

# Holiday Traditions



# Christmas Eve Traditions

Christmas Eve is a great time for low-key, fun traditions that your family looks forward to every year.

The holiday season can get overrun with parties, shopping trips, cooking, travel and more. And Christmas itself can be full of expectations, along with more cooking, family, unwrapping presents and calling the grandparents to catch up. Traditions help us slow down and enjoy the season.

If you don't have those traditions yet or are looking for new ones, Parenting Magazine offered traditions that'll make Christmas Eve fun and memorable.

**Attending mass or another religious service:** Midnight mass is traditional for many religious families. Make it extra special; get your family Christmas dresses or other holiday clothes so you can all dress up, have Christmas songs for the drive there and then have hot cocoa and cookies or some other treat when you get home.

**Christmas Eve dinner:** Christmas dinner is a big shebang — lots of dishes, lots of cooking. Make dinner the night before more casual: get takeout, order pizza or have chips and sandwiches. If you want to make it fancy, eat by candlelight. Or get a bunch of snacks and finger foods and



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pair it with game or movie night.

**Take a Christmas lights tour of the city:** Although you can do this anytime in December, people tend to go all out for Christmas Eve. Find out which neighborhoods get most into the decorating spirit and drive around to see Santa

and his reindeer, light displays, snowmen, luminaries and more.

**Make cookies for Santa:** Whether it's sugar cookies or gingerbread that everyone gets to decorate or a special kind of cookie that reminds you of Christmases past, spend the day baking. If you're not sure

about cookies, try your hand at candy or make Christmas bread. Find a way to get the whole household involved.

**Watch a movie or read a Christmas book:** Maybe you have a family favorite like "It's a Wonderful Life" or "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" that you want to watch every year

(though as your kids get older you may want to reassess). Or maybe your family wants to mix it up every year and watch a different holiday movie. Rotate who gets to choose the movie or book between members of your family and then settle in by the fire with blankets, pillows and lots of treats.

# Christmas Tradition Origins

Ever wonder why we decorate fir trees or hang mistletoe during the Christmas season?

Households, regions and families have a variety of traditions to celebrate Christmas, ranging from ugly sweaters to drinking eggnog to a Christmas goose, while others, like decorating an evergreen tree, are common across the world. Mental Floss talks about the history of these common, and a few less common, traditions.

## EVERGREEN TREES

Before Christianity, people used branches from pine trees to decorate their homes during winter as a reminder that plants would return in abundance during the spring. As Christianity grew, people incorporated the tradition of evergreen trees into their celebrations, particularly in Germany, decorating trees with apples. The tradition increased in popularity when Queen Victoria decorated a tree in honor of her German husband.

## CHRISTMAS COLORS

Red and green don't have an official origin story, but historians believe green may come from the evergreen tree tradition, and the red is from holly berries, which also have a religious implication; the berries have been associated



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with the blood of Jesus Christ.

## MILK AND COOKIES

Leaving a sweet treat for Santa dates back to ancient Norse mythology. Legend has it that the Norse god Odin had an eight-legged horse, Sleipnir. Children left treats for Sleipnir with the hope that Odin would give them gifts in return. It returned to popu-

larity in the United States during the Great Depression as a way to teach children to be grateful for gifts.

## ADVENT CALENDARS

These calendars help you count down the days until Christmas. You can buy them at the grocery store — typically these come with little chocolates or other candies

inside — or get a reusable one at a craft or Christmas store. These could include candy, reading the Christmas story or something else. Advent itself is a religious advent that has been celebrated since the fourth century; it starts on the Sunday closest to Nov. 30 and is a period of preparation for Christmas.

## MISTLETOE

This plant, which is actually a parasite, has long been associated with fertility; according to the Celtic Druids, it blossomed in the coldest times of winter. How the jump from fertility to kissing is unknown, though the tradition grew in popularity with English servants in the 1700s and spread upward.



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# Christmas Around the World

Want to add a little international flair to your holidays this year? Countries and cultures throughout the world have a variety of traditions that celebrate different days of the season or highlight activities unique to their region.

Green Global Travel shares a variety of traditions; look for one to incorporate in your family fun this year.

Hiding a Christmas pickle in the

tree has long been thought to be a **German** tradition. On Christmas morning, whoever finds the pickle-shaped ornament gets an extra present. There's a legend about a Civil War soldier from Bavaria who begged for a last pickle before he died, which helped him survive, and another story about St. Nick rescuing two boys from a pickle barrel. But historians believe it likely started with the sale of pickle-shaped ornaments imported from Germany.

In **Iceland**, people exchange books on Christmas Eve, then spend the evening eating chocolate and reading them. It's part of a season known as the Christmas Book Flood, or Jolabokaflokkur; because of this tradi-

tion, Iceland publishes more books per capita than any other country in the world, with most of those sold went in September and November.

In **Peru**, Christmas Eve is La Noche Buena and is the main celebration. After Christmas Mass, families have a big meal, open gifts and toast each other at midnight. Houses are decorated with nativity scenes that are intricately carved from stone or wood, and gifts are spread around the manger. The person chosen to put the figurine of baby Jesus in the manger is supposed to have good luck.

The **Syrian** tradition holds that children receive gifts from one of the wise men's camels, which according to legend was the youngest and smallest in

the caravan and collapsed from exhaustion at the end of the journey to Bethlehem.

In **Spain**, families eat Roscon de Reyes, a sweet bread ring similar to king cake, on Jan. 6 during the celebration of Dia de Reyes, or Kings' Day. This celebrates the arrival of the three wise men. The bread is topped with crushed almonds, candied fruit and powdered sugar and has a baby Jesus doll (or dried fava bean) inside the cake.

In **Poland**, people often decorate Christmas trees with spider webs because a Polish legend holds that a spider wove a blanket for Jesus, and many Polish people consider spiders to symbolize goodness and prosperity.

# Advent and Other Holidays

The time around Christmas is full of holidays that many Americans may not know about but can be a good way to mix up your holiday celebrations.

## ADVENT

It starts with Advent, which encompasses the Christmas season, starting four Sundays and four weeks before Christmas Day, or starting Dec. 1 and running through Dec. 25.

According to WhyChristmas.com, Advent means “coming” in Latin and signifies the coming of Jesus Christ. The religious purpose to use this time to remember the real meaning of Christmas. Historians don’t have a time for when the celebration of Advent started, but it was at least 567 AD. Advent calendars serve the purpose of counting down this period, while in Germany, the people have an advent wreath with 24 little presents to mark each day.

## ST. NICHOLAS DAY

This holiday is celebrated on Dec. 6 in countries throughout the world, mostly in Europe. Cultures that celebrate St. Nicholas Day use this as the main gift-giving holiday for the Advent season. Children leave shoes or stock-

ings (wooden shoes, if you want to be really traditional) the night of Dec. 5, and they’re filled with candy, fruit, nuts and gifts overnight. According to the St. Nicholas Center, these gifts should be shared, in keeping with St. Nick’s mission of caring for the needy.

## TWELVETIDE

We’ve all heard the song, but do you know the traditions behind the 12 days of Christmas? Twelvetide, as this holiday is known, officially starts on Christmas Day and finishes on Jan. 5 and is both a religious and secular holiday. According to The Sun, a British newspaper, each day celebrates a different person or event in the life of Jesus or the history of the church, including various saints, or a memorial about the children killed by the soldiers of Herod as he searched for the baby Jesus.

## EPIPHANY

The last day of Twelvetide is known as Epiphany Eve. For Christians around the world, Jan. 6 is the 12th day of Christmas and it commemorates how the star led the three wise men to the baby Jesus. According to The New York Times, cultures celebrate with parades and people dressed up as the kings bearing gifts. In Spain and in Latin American countries, Epiphany is the major gift-giving holiday of the season, and children write letters to the Magi on Epiphany Eve.



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# Kwanzaa: 'First Fruits'

Kwanzaa, which is from Dec. 26 to Jan. 1, has its origins in the first harvest celebration of Africa.

The name is derived from the Swahili phrase for "first fruits" and was developed in 1966 by Maulana Ron Karenga, an author and scholar who wanted to preserve, revitalize and promote African-American culture.

According to History.com, Kwanzaa is not connected with any specific religion but instead is practiced by Africans and people with African ancestry. Traditional celebrations include songs and dances, poetry, storytelling and a meal.

Each night of Kwanzaa celebrates a different symbol of the holiday, though traditionally each night the family gathers and a child lights a candle on the candleholder, known as the kinara, and the day's principle and symbol are discussed. On Dec. 31, the karamu, or African feast, is held.

Mazao, or crops, symbolizes work and the holiday's basis of gathering as a family. People place nuts, fruits and vegetables, which represent work, on the mkeka, or a decorative mat used during Kwanzaa.

The vibunzi, or ear of corn, represents fertility. One ear is placed on the mkeka for each child in the family; if there are no children, two ears are still



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placed to represent the idea that a village raises a child.

Mishumaa Saba, or seven candles, symbolically recreate the sun's power and provide light. There are three red, three green and one black candle, each of which represent a different principle; one is lit each night.

The candleholder, or kinara,

represents the ancestors and can be a variety of shapes, as long as all the candles have a distinct place. The place of the ancestors is an important part of African festivals, so remembrance and celebration is an important part of Kwanzaa as well.

The kikombe cha umoja, or the unity cup, is used to per-

form the libation ritual during the feast on the sixth day of Kwanzaa. Many societies pour libations for the dead whose souls stayed on their farms or leave the last drink for the dead. During the feast, the cup is passed to everyone present to drink, then the oldest person in the room pours the libation in the direction of the

four wind to honor ancestors, then pours it on the ground.

On the seventh day of Kwanzaa, celebrants give zawadi, or gifts, to family members to encourage or reward accomplishments. Often these are handmade and intended to encourage social relationships and connections.

# Celebrating Hanukkah

Hanukkah is an eight-day Jewish festival of lights that takes place in late November or December.

It commemorates the rededication of the temple in Jerusalem, which was desecrated after the Maccabean Revolt, thus celebrating the miracle of the Jewish people triumphing against large odds. According to Time Magazine, the most well-known part of the story is how the people only had enough oil to light a lamp for one night, but it miraculously lasted eight days. Time shared the history of some of the most well-known Hanukkah traditions.

## THE MENORAH AND EIGHT CANDLES

Hanukkah celebrants have a menorah with eight candles, one of which is lit each night. This tradition actually started in Eastern Europe in the 1700s; candles were a cheaper and cleaner source of light than lamps lit by olive oil, which would have been traditional in the Middle East centuries earlier. The menorah tradition started with Germans more recently, then synagogues started using them.

## FRIED FOODS

Eating latkes, or fried pota-



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to pancakes, and jelly donuts are traditional during Hanukkah; frying foods in oil

is a symbol of the oil used to light the lamps. Hanukkah donuts, or sufganiyot, date

back to the Israeli labor group Histradut in the 1920s; these bakery-produced items pro-

vided labor for workers, as opposed to homemade latkes. Latkes became part of Hanukkah traditions in the mid-1800s when potatoes became a staple of the Eastern European diet. The Middle Ages version of latkes were made of cheese.

## CHOCOLATE COINS

Chocolate gelt, or foil-wrapped chocolate coins, are part of a traditional Hanukkah celebration, though where the tradition came from is unknown. In the early days in Yemen, Jewish mothers gave their children a coin on each day of Hanukkah to buy sugar and red food coloring to make Hanukkah wine. Another possibility is from 19th century Eastern Europe, when rabbis went from town to town to give Hebrew lessons and were paid with food like whiskey, grain or honey.

## DREIDEL

The spinning top game may come from a game from the 1500s that was played in Ireland and then moved to Germany. The four letters on each side of the top are now thought to symbolize the Hebrew words in “a great miracle happened there.” It evolved to represent different wording related to game instructions.

“Dreidel” is a Yiddish word but the top also had other names, including “varfl,” which means “something thrown.”

# New Year's Traditions

Losing weight, getting your finances in order or quitting smoking are about the most traditional of the most quintessential of New Year's traditions: making New Year's resolutions.

There's good reason for this tradition — a new year is the perfect time for a new you, so the commercials go. But New Year's Eve isn't the time for resolutions. Green Global Travel offers background on other traditions to ring in the new year.

## BLACK-EYED PEAS

Did you know that black-eyed peas are supposed to deliver health and wealth? Many people eat Cajun-style black-eyed peas and cabbage on New Year's Day to have good luck for the next year.

## SINGING "AULD LANG SYNE"

Singing this song at midnight is done throughout the English-speaking world; this Scottish folk song was transcribed by poet Robert Burns, and the title means "days gone by." It's a common song of celebration popularized for New Year's Eve by Guy Lombardo and the Royal Canadians.

## NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS

This tradition, which is shared worldwide, started as part of a 12-day festival originally celebrated in March in Babylonia and then in Rome; in the 18th century, churches adopted resolutions as a way to encourage members to renew their commitments to God. Traditionally, almost 90 percent of resolutions are

abandoned within a month or two.

## FIREWORKS

Fireworks, which originated in ancient China and migrated to Europe, have always been used to scare away enemies and evil spirits. This made them a natural part of New Year's celebrations, which focus on starting the year fresh and setting up

a positive start to the new year. Fireworks shows are common throughout the world.

## KISSING AT MIDNIGHT

This well-known practice wasn't invented by Hollywood for romantic comedies, though it's certainly been appropriated in dozens of movies. Although it's now a well-known practice, it start-

ed thousands of years ago with the Roman festival or Saturnalia. In ancient Rome, it was an act of debauchery; it evolved in European folklore, which said the first person you met in the new year set the tone for the rest of the year.

Attendees at European masquerades kissed as an act of purification after taking off their masks.



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