

Former Swiss Guard, author of 'The Vatican Christmas Cookbook,' talks food, faith

As families contemplate what dishes to prepare this holiday season, they can consult David Geisser, a former Swiss Guard who, when serving as a papal protector, cooked for recent pontiffs and heads of state, including U.S. presidents, Queen Elizabeth II and celebrities.

[“The Vatican Christmas Cookbook”](#) (Sophia Institute Press, \$34.95), co-authored with Thomas Kelly, is the latest work of the 30-year-old soldier from Zurich who originally trained as a professional chef. His latest book, the sequel to [“The Vatican Cookbook,”](#) provides more than 70 new recipes, along with true stories, history and legends of Christmas at the Vatican, all through the lens of a pontifical Swiss Guard.

In a conversation with Our Sunday Visitor, Geisser talked about his decision to join the Swiss Guard and shared a few of his cooking secrets.

When asked why he interrupted his career as a chef to serve two years in Rome, Geisser said: “My dreams are more important than my professional career. That is why I chose to be a Swiss Guard.” Calling it the “best possible decision” he could have made because it allowed him to enhance his culinary skills while fulfilling his dreams, he added, “I wanted to donate two years of my life to the Vatican.”

Having written “Buon Appetito” and launched a YouTube channel during that time, he said: “I never put my passion for cooking aside. What a great two years it was! I was able to partake in experiences that I would never have dreamed of, serving Pope Francis and former Pope Benedict XVI, creating close friendships and developing my faith, among other incredible

memories.”

Acknowledging that Rome and the Vatican draw impressive people worldwide, he said, “while I was there, I felt as if I was a small part of history in the making.”

“My faith,” he said, has always been “very important to me. ... In fact, I think it would be difficult to be a Swiss Guard if I did not have my faith.” Referring to his time at the Vatican, he called the way he lived and saw the faith lived through others as a “special gift.”

“Growing up, my family and I would pray before meals, keeping our faith at the center of our lives,” he said. “My mother was my culinary inspiration. Cooking with my mother are among my most special moments, which contribute greatly to my love for cooking.”

One of the many recipes featured in the book, and one of Geisser’s favorite Christmas recipes to make, is “chocolate surprise cake. Not only because it is a dessert, but who doesn’t love chocolate?” In the cookbook, he demonstrates how anyone can make this “simply elegant, Christmas classic.” Said Geisser, “This way anyone can deliver this delicacy with the same result as a gourmet baker or chef!”

Reminiscing about Christmas traditions in his Swiss homeland, many of which are featured in the cookbook, he said, “We make lots of Grittibäntze, an enriched and sweetened dough that is molded into a figure similar to gingerbread men.” A common love in the Vatican and Switzerland, Geisser said, are cookies.

Italy is one of Geisser’s favorite countries, and many of the cookbook’s recipes, he said, are a taste of its fine culture and culinary cuisine, which he came to know and love during his time at the Vatican. “Some of my favorite dishes from Rome are pasta, risotto, pizza and antipasto,” which he emphatically says “are traditional recipes that can never let

you down.”

Noting that Swiss Guards are required to work on Christmas Eve, he shared that one of his fondest memories from that time was that night after work, when all the guards retired to their rooms “to eat fondue that was prepared in advance. It is a very fun and stress-free evening, because no one is required to remain in the kitchen but can instead enjoy each other’s company.”

Another memory that stands out for him was their St. Nicholas celebration, where all the guards with the commander indulged in a great feast, especially enjoying cheese fondue.

Fondue Moitie-Moite, Geneva Fondue, Tilsit Red Fondue and Tomato Fondue are among the five served that evening, Geisser noted, explaining, “Cheese fondue became very popular throughout Switzerland, specifically when the Swiss Cheese Union mounted an advertising campaign in the 1930s to promote it worldwide.” Cheese fondue, he said, is what people often ate in the Swiss Guard barracks.

While he prefers to live at home in Switzerland with his family, he is thankful for Rome and all of the opportunities it gave him. “I will visit as much as I can!” he said.

To anyone visiting Switzerland, he suggests ordering – not a shock – cheese fondue, but also raclette, a Swedish dish based on heating and scraping melted cheese fresh off the grill.

“The Vatican Christmas Cookbook,” Geisser said, presents “the perfect” Christmas Eve pizza raclette. “I highly recommend it for Christmas Eve this year!”

Aside from cheese-based specialties, the book offers savory, authentic options for all, including Filet Mignon with Pepper Sauce, Linguine Carbonara, Muggi’s Mincemeat (a generations-old recipe from Geisser’s grandma, Muggi), sides, desserts and even a Salmon Club Sandwich.

“Cooking is the way I give back to God what he has given to me,” Geisser said. “My food is my expression of love.”

Having written six cookbooks to date, and with another to be published in 2021 on a different season, the acclaimed chef says: “There is no key recipe for my success. I am grateful and humbled by the incredible opportunity that has been bestowed on me.”

Deborah Castellano Lubov writes from Rome.