



CULTURAL CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

Rooted in Church, Family & Food

By Russ Disotell

Tourtiera and Christmas midnight mass. These are two of the cornerstones of French Canadian Christmas traditions and part of my family traditions. Specifically my great aunt Sophia's tourtiere, and my first Christmas midnight mass. I was a nine year old altar boy and this was a huge event. It was quite possibly the first time I had ever stayed up so late and was definitely the first time I drank coffee.

Every culture that celebrates Christmas has its own traditions, usually rooted in religious symbolism. Ewa Bujnicka, of From Here to Infinity Gallery remembers the symbolism in the traditions celebrated in her native Poland. The family supper on Christmas Eve was the focal point of celebrations. The day itself was one of fasting in preparation for Christmas. "You couldn't start the meal until the first star appeared in the sky", she recalls, in remembrance of the star of Bethlehem. "There were 12 dishes to represent the 12 apostles and there was no meat served, just fish and vegetables. One extra place was

set at the table for anyone who might be wandering in need of food and shelter."

Usually there was soup, either borscht or mushroom depending on which region of the country you lived in. All manner of noodle and vegetable dishes were served including perogies and uszka, a dish similar to ravioli. Fish made an appearance in a number of courses, depending again on the specific region. The meal ended with an assortment of pastries and desserts.

After the meal, which could last for hours, presents were opened. Eva remembers the presents appearing, almost magically, when the lights were turned on. Saint Nicholas was the local Santa Claus figure, although Eva remembers that Saint Nicholas or angels were responsible for the gifts. Finally at midnight the entire family headed to church for midnight mass.

Roman Peredun embraced his Ukrainian heritage while in university and found an unexpected bonus pertaining to his

Christmas celebrations, "The traditional date for Ukrainian Christmas, January 7th is still celebrated in many Ukrainian Canadian homes so it allows us to enjoy a longer Christmas season than most." The January 7th date is the Orthodox Church's date for Christmas according to the Julian Calendar, the precursor of our present day Gregorian Calendar.

"In our family we still celebrate December 19th as the feast day of Svyaty Mykolai, St. Nicholas or the modern day Santa Claus. We have a traditional Ukrainian meal and give each child a gift. It is a quiet day to celebrate our heritage and our religion." One of the tasks set aside for this evening is the setting set up of the Shopka or traditional Nativity Scene, which can be found in many Ukrainian households. The western tradition of Christmas Day as December 25th is celebrated in a traditional Canadian fashion with turkey, cranberry and "the whole nine yards".

The celebration of Ukrainian Christmas begins the evening of January 6th. In memory of the

journey of the Three Wise Men children watch for the first star to appear in the eastern sky, so that the celebration can begin. In many households, like their Polish neighbours, twelve dishes are served to commemorate the twelve apostles. The traditional Ukrainian Christmas meal is known as Svyaty Vechir and often begins with Kutia, a sweet pudding made with grain, which is often only ever served for Christmas dinner.

After the meal the family and guests will gather and sing Christmas carols. One of the most popular is Shchedryk, which is the basis for the well known Carol of the Bells. Dessert is served once the family returns from Midnight mass.

Canadians of Italian descent celebrate Esta Dei Sette Pesci or the Feast of the Seven Fish on Christmas Eve. Much like their European counterparts meat is banned on Christmas Eve and Christmas Eve day should be spent fasting. The seven courses are thought to commemorate the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church, or alternately, the seven days it took to create the world.

My wife's family is Italian and a typical Christmas Eve menu can include clams, oysters, scallops, calamari and all manner of seafood, in a variety of dishes and sauces. Pasta dishes, meatless of course, have also made their way onto the menu. If you are really lucky someone's nonna, or grandmother, will bring along a delicious, spicy zuppa di pesci, or fish soup.

Card games are quite often played after the meal or between courses, especially if there are older generations present. Midnight mass is the centrepiece of the Christmas Eve celebration. After mass the family returns home for dessert. This is traditionally pannetone, a fluffy, sweetbread style cake or loaf. It can be plain or contain dry fruit and is served with mascarpone cream or/and amaretto (almond flavoured) liqueur.

Gifts are usually exchanged on Christmas afternoon. As in many other European countries they are brought by Father Christmas. However there is another tradition, now almost forgotten except by older generations, that the gifts are brought by La Befana, the good witch. The story goes that the Three Wise Men stopped to ask directions of La Befana, and after they left she tried to follow them with sweets and gifts for the baby Jesus, but got lost. She stopped at every house she passed, giving gifts to the children in the hopes that one of them was the Christ Child.

Whatever your Christmas tradition is, it is probably rooted in religion, family and food. Simply have a Merry Christmas. **LH**



Left Page: *Tourtiere* is the cornerstone of many French-Canadian Christmas meals, including my own.
Middle: Many Christmas traditions are centered around the family's Christmas Eve meal.
Bottom: A 2006 Christmas postage stamp depicting Ukrainian Christmas scene.