

It's A Wonderful Life

Christmas at Dennis and Judy Jones' Ladue mansion is both formal and familiar ... but always fabulous

By Stefene Russell



Photo: Photography by Alise O'Brien

"It used to be fresh," says designer Scott Tjaden, referring to the 20-foot Christmas tree in the foyer of Dennis and Judy Jones' 32,000-square-foot mansion in Ladue. "It just got to the point where ... well, it took eight men to bring it through those front doors. It came on a semi truck."

It also shed pine needles onto the white marble floors; the limbs dried and crackled. The Joneses allow their guests to smoke indoors (which, in this house, seems less like a habit C. Everett Koop would wag a finger at than Monte-Carlo-casino-glamorous), but one day, Mrs. Jones had a vision of a spark jumping into that tree ... yikes. So with her daughter Denise and Mr. Tjaden in tow, a trip was made to Baisch & Skinner to purchase a not-so-artificial-looking artificial replacement.

"That year, we also decided to do more black ornaments on the tree to pull out the piano," Mr. Tjaden says of the excursion. "It really gives it some depth, makes it not so light and airy, gives it a little weight."

Those black ribbons and baubles add gravity to 45 strings of 150 white fairy lights, dozens of white silk tassels, gold angels, gold stars and sequin-studded globes; Mr. Tjaden also likes to place painted gold branches throughout the tree because the natural, irregular angles help to keep it from looking "too perfect or too cookie-cutter." Tjaden refers to this as the "wow! tree" and the "party tree."

Downstairs in the brasserie stands the Joneses' "real tree," in both senses of the word: it used to grow in the ground, and it's where the family actually celebrates Christmas. When asked if the family makes a pilgrimage to the woods to saw down a tree by hand, Mrs. Jones shakes her head, laughing: "We go to a lot and buy it."

It's Just Lunch presents....



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In this house, Christmas comes in two distinct guises: formal and familial. Mr. Tjaden has assisted Mrs. Jones with the formal decorating—the large tree and the mantels upstairs—for five years now. Mrs. Jones oversees the family tree, as well as the more personal decorating touches that appear throughout the house. That includes what Mr. Tjaden describes as “an incredible Santa collection,” a miniature Christmas village and needlepoint Christmas stockings handmade by daughter Denise, who, at the request of her mother, leaves

names off, so they can be passed down through the family.

Mrs. Jones and Mr. Tjaden first began working together in 2002, when she answered his ad in the *Ladue News* (“It was real simple,” he says. “Just ‘mantels, trees, holiday décor, call Scott ...’”).

She left a message; he called her back. “She said, ‘Well, how much would it be for five mantels? And I have a pretty big tree.’ I was like, ‘Well, I don’t know. I’d have to come look at it.’ And then I pulled up ...” He pauses, almost unable to describe his shock at realizing what “pretty big tree” meant.

“I brought her samples, and they were so small compared to what she needed, but she just said, ‘Okay.’ So I did it,” Mr. Tjaden says. “I just worked my butt off. We had to get some more lights, but it was fine the first year, we just used what she had. And then the next year, we started changing stuff around.”

Before Mr. Tjaden’s arrival, the Joneses’ house manager handled the holiday decorating. As a native Southerner, he loved magnolias and put them everywhere. Mr. Tjaden has worked away from this floral motif, instead using pine cones, fruit branches and pine boughs to suit the European feel of the house (architect Scott Krejci designed it in the manner of a French chateau, thus its name, Chateau Deux Sources).

“She and I agree on one thing, and that’s restraint,” Mr. Tjaden says. “The house is so fancy, you need the opposite in holiday décor. So even though it’s layered, it’s toned back and it’s very monochromatic. It works because it’s enhancing the décor and not working against it.”

In the breakfast room, live holly hangs from the chandelier over simple Christmas place settings; for the mantel, Mr. Tjaden used traditional pine greenery and red pillar candles, but made the tableau a little fresher and more contemporary with an arrangement of green apple and cranberry branches in a white metal urn. On nearby shelves are pieces from Mrs. Jones’ Santa collection, including a velvet-frosted Father Christmas and a sporty Santa with a set of golf clubs.

“We sprinkle them around,” she says of the Santas. Mrs. Jones also collects Madame Alexander dolls, displaying them in the garden window in the kitchen. She also never fails to put out a rather humble-looking gold angel in the window above the stairs that lead to the brasserie.

"About 35 years ago," Mrs. Jones says, "a friend of mine had a class and taught four or five of us how to do papier-mâché, and so this little angel, though she's certainly not beautiful or anything, has to come out every year at Christmas. Most of those people in the class are people who have moved away, and they're not people I see anymore—so she's a reminder of those people."

Mrs. Jones is similarly attached to another tree, a tiny one hung with needlepoint ornaments made by friends and family, which sits on a table far from the common rooms.

"It started out as a tree of needlepoint ornaments from a group of our friends," Mrs. Jones says. Each friend made an ornament celebrating a "first." Her friend, designer Diane Breckenridge—who decorated the house—did a little French chair. There are ornaments for the Cannes Film Festival, a Grand Prix race in Monaco, a cruise. "And then over the last three or four years, my 13-year-old granddaughter did some; this one, my mother, who will be 90 this year, did two years ago. And she just took up needlepointing. I have another that my sister gave me 20 years ago. And I did that one, the one with Mrs. Claus."

Though Mrs. Jones tends to oversee the private decorating and Mr. Tjaden the public, they do collaborate. They worked together on the formal dining room, where Mrs. Jones and her husband do the majority of their entertaining.

"We usually start decorating the Friday after Thanksgiving," Mrs. Jones says. "Then we have our first festive party in the first week of December. I usually do a ladies' luncheon about the third week of December. I belong to a ladies' wine group called 'Wineaux' [both husband and wife are serious wine aficionados], so we do a black-tie Christmas party and invite our husbands. There are 20 of us, so we do that in the dining room, and it's a really elegant evening."

Just like in the foyer, the dining room is large in scale. Though the ornate décor requires a simple approach, Mr. Tjaden explains that doesn't mean minimal: "You have to work in double, triple, quadruple scale. One strand isn't enough—you have to pile it on." Fresh greenery is used for the centerpieces, but never flowers: "Most of our entertaining is built around wines," Mrs. Jones explains. "If the flowers are very fragrant, that affects the wines." "We use pine cones, cranberries, just the traditional things that you'd have in a dining room for Christmas," Mr. Tjaden says. "So we also have those types of things set up on the mantel." (The centerpiece of the mantel in this room, though, is undeniably Mrs. Jones' own exquisite wise men figures—two on camels, one on an elephant.)

Though they're always "finessing new things into the mix," over the past five years, Mr. Tjaden and the Joneses have established their own little rituals when it comes to decking the halls: from the process of dressing the "party tree" in lights to the fresh holly that's always hung in the breakfast room to the music.

"Mr. Jones plays Christmas music while we're decorating and we all just crack up—everything from 'Jingle Bell Rock' to Mariah Carey ... He wants that mood, and he is totally into Christmas," Mr. Tjaden says. "In fact, one year, we didn't hear anything, and we were like, 'Hey, Dennis! Where in the hell is the music!?' And he was like, 'Oh! I gotta turn that on!'"

As the doors of the Advent calendar pop open and Christmas draws near, the focus shifts from wine vintages and dinner parties to family. The guest rooms fill up with relatives from California and Minneapolis. Adults congregate in the kitchen with wine, teenage grandchildren loll on couches and great-grandchildren, although too little to quite grasp the nature of the holiday, still appreciate the near constant presence of cookies.

"Emotionally, there's this dichotomy of her being this very strong businesswoman—she was CFO of their pharmaceutical company," Mr. Tjaden says. "And then you see this very sentimental side—making sure that her family is taken care of, and appreciated and recognized. All those family portraits going up the stairs haven't been reframed. They're in the same frames they had in the '50s and '60s and '70s. She hasn't changed the frames; she's absolutely unpretentious. Within that beautiful house, there's all these touches that are very homey, and very ... She doesn't forget where she came from, or her family, or her memories."

Holiday Decorating Tips from Scott Tjaden

- 1. Measure!** For mantels especially, it pays to carefully plan out what you're doing first. It saves time in redoing.
- 2. Every year,** the artificial [greenery] lines look more like the real thing. When buying artificial, buy good—not cheap. Hopefully you'll be using the artificial year after year, so spend the money upfront, and you won't go wrong.
- 3. Christmas lights** are the cheapest way of adding holiday sparkle to the dull, wintry days. Load up.
- 4. For live trees,** make sure they are watered. If you keep your house warmer, you'll need to water your tree as much as twice a day.
- 5. Mix real with artificial.** On areas that are out of reach, sometimes fake will work better. Having fresh greenery and flowers at eye level helps balance out the artificial you may have on a balcony or a chandelier.
- 6. Early Americans** used fresh branches and berries to embellish the tops of paintings, mirrors and sometimes chandeliers. Do the same. A bit of greenery at the top of these items may be the only decorating you need to do.
7. Some of your **old family ornaments** or holiday items may be weird, tacky and bizarre, but it's the time for family and friends to have fun—so don't be afraid to put them out.