

What We Kept, What We Ditched, What We Cooked: How COVID Changed the Holidays

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Mary-Liz Lichtenfels got burned in last year's pandemic Christmas tree shortage. And instead of hosting 19 people for the holiday, it was just her, her husband and their three millennial children. It was a quieter celebration, but Lichtenfels, who runs the McLean, Va., staging business [Redesign by ML](#), says all of that uncertainty gave her the courage to mix things up in 2021.

Last year's stark December, before [coronavirus](#) vaccines were widely available, disrupted many holiday rituals. Many had lost loved ones to covid-19. In-person celebrations were canceled and hastily moved to Zoom. Cookie parties were mothballed, and Grandma couldn't come make the pizzelles. Sacred prime-rib feasts were dumped in favor of having takeout tacos outdoors under a patio heater — if you could find one. Even church services went virtual. There was sadness as Americans had to let go of many of their cherished annual customs. But wait. Are they all so cherished?

“The pandemic liberated us from certain traditions,” Lichtenfels says. This year, she and her husband raced out the day after Thanksgiving and cut down an eight-foot Fraser fir to ensure they had a tree, but it's smaller than what they had in pre-pandemic times, and she only hung half as many items on it, skipping her traditional “ornament neighborhoods.” (She also confesses to ditching some ornaments from the “island of misfits” — the tacky pieces that were always hidden in the back.) Instead of installing the tree in the formal living room, where they rarely spend time, she stuck it in the kitchen, “where we can see it from three rooms.” Excited about her tree's new look, she shared it on a story on social media. “Within one minute of posting the tree on Instagram, I got a text from my youngest son that said, ‘What are you doing?’ and a big sad emoji,” she says. “If the pandemic has taught us anything, it's that we need to simplify our lives.”

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