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# Party planner's home, spirit light up for holidays

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Enlarge Photos by Robert Deutsch, USA TODAY

Decorate every corner: But the main attraction is the 16- to 18-foot Christmas tree that star party planner David Tutera, left, and partner Ryan Jurica put in the great room.



Enlarge

Join the celebration: The central Connecticut property's guest house across the pond gets a lot of use when Tutera and Jurica host parties for the holidays and Memorial Day.



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Special memories: Tutera and Jurica got this ornament in Disney World on their first trip together nine years ago.

But Tutera and Jurica are here, a 2½-hour drive northeast among the wild turkeys, deer and coyotes, for the stretch between Christmas and New Year's.

The couple considered the Hamptons "for a millisecond," says Tutera. "I always feel like I'm working there," amid the constant social swirl. "Here, I don't shave. I don't get ready because I don't have to look presentable. I just chill."

But that doesn't mean Tutera turns off his over-the-top entertaining instincts completely. He has put on a wedding here (his aunt's, this past June, for 150). He hosts an annual 100-person Memorial Day party, complete with fireworks, as well as a 70-guest holiday bash.

With its cozy quarters — wide-planked wood floors, antique Empire-style furniture and brick, yellow and blue walls — the three-bedroom main house feels particularly suited for the snow-and-sleigh season. And Tutera, not surprisingly, is a stickler for yuletide tradition.

When it comes to the trees themselves, anything other than the real, coniferous deal is "sort of a cop-out," he says. Chopped down on a nearby farm, "these'll last way after Jan. 1 because they weren't cut in Canada, driven down to the city and sitting outside for a year." Garlands, however, winding up banisters and snaking across mantels, get a free pass for being faux: Fresh fronds wouldn't last the season.

And it's not just the trappings but the trimming technique that's key. Big ornaments migrate toward the inside of the trees, to fill in gaps. Smaller baubles dangle from the tips, to prevent weight-induced drooping. Lights are strung starting in the middle and then climb up and down, trunk to tip, as opposed to branch to branch. If you scrutinize the tree through squinty eyes, you can detect where there's too much or too little blackness.

The goal is that "you don't see wires," says Tutera. "You see lights" — and maybe a little elfin magic.

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 By **Olivia Barker, USA TODAY**

MIDDLESEX COUNTY, Conn. — Certain sparkly specimens come to mind at the mention of "famous Christmas trees": The one rising from Rockefeller Center, of course. That which graces the White House.

But perhaps the Fraser fir grazing the great room ceiling of celebrity party-planning maestro David Tutera and his partner, Ryan Jurica, should be added to the list. Soaring 16 to 18 feet high, it's woven with colored lights — a process that takes three hours alone — and studded with scores of ornaments: globes, angels, a sand dollar and a banjo, each of which, Tutera says, has a story behind it. (Some, like a brass Eiffel Tower, were picked up while traveling; others, like a glass-enclosed angel, graced the tree of Tutera's grandmother.)

It's even wired and nailed to the wall — not to deter those who might want to abscond with it, but those who might want to climb it, as one of the family cats, Valentine, did a few years ago (causing little damage to the glass goods adorning it).

Decorating takes a solid day, but, when it comes to trimming the entire 3,500-square-foot 1840 Greek Revival country house, that's just the tip of the branch. Over the week after Thanksgiving, Tutera and Jurica erect four other, smaller trees: This year, Fraser and white firs stand in the sitting room and library, and a white spruce greets guests in the foyer.

The trees' relatively modest size does not mean they're modestly appointed. After all, Tutera is the man who made Star Jones' wedding shine and Al Gore's vice presidential tree twinkle. Other clients have included Jennifer Lopez, Elton John and Barbara Walters. One tree is decked entirely in ornaments from the '50s and ringed at the trunk with a dozen Santas. (Three dozen or so teddy bears — they own around 100 — crowd the skirt in the great room.) Another is dominated by dozens of incarnations of Mickey Mouse.

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Tutera has had a relationship with Disney for two years, designing a line of destination wedding packages for the company, but his "obsession" started when he was 10. The most important ornament in their 1,000-plus-piece collection is a Mickey and Minnie sphere they picked up on their first trip together, to Disney World nine years ago. That gets a prime spot on the great room tree.

"We're a little kooky," says Tutera, 41. "We know we are."

"We're two guys who are not only a little nuts over Christmas but both of our moms are, too," says Jurica, 30, Tutera's creative director. "We grew up with mega-Christmases," and now they've taken hold of Santa's reins, hosting a dozen or so members of their respective families each year.

Purchased four years ago, the property is ideal for gatherings. With four buildings — including a three-bedroom guest house, gym/three-car garage/future office and the original (currently empty) one-room schoolhouse — four ponds and three brooks on 9½ woodsy acres, it's Camp David and Ryan. The pair typically sneak away from their apartment in Manhattan's Flatiron District two weekends out of the month. (Tutera's pine-scented fingerprints are all over the city: He designs the holiday decorations for the posh Pierre and Plaza Athenee hotels, as well as for private residences.)

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