

International dinner



# Willkommen!

German baker Olaf Blanke brings a taste of his homeland to his New Zealand table this Christmas

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## International dinner



**THE FRIDGE**, container of untold festive delights, sits in the middle of Olaf and Oranna Blanke's kitchen, while the couple bustle between it, the stovetop, the oven, the sink and guests' glasses. Eight friends have arrived at their home in Auckland's Mt Eden to celebrate a traditional German Christmas feast.

"There's nothing German about these caipirinhas, though," laughs Olaf, referring to the Brazilian welcoming drink he has mixed. "But it's summer, so we had to have something nice and refreshing to start."

The fridge is covered with the usual ephemera: photos, invitations, reminders. They are pinned to the appliance with magnets cleverly made from sea shells. Well-travelled shells. Olaf explains: "They went with us from New Zealand, back to Germany. And then, years later, back to New Zealand – without any hassle from MAF!"

The shells are a little reminder of the big changes the couple have been

through in the past eight years.

They first visited New Zealand in 2004 at the insistence of their friend Ralf Schmidt, a senior lecturer and chef pâtissier at the Manukau Institute of Technology, and one of tonight's guests.

This country drew the couple back every year after that, and in 2008 they

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decided Olaf would test out living and working here, while Oranna stayed put in the German city of Mainz for a while, in case it all went pear-shaped.

"We had a really good life in Germany, but it was almost too perfect and we were getting bored; we wanted a change," explains Oranna.

Things didn't go pear-shaped, and Oranna joined her husband in Auckland, where he was busy building a reputation as a talented pastry chef at establishments like Boulangerie L'Epi, SkyCity and Zarbo.

This new career really was a change for Olaf, who had spent the past seven years working in HR in Stuttgart where the couple were living. "I was beginning to realise my kinaesthetic side was really strong," explains Olaf. "I had loved cooking since I was old enough to stand up at the kitchen bench alongside my mum, who encouraged me. Plus, 'baker' was on the shortage list for NZ residency – and I liked the idea of being self-employed eventually."

That last wish came true in 2011 when Olaf opened Olaf's Artisan

Bakery & Café in the picturesque Mt Eden village, not far from the couple's home. There were plenty of cafés in the village already, and a bakery. But Olaf's baking is truly something special, built on his belief in using slower methods that negate the need for additives and improvers in his breads and pastries. He does offer breads made with yeast, but sourdoughs – and he does 8 varieties – are his real love.

Oranna manages the café. No matter how busy they get, she appears to glide effortlessly behind the counter, an invisible string pulling her neck and back straight. Oranna was a professional ballerina for 15 years before retiring, having danced with the Stuttgart Ballet and the Zurich Opera House. Right now, though, she's reminiscing about presents, not pirouettes, as she talks us through the schedule of Christmas celebrations in her home country.

"We'd go shopping for gifts at



the Christmas markets. The stalls all have sloped roofs, and each roof is decorated in its own theme. On Christmas Eve, we would go to late mass then come home and open all the gifts. We'd eat little that night – some sausage, some bread. The next day, the 25th, is when we gorge all day."

Olaf chips in: "In Germany, either roast goose or duck is eaten on the 25th. But now we're here in NZ, where

## Almond peaks

READY IN 25 MINUTES, PLUS DRYING TIME MAKES 20 

200g ground almonds  
200g caster sugar  
50g egg whites  
Pinch cinnamon

**1** Put all ingredients and a pinch of salt in the bowl of a cake mixer and mix on a low speed (alternatively use an electric egg beater).

**2** Divide mixture into 20 pieces and roll into balls using both hands. Place on a tray lined with baking paper, using your thumb, index and middle finger to press the dough to achieve a pyramid shape (pictured left).

**3** Leave for at least 2 hours to dry. Don't cover. Preheat oven to 220°C.

**4** Dust cakes lightly with icing sugar and bake for about 8-10 minutes until light brown.

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## Walnut shortbread

READY IN 25 MINUTES, PLUS  
RESTING TIME MAKES 40

400g shelled walnuts  
350g caster sugar  
200g butter  
125g eggs  
500g flour  
Pinch cinnamon  
Zest ½ lemon

- 1 Roast the walnuts until they are lightly coloured.
- 2 Put the sugar and the butter in the bowl of a cake mixer. Start on a low speed. When combined, add eggs in four stages to avoid splitting. Keep on going until everything is well combined.
- 3 Add the flour, a pinch of salt, cinnamon and lemon zest in one go and mix on a high speed until combined. (The process should be fast as you want to avoid the dough getting too warm.)
- 4 Rest dough in the fridge for 2 hours. Before you place it in your fridge, decide on the shape you want. I do it in logs, so roll it into the shape, than wrap in plastic wrap.
- 5 Preheat oven to 180°C. Unwrap dough and cut into 5mm-wide pieces – about 40.
- 5 Place on a tray lined with baking paper and bake for about 10-12 minutes until golden brown.

goose is proving very hard to source, it's roast duck."

Meanwhile, Olaf invites everyone to tuck into the first course: smoked venison, duck, pork and eel as well as French brie; goat's cheese and comté. "I miss the cheese from home", sighs Oranna. "Not that Germany is known for its cheeses, but we were close to Switzerland and France, so we had all their wonderful cheeses."

"But you can buy those cheeses here now!" guest, neighbour and chef Alan Brown pipes up. "Ah, but you'll pay an arm and a leg for them; they're like gold!" says Oranna.

Alan is the man to thank for the selection of smoked goods. He was up till an ungodly hour the night before, tinkering with his cold smoker – homemade, out of an old wine barrel. The results are delectable, each of us finding favourite matches with the meats and cheeses and the bewildering array of Olaf's bread. This evening's selection is pain au levain, campagne, baguette, ciabatta, fig & fennel, macadamia & thyme, and a gutsy noir rye made with porter beer from Blenheim artisan brewer 8 Wired – a

bottle of which Olaf produces to taste alongside the bread. All the breads are superb and only the aroma of the roast ducks emerging from the oven serves as a reminder to leave room for the main course.

Seated at the festooned dining table, pinot noir is poured and guests are served their choice of duck thigh or breast, accompanied by Olaf's special red cabbage (cabbage never, ever tasted so good), a 'napkin dumpling' (made from stale bread, flour, egg, milk and herbs) and a seriously tasty savoury strudel filled with savoy cabbage, onions, pancetta, nutmeg and cream. The strudel pastry Olaf has made – light and crisp on the outside with a perfectly chewy inner, is a thing of splendour, but – according to Ralf – it is easy to make. "You just need a big space, because you need to stretch the dough out a lot and the flour gets everywhere!" In actual fact his description makes it sound the opposite of easy – some things are best left to the experts.

Night falls and Oranna glides round the table and the living area, lighting the red and gold candles she has