultants to make sure every detail is taken care of with one goal in mind, that your event is one you will remember fondly for many years to come.”

When it comes to the bar situation, weighing the pros and cons of cash or open bar is also an important decision for couples to make. “Most guests expect an open bar of sort,” JoAnn says. “Having a cash bar has its perks—it’s less expensive on the couple, but with an open bar, people tend to socialize more and it feels more like a complete wedding and a grand gesture of sorts for the guests—like a ‘thank you for coming.’”

JoAnn recommends a stocked bar, which means it is fully prepped with beer, wine and champagne as well as crowd favorites, such as cosmos, martinis and Manhattans. Also, she adds, that this season bourbon is trending. “Bourbon is the craze right now,” she says, and that’s good news for celebrations. “It’s such a versatile liquor,” she explains. You can serve it hot (as in a hot toddy, that is) if you’re having a white-winter wedding or pair it with seasonal flavors like cinnamon, cranberry or maple in an old-fashioned over ice.

Pass the plates, there’s plenty to go around. Guests have up to eight options for passed butler plates, ranging from your traditional meatballs and stuffed mushrooms to niche light bites like French onion soup bowls and Gorgonzola Dolce-N-Fig Tarts. Themed food stations included in the wedding package elevate the fun and bring a couple’s unique flavor palate to the fold. Couples can keep it casual and fun with an all-American buffet, complete with sliders, ribs and all the fixins, or a trip “South of the Border” with a build-your-own-taco-and-fajita station; the opportunities are endless.

Guests like to be entertained, so JoAnn makes sure every cocktail hour includes some sort of interactive display. Whether it’s photo booths, boards or tokens for guests to write good wishes for the newlyweds, cocktail hour is a great time to knock those out, before “Uptown Funk” brings guests to the dance floor.

Waters Edge offers tours of their private suites and dining rooms (see *special-events.watersedgeatgiovannis.com*).



**right:** If fun were described in a sandwich, it’d be a crunchwrap from Taco Daddy.

**far right and below:** The Lila Rose is pure fun wrapped up in pink and gold.



## Feeling Groovy Break with Tradition for the Fun of It

If one were to explain the millennial zeitgeist in a word, it’s *vibe*. With such a bustling young community in Stamford, vibe takes form in many different ways. It’s having the right look, the right company and the right drink (or two). Where to catch the best vibes? You’re leaps ahead of the game to start your quest at **TACO DADDY** and **THE LILA ROSE** ([tacodaddystamford.com](http://tacodaddystamford.com)). The brainchild of John and Morgan Nealon, husband-wife duo, Taco Daddy

and its new sister restaurant, The Lila Rose, have been serving up great vibes and equally great food and cocktails so consistently, it has created something of its own vibrant community of people who simply love to have a good time.

After leaving Fortina, John teamed up with his wife to create Taco Daddy in 2019. They’ve been known as the crunchwrap gods, cocktail wizards and fun-time-givers ever since. Now, with the new The Lila Rose, a fanciful cocktail and tapas bar, the fun keeps going.

“The Lila Rose came from the singular thought, ‘Taco Daddy needs a neighbor,’ says John. “Nowadays, I think the collective feel around town is, ‘All you want to do is go out and do something.’ We wanted to give



FOOD BY KYLE NORTON; PORTRAIT, CONTRIBUTED; COCKTAIL BY JULIE BIDWELL

people in Stamford a feel that they're not in Stamford, that you might only see in a larger format like a New York City club."

The design and mood of The Lila Rose conveys an attainable elegance and nostalgic flare. "First, picture where Tony Montana eats in the dining room in *Scarface*, mixed with the sort of escapism of the 1970s, reminiscent of Studio 54 vibe," John paints. "Just fun, loud and a throwback to a time of old."

The design is also a nod to John's family quirks. "I wanted to give homage to my mom and sisters collective, aesthetic palate: the pink and gold chunky bracelets they wear became part of the decor in that we wanted to bring back gold becoming cool again, while conveying that sense of luxury without

putting a price point on it. Everything in Lila has a reason for it, from the gold flatware and gold trees to the crazy floor designs from our brilliant designer Michaela Santalucia. We had a blast designing The Lila Rose."

Of course, you also come for the cocktails, which, not necessarily by design, was chiefly emphasized at the start of both restaurants. In the beginning John cooked and focused on their bar program; it was priority for the restaurant. Morgan, who comes from a bartending background, worked with Dave Cohade to ensure the cocktail program was eclectic, functional and, at times, funky.

"When we realized how aesthetically pleasing it was having a drink focus within this young demographic, despite not having a real chef in this location in the area, we took off from there," says Morgan. "We wanted things that were tasty, beautiful and delicious—that's our strength. At The Lila Rose, the drink list is smaller, twists on classics, but the glassware makes the statement for you." For example, have you ever wanted your drink in a lightbulb? Well, Lila Rose got you covered.

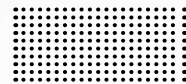
As the pandemic situation evolves, one thing that remains consistent, adds Morgan, is their creative spirit. "For us, especially during Covid, we saw restaurateurs stop creating. Everyone was in such a stressed state and it's hard to stay creative and not rely on old hits or cut menus down. The way we got through this difficult time was by staying creative," she says. "At meetings, we have one rule: You come up with something, you make it. We all give feedback and sometimes it gets on the menu, but, most important, it's fun."

Expect the *wow* factor this holiday season as both Taco Daddy and The Lila Rose decks out their spaces for the season with twinkling lights, and according to the Nealons, "a comical amount of Christmas trees." We would expect nothing less.

The Stamford restaurateurs will share on their Instagram feeds @tacodaddyandthelilarose all the upcoming details on their holiday-themed blackout brunches and not-to-be-missed Thanksgiving-themed offerings as well as how to book party space at either of their restaurants.



**right:** Cranberry  
Pomegranate  
Mezcalita



## Let It Pour

### Craft the Perfect Bar Cart at Home

**T**his holiday season you might be considering hosting a full meal, soup to nuts, at home. On the other hand, you might also want to keep it simple and host a cocktail hour just for a few friends. Either way, and anywhere between the two extremes, one secret to success is found in the same place: a well-dressed bar cart. Simply put, a good one makes an impression on your guests. And to do that, give it the works: seasonal garnishes, tasty appetizers, fancy napkins and, of course, a great selection of wine, liquor, mixes and more.

Because a bar cart for even the smallest of holiday-time gatherings needs thoughtful TLC, we wanted to serve you expert advice on how to get all of the important details just right—we turned to Jeffrey Selden, managing partner of **MARCIA SELDEN CATERING** ([marciaselden.com](http://marciaselden.com)). For more than forty years, the business has produced works of delicious art. Based in both Stamford and New York City, the caterers make the area's most discerning clientele look their best at every soiree.



**left:** Jeffrey Selden, managing partner of Marcia Selden Catering **right:** A bar with all of the essentials by Marcia Selden **below, left:** Creatively use space to create a bar at home **below, right:** Raspberry trifle with pistachio nougatine



## PRO TIP:

“Add a bar tray to organize everything on the cart for a finished look. Stock the bar cart with wines, bubbly, spirits and mixers, and to elevate the experience, fill collectible decanters with vodka, gin, tequila and bourbon—always fan favorites.” —Jeffrey Selden

“Getting ready for the holidays at home can be made simple in so many ways,” says Jeffrey. “One of my favorite tips to show off your party style is a gorgeous bar cart filled with your favorite libations to help get the party started. No bartender needed! Just set up a great bar cart and let your guests help themselves to your favorite cocktails. The perfect bar cart will match your décor and can be a chic accessory that fits into so many rooms in your home.”

Jeffrey recommends that if you don’t have a bar cart on hand, get creative. “Be spontaneous and create one on a console table, side table or kitchen counter.” Finding a solution with what you have can be fun and personal, which your guests will appreciate.

Now that you’ve found the cart, the next step is stocking it properly, and that starts with the essentials. “For me, the ultimate bar cart has an ice bucket, wine glasses, highballs, flutes, martini coupes and rocks glasses” says Jeffrey. “A martini shaker and wine opener are must-haves and to complete the look, add an elegant vase filled with holiday blooms and greenery.”

Then the fun begins: cocktails. Anyone can do this. “Make it easy for yourself and your guests and create pre-batched cocktails for them to simply pour and enjoy,” says Jeffrey. If you’re not a trained mixologist, consider Marcia Selden’s pre-batched catered cocktails, created seasonally with flavors that evoke the holiday spirit. “The go-to favorite cocktails at Marcia Selden Catering are our Ginger

Cinnamon Bourbon Old-Fashioned and our Pomegranate Mezcal Margarita.”

After serving tasty light bites or full entrées, be sure to end the evening on a high note. “Finish off the party with a winter spiced nut mix, baked Brie with dried fruit and ginger snaps and some smoked Norwegian salmon with capers, crème fraîche, pumpernickel toasts and dill mustard,” says Jeffrey. The secret is to prep these end-of-party bites ahead of time. “Room temperature snacks keep you with your guests and out of the kitchen. Be sure to include holiday-inspired cocktail napkins, stirrers and straws. With a fully stocked bar cart, you will be able to enjoy your guests and have a stress-free party at home.”