



SWEET CHRISTMAS

BY ALEX HITZ



WHEN I WAS GROWING up in Atlanta, Christmas was about concerts. That's because my stepfather, Robert Shaw, conducted at least 12 of them every December—a Festival of Carols with collegiate and children's groups and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, and Handel's "Messiah" with more than 300 people in the chorus.

Robert was Mr. Christmas. His album *Christmas Hymns and Carols* was the first classical record ever to go gold, and each year tens of thousands of people heard his concerts live, not to mention the millions more who listened in Radioland. By the time Christmas Day rolled around, let's just say Robert was usually exhausted and only in the mood for a fairly quiet celebration.

My mother's family would come to our house for a mid-afternoon lunch, and the menu was always the same: Champagne, Cheese Straws, Caviar and Blinis, Smoked

Salmon. Then Lobster Bisque, The Perfect Roast Tenderloin of Beef with Sauce Soubise, Creamed Spinach with Red Peppers, and Charlotte Russe for dessert. Charlotte Russe was a tradition from my mother's grandmother, and a treasured family recipe. Festooned with garlands and bows, every place would have a handwritten card—and a Christmas "cracker" from England for us to pull and pop. There was a very special red wine for the grown-ups, and the children couldn't wait to get up from the table to play with the toys Santa'd brought. The adults were surely delighted by this abdication, at least until the year we knocked over the 16-foot tree in my mother's living room, and it came crashing to the floor. Nobody hurt—but I only use small trees as centerpieces on tables now.

I've come to realize that the only constant in life is change, and my Christmases these days are spent either

Alex Hitz's Charlotte Russe

ALEX HITZ'S CHARLOTTE Russe

- 1 envelope unflavored gelatin
- ½ cup cold water
- 5 large egg yolks
- 1 ½ cups sugar
- 2 teaspoons all-purpose flour
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- 2 cups half-and-half
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- ½ cup dry sherry, divided
- 2 (3.5-oz.) packages hard ladyfingers
- 2 cups heavy cream
- Garnishes: whipped cream, chocolate shavings, mandarin orange segments

Preparation:

- Sprinkle the gelatin over the ½ cup cold water; stir and let it stand 5 minutes. Whisk together the egg yolks, sugar, flour, and salt in a bowl. Bring the half-and-half to a simmer in a medium saucepan over medium heat. Whisk ¼ cup hot half-and-half into the egg mixture; add the egg mixture to the remaining hot half-and-half, whisking constantly. Reduce the heat to medium-low, and cook, stirring constantly, 8 to 10 minutes or until mixture just thickens and coats a spoon. Add the vanilla, gelatin mixture, and ¼ cup sherry, stirring until combined. Remove from the heat and let the mixture stand 15 minutes. Transfer the mixture to a bowl. Cover and chill for 2 hours or until mixture is a pudding-like thickness, stirring every 30 minutes. Arrange 23 ladyfingers in a single layer on a baking sheet. Brush both sides of ladyfingers with remaining ¼ cup sherry. Line a 9-cup charlotte mold or soufflé dish with plastic wrap, allowing 2 to 3 inches to extend over sides. Line the sides of mold with ladyfingers.
- Beat the cream at medium speed with a heavy-duty electric stand mixer 2 to 3 minutes or until soft peaks form. Fold the whipped cream into the chilled half-and-half mixture. Gently pour the mixture into the prepared charlotte mold. Cover and chill 8 to 24 hours or until fully set. To unmold, invert a flat plate over the charlotte. Holding the containers together, invert. Lift off the mold, and gently remove the plastic wrap. Garnish the charlotte as desired and serve it whole or cut the charlotte into wedges.



This page: Alex's family recipe for Charlotte Russe, which he shares with us for the first time. **Opposite page, from left:** Alex serves his traditional Christmas dinner, true to style; Alex's stepfather, the conductor Robert Shaw, and the album cover of his Christmas Hymns and Carols; Alex is the consummate host on Christmas Day.

in New York or Los Angeles. If I'm in New York, I'll go to an early service of lessons and carols at St. Thomas Church on Fifth Avenue, and then to a festive friend's house who serves a very festive dinner, down to the Christmas crackers. If I'm in L.A., I entertain at home—or go to a friend's and do the cooking. Last year we were 40, my adopted family of friends, and guess what I gave them? The menu from my Southern childhood. Life changes, but the food stays the same. With each bite, I'm home again in Atlanta, age 10. And not one year goes by without me listening to my favorite of Robert's Christmas albums, *Songs of Angels*, at least two hundred dozen zillion times.

So Merry Christmas. My present to you this year is that treasured Charlotte Russe recipe from my childhood. ♦