

Donato's Christmas Shoppe offers guests a visual banquet

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DANVILLE — Most folks who drive Route 642 west of Danville, know the Donato farm on sight. It has a picture-postcard barnyard where strutting roosters and pecking hens stand out against the red buildings. My own personal introduction came the day a goose decided to slow down traffic and roosted on my car hood.

But like many passers-by, I noticed only the signs on the property: Brown Eggs and in season Ducklings for Sale and Sweet Corn, and farther down the road at the barn, Gunsmith and Christmas Shoppe. I stopped occasionally on my way home from work to pick up a needed dozen eggs or sweet corn, but until recently my only interaction with the Donatos was limited to their impertinent goose and an impersonal change basket by the roadside.

This December, at last, I discovered the Christmas Shoppe and the Donato family. Both discoveries were delightful.

The Donatos came to central Pennsylvania a decade ago. Their arrival was somewhat accidental. They lived in Somerville, N.J., where Pete was a gunsmith and Pat a nurse who also enjoyed dealing in antiques.

They originally came to central Pennsylvania to visit a friend who had moved to the Danville area. During the visit, Pat and Pete said they were interested in finding a retirement home for their future, and they liked the area. The friend connected them with a real estate agent who showed them several selections.

"He must have hated us. We didn't like anything he showed us," Pat recalls. Finally the agent mentioned offhandedly an old farm property that was somewhat rundown but had seven fireplaces.

"We asked to see it," Pat says. "And we fell in love immediately." They bought the 35-acre farm that day and found themselves moving in, although they were more than

20 years away from retirement.

In the beginning, Pete set up his gunsmith business in the smaller of the property's two barns. An avid outdoorsman, he looked forward to making use of the tillable acreage and trying his hand at crop farming. The rest of the family's farming came along almost by accident. "A friend gave us a hen and two chicks as a gift," Pat explains, "and it just sort of grew."

Today there is a busy barnyard of poultry and fowl. Pat notes that the poultry business helped to pay off her daughter's art school education. A self-confessed "city girl," Pat is especially proud of having recently received a Grade A rating from a state poultry inspector who visited the farm.

Pete has turned most of the operation of the gun shop over to their 23-year-old son Craig, while he concentrates on growing corn and vegetables. More recently, the Donatos have added horses and sheep to their property. They are pleased to be able to grow most of their own feed for the livestock.

Today there are four generations on the Donato farm. Pat's mother, Rose Calabrese, lives with them. And Craig, his wife, Chris, and their three-year-old daughter, Candace, live over the gun shop, which Craig and his father converted into an apartment.

With Craig and his older sister Lori established in their own lives, Pat wanted more to do. She had little desire to return to nursing and was looking for something she could establish on the farm. Pete suggested converting the ancient pigpen into a shop, and since Pat is especially fond of Christmas, the idea for the Christmas Shoppe was born.

It wasn't long before news of the shop had spread. And as its popularity grew, so did the need for more space. "Last year cars were waiting in line to get in the yard," Pat admits. She knew it was time to move.

Pete, who enjoys renovating, suggested the top level of the 18th-



Rose Calabrese (left) and her daughter, Pat Donato, relax by the fireplace.

Century bank barn. Pat confesses that she was reluctant at first to make the move, but now she is pleased because there is ample space outside for parking and inside for a holiday world of merchandise.

Visiting the Christmas Shoppe is like being a guest at a feast. The treats begin in the parking lot, where you are greeted by a curious rooster and a calico cat. Everyone pauses at the front window, where a holiday village has been set up. Opening the door, you enter a cozy, homey place as comfortable as a good friend's kitchen.

"Mmm, it smells so good in here," the woman after me remarked.

Before you is a visual banquet. There are ornaments everywhere, hanging around the counter and arranged neatly by category on display shelves. What would you like? There are pigs, cows, sheep, horses, ducks, geese, tractors, Santas, cats, mice, angels, baskets, blocks, clowns, trains, unicorns, bears, and musical instruments, to name just a few. There are unusual and unique items, such as the delicate white ornaments that look as if they've been cut from doilies but are actually fine metal work, and the shimmering, swirling blues and lavenders of art glass ornaments.

The shop seems as much a celebration as a selling place. There are handsomely decorated trees in every corner with themes that reflect farm life and the Victorian era. Toys and dolls are not simply shelved. They sit on miniature wicker furniture, ride doll-size wagons or even rock on a handmade horse, as if about to come to life. At one window overlooking the farm is a table set for New Year's Eve in bold splashes of red, black, and white.

One favorite part of the shop is the hearth. The room is warmed by a fireplace Pete built from stones found on the property. The Donatos have placed a Queen Anne chair beside the fireplace and often leave the day's newspaper nearby. Men who come to the shop with their wives can sit down and relax with the paper while the women shop. Pat notes that more than one fellow has been comfortable enough to fall asleep there.

Children who visit can find a place on the hearth, too. There is a deacon's bench and a supply of toys underneath. Pat's mother, Rose, often helps out by playing with the children while mothers shop. When the weather is nice, Pat encourages the children to visit the horses and sheep in the lower level of the barn, and the farm is becoming a popular stopover for school groups and scout troops.

It's easy to forget that you're in a barn, and Pat reports that shoppers are sometimes startled when a horse downstairs kicks a stable wall. More than one visitor looking



Candace Donato, 3, shows off one of her favorite toys, a lamb.

over manger scenes has been puzzled to hear the bleat of live sheep.

On any day of the year there are dozens of shoppers in and out of the store. In cold weather Pete comes and goes, adding wood to the fire and reporting that he's on his way to bring in the last of the corn. Rose helps restock some shelves and comforts a restless baby. Chris drops in to see if Pat needs any help, and Candace gives her three-year-old opinion on what the customers should buy.

What draws people to the Christmas Shoppe? It is, in part, the variety of goods. There are stocking stuffers, books, toys, and holiday goods from around the world. There are art pieces and antiques as well as unusual merchandise that ranges in price from 15 cents to \$450 and more. But listening to their comments in the store, shoppers have come for the atmosphere as well.

Spend quality time with family

NEWARK, Del. — Holidays are a time for families to share special moments so they create memories and traditions for tomorrow. But families need to plan for this quality time, says Debbie Amsden, University of Delaware extension home economist.

"Quality time involves people giving each other their full attention while interacting in a positive manner," she explains. "The goal is enjoyment. It may include an activity that brings people together for a common experience."

The key to quality time is the conversation that links people as they hear what's going on in each other's lives, she says. In the midst of the holiday season, families may have difficulty finding quality time. But they need to stay in touch as each person prepares for the celebration.

"It's unrealistic to expect to

engage in holiday activities on top of a regular schedule," Amsden cautions. "Something has to give."

She suggests that families study a calendar and decide what can be dropped or postponed. Engaging in too many activities is counterproductive to quality interaction.

"Family members may want to eliminate some regularly scheduled leisure activities to make time for special holiday events," says the home economist. "Or they may decide to cut corners on chores and clean less often. They may also plan to miss monthly meetings in December to create more shared family time."

"Parents can't always explain the significance of certain activities to their children," says Amsden. "But with time, children's tastes will change and they'll be grateful for the traditions created today."



The "farm" tree features pig, cow, duck, chicken and horse ornaments.