

Christmastide Foods



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1. Christmas Eve Dinner

The Meatless Meal



When it does not fall on a Sunday, the Vigil of the Nativity (Christmas Eve) is a day of fast and abstinence. Consequently, it was long the tradition to have a **special seafood meal** the night before Christmas. In parts of Italy, **eels** are a favorite treat for

this feast, while other countries prefer **oysters, red**

snapper, shellfish, and so on. A traditional Mexican meal, on the other hand, would include a "**salad** of the Good Night" (*ensalada de Nochebuena*) and **fried cakes** (*Buñuelos*).

Breads and Cakes

Most countries also had some sort of **Christmas cakes** baked on Christmas Eve and eaten during the season. In Ireland **circular cakes** with caraway seed for each member of the household were so popular



that the Gaelic name for Christmas Eve is *Oidhche na ceapairi*-- the "Night of Cakes." In Germany cakes were adorned with a **figure of the Christ Child made out of sugar**, while in Slavic countries **white wafers** blessed by the priest and eaten with syrup or honey were imprinted with scenes of the Nativity and distributed by the father as a symbol of love and peace. (In Lithuania these were called "bread of the angels" and in Poland *oplatki*, or "offerings.") In France and French Canada small round loaves (*pains d'habitant*) were baked for Christmastide.

2. The Réveillon Meal

Réveillon comes from the French word, "to awaken," and is used to denote Christmas Eve. The ***Réveillon* meal**, however, refers to the feast held after the return from Midnight Mass on Christmas morning. Great French foods, such as **oysters**, ***boudin*** (blood sausage), and **roast turkey**, would grace the table, while in French Canada there would always be a delicious meat pie called a ***tourtière***. The dinner is traditionally concluded with a pastry called a ***bûche de Noël*** (Christmas Log).

3. Christmas Day Dinner

The Feast of the Nativity calls for great feasting. The traditional Christmas Day dinner varies according to nationality, but it is always marked by hearty and delicious dishes. The English, for example, have preserved the medieval tradition of eating **geese** and **mincemeat pies** along with **plum pudding**. **Goose** is also popular in many parts of continental Europe, while the Scandinavians prefer some kind of **pork**, such as ham or spareribs.

4. St. Stephen's Horns (December 26)

As mentioned [elsewhere](#), St. Stephen is associated with horses. Consequently, on this day in Poland Christians traditionally bake a bread in the form of

a horseshoe called "St. Stephen's Horns," *Podkovy*.

5. *St. John's Wine (December 27)*



As mentioned [elsewhere](#), the memory of St. John is honored on his feast day with wine. The wine drunk or blessed on this day is called "**St. John's Love**" (*Johannesminne*) or **St. John's Wine**. Christians toast each other with the line, "Drink the

love of St. John," during their meals on December 27. When the wine has been blessed by a priest (see [Customs](#)), it becomes a **sacramental**, and is kept in the house throughout the year as a good thing for a newlywed couple to drink on their return from church, as an aid for travelers before a long trip, and as succor for the dying after they have received the sacraments. In the *Catholic Cookbook*, William Kaufman includes a recipe for St. John's Wine:

1 quart red wine

3 whole cloves

1/16 teaspoon ground cardamom

2 two-inch cinnamon sticks

1/2 teaspoon ground nutmeg

1/2 cup sugar

Pour the wine into a large saucepan. Add the remaining ingredients. Boil for 5 minutes (after which point the alcohol is virtually evaporated). Serve hot. 8-10 servings.

6. Baby Food on Innocents' Day (December 28)

As mentioned [elsewhere](#), the Feast of the Holy Innocents is a day for the younger members of the family or religious community. Some kind of "**baby food**" -- such as a **hot cereal** with sugar and cinnamon -- is generally served to them.

7. St. Sylvester's Day (December 31)

In Austria, it is considered good luck to eat *krapfen*, apricot-jam doughnuts, when the clock strikes twelve on New Year's Eve. In Poland, *Poncz Sylwestrowy* ("Sylvester's Punch"), a strong rum mixture, is drunk on the same occasion. Perhaps these decadent and robust treats betoken "the fatness with which the soul is filled" (Ps. 62) brought on by the peace enjoyed under Sylvester's pontificacy.

8. God-Cakes on the Feast of the Circumcision

In addition to the treats enjoyed throughout Christmastide, there was an old custom in Coventry, England of visiting one's godchild. On this day "**God-cakes**," little triangular cakes (in honor of the Trinity) with sweet filling, would be given to the godchildren.

9. Kings' Cake on the Feast of the Epiphany

The most famous culinary treat on the Feast of the Magi (traditionally believed to be kings from the Orient) is the **Epiphany cake**, or **Kings' cake** (*Dreikönigskuchen*, *Gâteau des Rois*). The Kings'



cake varies from country to country but its one common characteristic is a coin or trinket placed inside it while baking. The person whose piece of cake has this object gets to be "king" for the day. In some European countries it was the custom of having a bean and a pea: the man who got the bean would be king and the woman who got the pea would be queen.

10. Lamb's Wool

A popular Irish and English drink throughout Christmastide but especially on the Feast of the Epiphany is **Lamb's wool**, so-called from the whiteness of the roasted apples used in making it. This delicious medieval concoction consists of cider or ale, roasted apples, sugar, and spices. It is served hot.

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