

# Inside the White House Kitchen

By Risa Wyatt, Wine Enthusiast Magazine - Issue: March 2009

So... what's it really like inside the Obama White House? Amelia and Dalia Ceja of Ceja Vineyards in the Napa Valley had a look recently on a private, two-hour tour of the Executive Mansion. The visit was hosted by Daniel Shanks, the usher in charge of food and beverage at the White House since the Clinton administration in 1995; he continues in that position under President Obama. Because of their interest in food and wine (Amelia is president of Ceja Vineyards, and Dalia, her daughter, is director of sales and marketing), their tour centered on the culinary protocol at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. The Cejas share impressions and experiences from their visit:



The dish on dishes. The ground-floor "Presidential Collection Room" holds china from practically every president since George Washington, with up to 320 place settings of a design. A particular favorite of the Cejas: the simple, gold-rimmed plates with a gold image of the White House at the center, created for Bill and Hillary Clinton—the only tableware to depict the White House.



And you think your kitchen is small? "It's tiny!" exclaims Amelia, estimating that the main White House kitchen measures about 20 feet by 20 feet even though formal dinners can host as many as 140 VIP guests. Counter space is limited: for large banquets, staffers convert the family residence dining room to a staging area.

Wine—if you're President, you get it wholesale. Likewise the wine cellar is diminutive—no bigger than a walk-in closet. Wines are acquired for specific upcoming events and though the White House cannot accept wines as gifts, bottles are purchased at a standard discount.

You gotta eat fast. Even elaborate State Dinners last just 55 minutes for five courses. Only three butlers tend to all the guests, removing the finished (or not) plates while they serve the next dish. The First Lady cues staff when it's time to present the following course. Yet because service runs smoothly, guests never feel rushed and on one occasion, the Queen of England personally complimented the staff on their presentation. BTW—you can't dine with the one that brung you; as per White House etiquette, partners sit at different tables so everyone can mingle.

Think fresh. The Obamas prefer fresh, seasonal foods. Even kid-friendly pizzas and pastas for Malia (10), and Sasha (7) come topped with vegetables. The White House already has a small vegetable garden; Beltway buzz predicts even more green acres under the Obamas.

Snack time. For midnight munchies, a kitchen near the family quarters is stocked with healthy snacks such as yogurts and fruit juices... plus there are always fresh-baked cookies. A new staple has been added to the pantry: Honest Tea, Mr. Obama's favorite organic brew (the President prefers Black Forest Berry and Green Dragon).

At the White House, no one will steal your wallet. After being welcomed into the administrative offices prior to their tour, the Cejas pondered whether to carry their coats and handbags. "You can leave your purse," recommended a staffer. "This is the safest house in the U.S."

Kids welcome. The White House staff is excited to have children in residence again: Malia and Sasha are the youngest presidential progeny since Chelsea Clinton, who was 12 when Bill Clinton was sworn in. On the night of January 20, while their parents whirled on the dance floor at ten inaugural balls, Malia and Sasha had a ball themselves exploring their new home. White House staff organized a late-night scavenger hunt for the girls and their friends—a tradition that helps familiarize First Kids with their new residence.

The White House is a home. Yes, the White House is a museum, holding nearly 500 paintings, sculptures and drawings by artists such as Gilbert Stuart, Norman Rockwell and Georgia O'Keeffe. "But you get the sense of a real family living in their home—normal people living their life in a house that the whole world watches 24/7," says Dalia Ceja. The White House is the ultimate home office: from the family quarters to the Oval Office, Barack Obama has a commute of 30 seconds. In his first weeks of office, he has made a point of eating breakfast and dinner with his family—a way to keep his children's lives as normal as possible. As Amelia Ceja recounts, "At the White House, the feel is warm and embracing. After all, it literally is the heart of the country."