This year I just needed the sound of people and the bustle and activity of cooking and the smells of baking. Julia obliged by arranging to have large numbers of her friends around baking various forms of cookies — from lemon squares scented with ginger to shortbread flavored with Earl Grey tea. But I also started thinking about New Year’s Eve dinner days in advance.

Day Minus 2 — Procurement and Basic Preparation

I bought 2 ½ pounds of wild salmon and an entire leg of lamb. The only preparation needed this far in advance was to prepare the lamb for roasting. I started by peeling and cutting two entire heads of garlic into slivers and then embedded all of the slivers deep into the meat of the leg of lamb. I rubbed the lamb with the juice of two lemons, sprinkled with oregano, and set it aside for two days. As with the first time we tried this preparation, you don’t want to see this stage.

Day Minus 1 — Curing the Salmon, Chilling the Beer

I let the salmon sit in an inexpensive French Cognac for three hours, then buried it in coarse salt and raw sugar over night. And there was no serious debate over this shot ... I went for maximum depth of field.

I also moved a large collection of beverages to the garage, my extended outdoor refrigerator. There are three bottles of Grande Dame 1988 Vintage Champagne, two bottles of Dupont Holiday Saison Avec les bons Voeux, and two bottles of 1990 Cos d’Estournel standing upright to settle out the dregs before decanting.

D-Day — Cooking Frenzy

First things first. I rinsed the salt and sugar cure of the salmon, then smoked it over pecan wood and apple wood smoke, then set it aside to chill. I heated the Bradley wet smoker, got it good and smoky, and tried to take some pictures of the contrast between swirling blue smoke and the bright red to orange salmon. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Even at 1/250 shutter speed, the cold gusty wind reduced the smoke to nothing but a blue haze when I open the door to the smoker. So forget shots of artistic swirling smoke; I just shot the salmon.
While the salmon was smoking I took the lamb out of the fridge to let it slowly come to room temperature, then smoked it for three hours over cold wet oak smoke. Once again, with the gusty wind it was hard to get the smoke to show up in photographs.

When the lamb is smoke flavored but the cooking has barely started, then it's time to put it in a Dutch oven, over a bed of Yukon Gold potatoes, themselves arrayed over a couple of sliced onions. Finally, I put the lamb on top of the potatoes, then poured a bottle of red wine into the Dutch oven, and placed the assembly, covered, into an oven that had been pre-heated to 350°.
This time I tried to remember to use a timer, so that I would not cook all the fat and all the moisture out of the lamb. It should still be fall-off-the-bone tender, but it should not be over cooked. Otherwise, what’s the point of using Jameson lamb? It looked great but I still don’t think that I got it at all right. The potatoes, caramelized in red wine and lamb fat, were perfect. But once again the lamb was a bit overdone.
The starters looked great and tasted just fine; it’s hard to make a mistake with salmon cured in Cognac. The 1988 Grande Dame was, indeed, still wonderful and with the smoked salmon the combination was nearly perfect. I still don’t have that lamb thing exactly right, but I can crank out the salmon pretty reliably. This batch was allowed to sit 16 hours on the salt and sugar, rather than 4, and it made a small (but positive) difference.

The table looked quite festive.
Jean made profiteroles for dessert ... which would not usually be my favorite. But after I bungled the lamb I realized this was as much about the photo shoot as about the food. The profiteroles, with a homemade smoky chocolate caramel sauce, were just about perfect. More importantly, they photographed perfectly.

My photography coaches were pleased with the photos. The guests were pleased with the food. I really liked the Grande Dame Champagne and the Cos d’Estournel Bordeaux.

Importantly, I did not spend the New Year’s after my father’s death alone and depressed ... but rather ate and drank to excess with a few good friends. Could I have asked for anything more? Yes. Next time I’ll try to get the timing right on the lamb!

ekc