

## Good food is always in style in Edith Wharton's kitchen at The Mount

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### Photo Gallery | [Kitchen Stories at The Mount](#)

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LENOX — Edith Wharton wouldn't have been fond of the latest trend in home design and kitchens. Open-concept living just wasn't her thing.

For Wharton — an authoritative voice of her time on architecture, gardens and interior design — every room had its purpose, a function. You do what you do in that particular room for a reason — you sleep in the bedroom, dine in the dining room and cook in the kitchen.

You certainly didn't entertain guests among the pots and pans and coal-burning stove.

"We tend to think of kitchens as the center of our house, where a lot of socializing happens," said Kelsey Mullen, education and public programs coordinator at Wharton's home, The Mount, in Lenox. "You know the old refrain: Everybody hangs out in the kitchen at parties? Not the case in 1905."

Standing in the middle of The Mount's newest exhibit, "Backstairs Project: Kitchen Stories," — a historical replica of what Wharton's kitchen is believed to have looked like in the early 20th century — Mullen points to the giant 1905 stove, with more than 300 working parts, on loan from Good Time Stove in Goshen. "This stove was burning 15 hours a day at 500 degrees. In the summertime, the food smell would have been intense. The hubbub in here certainly would not be something Wharton would have wanted to share with her house guests."

The exhibit, which opened in May when The Mount officially opened its doors for the season, is a moment in time frozen at the grand house. Original porcelain subway tiles line the wall behind the giant stove, the position of a deep porcelain sink offers just a glimpse of a garden view for the eight to 10 servants who would have worked at the kitchen during Wharton's time.

The makings for the homeowner's favorite holiday dish -- the recipe titled, "Mrs. Wharton's Christmas Pudding" — rest on the butcher block table in the center of the room, as if the original cook, Mary Bagley, had been interrupted in the middle of measuring out the two "wine glasses full" of brandy the recipe calls for.

The restoration of the original kitchen — which had been a shell of a room just last fall, with original tiles and a few remaining cabinets, and is now stocked with items from the period on loan from patrons across the state — as brought on mostly by the interest of visitors coming to The Mount, said Mullen.

"Visitors wanted to know more about the servants, the food culture here at The Mount," said Mullen, who was a member of the exhibition team that took on the project. "We wanted to recreate an early 20th-century kitchen that's partly informed by what we know happened here at The Mount during Wharton's time and partly from what we know of the period."

While the kitchen tools on display might remind the modern-day cook of some form of weaponry -- a large iron apple peeler/corer with multiple cogs and wheels that turn thanks to a little muscle from the cook -- the food culture of the time, at its core is something that is still relatable to food consumers today.

"The Mount was the original farm-to-table," said Mullen, of the estate that consumed locally sourced food from its own grand back yard.

It was a working farm, and though the work of cooking was difficult for the servants, the Wharton's and the staff ate well, according to Anne Schuyler, house operations manager at The Mount.

"What we learned, while we were doing this, is this is very hard work," she said of the cooking process at the turn of the century. "Yes, they were starting to have modern gadgets, but it was still very labor-intensive. These were hard working people who were chopping, prepping, boiling — all day long."

The meals were elaborate, often involving multiple courses that were prepared in the hot kitchen in the back of the house, then transferred onto a serving tray, sent up the dumbwaiter -- located in the scullery -- to the butler's pantry a floor above, where it was plated and served in the grand dining room, the next room over. A complicated dance of behind-the-scenes food preparation, executed perfectly three times a day for the Whartons and their guests, who were served delectable and fashionable dishes, such as Mock Turtle Soup — described as a "rich green soup made from calf's head, ham, sherry and parsley." Not your favorite? Perhaps a delicate filet of sole, "luxuriously sauced and garnished with lobster," is more what you had in mind.

What was on the menu said a lot about the hostess, said Schuyler.

"It was important to note whether they had Roman Punch or Canvas-Back Duck. The dishes [Wharton] described in her writing really described the character of the family she was writing about. It was a really interesting clue to society."

While the mechanical egg beater that required three hands to work -- one to crank, one to hold the contraption and another to hold the bowl — might not be relatable to visitors, the "backstairs" stories of the servants is, said Rebecka McDougall, communications director at The Mount. Thanks to the popularity of BBC's "Downton Abbey," and a resurgence in cooking and entertaining at home, McDougall said the kitchen exhibit is sure to resonate with visitors, proving that good food and a fabulous party are always in style.

"Food is very timely, it always is. It's very human," she said. "And regional cuisine is having a moment. As is the home entertainer, cooking for friends and family — the consummate host or hostess that we all want to be these days."

## **Roman Punch two ways**

These recipes for Roman Punch are from "The White House Cook Book," (1887), a popular cookbook in Edith Wharton's time that was sure to be a favorite in her kitchen.

"The White House Cook Book was very popular. It was great book, not only did it have recipes, but also household cleaning tips, medical tips, such as how to clear up lockjaw. ... It was an extremely useful book that was found in most kitchens in this kind of home," said Anne Schuyler.

### **Roman Punch No. 1**

Grate the yellow rind of four lemons and two oranges upon two pounds of loaf sugar. Squeeze the juice of the lemons and oranges; cover the juice and let it stand until the next day. Strain it through a sieve, mix with the sugar; add a bottle of champagne and the whites of eight eggs beaten to a stiff froth. It may be frozen or not, as desired. For winter use snow instead of ice.

### **Roman Punch No. 2**

Make two quarts of lemonade, rich with pure juice lemon fruit; add one tablespoonful of extract of lemon. Work well, and freeze; just before serving, add for each quart of ice half a pint of brandy and half a pint of Jamaica rum. Mix well and serve in high glasses, as this makes what is called a semi or half-ice.

It is usually served at dinners as a coup de milieu.

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### **If you go ...**

**What:** 'Backstairs Project: Kitchen Stories,' The Mount's historic kitchen comes alive with an exhibit of a 20th-century kitchen. With the help of collectors, the kitchen is furnished with historic utensils and appliances.

**Where:** The Mount, Edith Wharton's home, 2 Plunkett Street, Lenox

**When:** Open to the public daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., except on early closing days. See website for details.

**Cost:** Adults, \$18; Seniors, \$17; Students with valid ID, \$13; Free for 18 and under

**For more information:** Visit [www.edithwharton.org](http://www.edithwharton.org), or call (413) 551-5111