

CHRISTMAS IN POLAND

The preparations for Christmas begin many days before the actual celebration. Nearly everywhere women are cleaning windows in apartments and houses just before Christmas.

The insides of the houses are also cleaned thoroughly. It is believed that if a house is dirty on Christmas Eve, it will remain dirty all next year.



POLISH CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

Straw is put under white tablecloth. Some maidens predict their future from the straw. After supper, they pull out blades of straw from beneath the tablecloth. A green one foretells marriage; a withered one signifies waiting; a yellow one predicts spinsterhood; and a very short one foreshadows an early grave. Poles are famous for their hospitality, especially during Christmas.



In Poland, an **additional seat** is kept for somebody unknown at the supper table. No one should be left alone at Christmas, so strangers are welcomed to the Christmas supper. This is to remind us that Mary and Joseph were also looking for shelter.

It is still strongly believed that **whatever occurs on Wigilia (Christmas Eve)** has an impact on the coming year. So, if an argument should arise, a quarrelsome and troublesome year will follow. In the morning, if the first visiting person is a man, it means good luck; if the visitor is a woman, one might expect misfortune. Everyone, however, is glad when a mailman comes by, for this signifies money and success in the future. To assure good luck and to keep evil outside, a branch of mistletoe is hung above the front door. Finally, old grudges should end. If, for some reason, you do not speak with your neighbour, now is the time to forget old ill feelings and to exchange good wishes.



Traditionally, the **Christmas tree** is decorated on the Wigilia day - quite an event for children. The custom of having a Christmas tree was first introduced in Alsace (today a region of eastern France) at the end of the 15th century. Three centuries later, it was common around the world. Early on, the tree was decorated with apples to commemorate the forbidden fruit - the apple of paradise (the garden of Eden). Today, the Christmas tree is adorned with apples, oranges, candies and small chocolates wrapped in colourful paper, nuts wrapped in aluminium foil, hand-blown glass ornaments, candles or lights, thin strips of clear paper (angel's hair), and home-made paper chains. The latter, however, has become rarer because commercially produced aluminium foil chains are being sold.



Christmas and **Santa Claus Day** are not celebrated at the same time in Poland, but rather three weeks apart. Santa Claus (called Mikolaj) Day is celebrated on **December 6th**, the name day of St. Nicholas. This is when St. Nicholas visits some children in person or secretly during the night.

Christmas Day, called the first holiday by the Poles, is spent with the family at home. No visiting, cleaning, nor cooking are allowed on that day; only previously cooked food is heated. This is a day of enjoyment, for Jesus was born.

St. Stephen's Day is known as the second holiday. This is a day for visiting and exchanging Christmas greetings. When night begins to fall, you can hear stamping and jingling, followed by Christmas carol singing outside. Carollers begin their wandering from home to home.

One of the most beautiful and most revered Polish customs is the **breaking of the Oplatek**. The use of the Christmas wafer (oplatek) is not only by native Poles in Poland but also by people of Polish ancestry all over the world. The oplatek is a thin wafer made of flour and water. For table use, it is white and have patterns on them, usually of Nativity scenes.. Legend has it that if animals eat oplatek on Christmas Eve, they will be able to speak in human voices at midnight, but only those who are pure of spirit will be able to hear them.



On Christmas Eve, the whole family gathers and waits impatiently for the **appearance of the first star**. With its first gleam, they all approach a table covered with hay and a snow-white tablecloth.



A **vacant chair** and a place setting are reserved for an unexpected guest, always provided for in hospitable Polish homes.



The father or eldest member of the family reaches for the wafer, breaks it in half and gives one half to the mother. Then, each of them breaks a small part from each other's piece. They wish one another a long life, good health, joy and happiness, not only for the holiday season, but also for the new year and for many years to come. This ceremony is repeated between the parents and their children as well as among the children; then, the wafer and good wishes are exchanged with all those present, including relatives and even strangers.



When this activity is over, they all sit down and enjoy a tasty though **meatless** supper, after which they **sing koledy** (Christmas carols and pastorals) until time for midnight Mass, also known as **Pasterka** ("the Mass of the Shepherds").



In Poland, **Christmas Eve** dinner is the most important celebration of the year. Most of the dishes served are cooked specifically on this special day – and only once a year! Christmas Eve traditions, including culinary ones, are the combination of ancient pagan customs with religious ones introduced by the Catholic Church, local traditions and various folk cultures. The supper, which traditionally includes **twelve dishes and desserts**, may last for a good couple of hours. It is followed by an exchange of gifts. This number is the symbol of the richness, twelve Apostles and represents the twelve months of the year. But in the past, dinner consisted of an odd number of dishes. The preparation of the traditional dishes takes a lot of time. The types of dishes vary due to different regions of Poland. Therefore some dishes appear in the North, some in the South of Poland etc. The most popular would be few soups. Christmas Eve dinner often starts with **Barszcz** – **beetroot soup (red borscht)** which is traditionally served with tiny dumplings stuffed with a mix of soaked (and then nicely chopped) dried ceps and fried onion. These are called “uszka,” meaning “little ears” in Polish. Another famous soup is **Grzybowa** – a **mushroom soup** and it is made from dried forest mushrooms. It usually comes with square or thin noodles. Other traditional Christmas Eve soups are **Zupa Sledziowa** – a soft **water fish soup** (for example, carp), **Biały Zyr** – a **white bortsch**, **Zupa Migdalowa** – a vegetarian Christmas Eve sour rye soup or old fashioned sweet almond soup.



Then it comes to main course which is **Christmas Eve Carp**. The tradition of carp farming in Poland is at least 700 hundred years old. Carp is the Christmas Eve must-have in many families. Christmas Eve carp is often accompanied by hot sauerkraut with dried mushrooms, a vegetable salad or potatoes. There are numerous local, ancient and interesting recipes, including carp in grey sauce, carp with dried mushrooms and cream or stuffed with parsley.



Many families still serve **Pierogi** - the most recognizable Polish food abroad. The Christmas version of those half-circular dumplings is stuffed with cabbage or sauerkraut and dried forest mushrooms such as ceps. But this dish is not obligatory yet very tasty.



What cannot miss on the Christmas Eve table are boiled potatoes (to accompany the carp) and very famous **Braised Sauerkraut**. Polish Christmas Eve smells predominantly like sauerkraut. Sauerkraut has always existed in the Polish diet and is one of the most popular and recognizable food preparations. Nearly everybody braises sauerkraut as either filling for pierogi or as a side dish with the addition of dried forest mushrooms or tiny white beans.



Some families will serve **Cabbage Rolls (goląbki)**. The cabbage roll is a type of comfort food eaten all year round. In daily cooking it is usually stuffed with meat, but it changes its face during Christmas. In those households where they are served on that special evening, the stuffing is vegetarian and contains cereals (buckwheat, pearl barley or rice) and dried forest mushrooms.



As it comes to desserts, there are very popular - **Kutia** - an ancient dessert with origins in Eastern European made exclusively for the Christmas Eve dinner. It is a mixture of cooked, unprocessed wheat grains, cooked poppy seeds, honey, dried or candied fruits soaked in a small amount of port or red wine and various nuts - usually almonds, sunflower

grains or walnuts. Another very famous Polish Christmas sweet is "Makówki," a traditional poppy seed-based dessert and it is a must in Silesia, as well as "makietki," bread rolls soaked in milk or water, served with dried fruits and honey, and a dried fruits compote.



Christmas Festive time is full of baking and there are many cakes being prepared especially for this season. One of the most popular one is **Piernik** – a gingerbread which is a tradition several hundred years old. Gingerbread from Toruń – the city of Nicolas Copernicus – was already known in the 17th century. Ancient Polish cuisine was full of exotic spices, including ginger, cinnamon and nutmeg. The traditional Old Polish "piernik" which is still prepared in many homes requires a lot of time and attention. The dough consists of honey, lard, sugar, eggs, flour and a mixture of gingerbread spices. It must be made a good couple of weeks in advance to mature and gain the very special gingerbread taste. Baking it a couple of days before Christmas Eve makes it ideal for consumption. It is then cut along and eaten with layers of traditional plum preserves ("powidła"). It remains fresh for a long time. Poles also bake a lot of **Pierniczki** – small ginger cookies which also serve as Christmas tree decoration. Pierniczki are Polish gingerbread cookies. The Polish city of Torun, like Nuremberg, Germany, has been famous for its gingerbread cookies and cake piernik – since the Middle Ages. The cookies were originally baked in intricately carved wooden molds but today are more often cut in rounds or the shapes of St. Nicholas, hearts and other fanciful designs. Chocolate-glazed, heart-shaped pierniczki are passed out to children on Dec. 6 by **Swiety Mikolaj** – St. Nicholas. One more Christmas cake worth mentioning is **Makowiec** a poppy seed cake. This tiny, black grain symbolizes prosperity and must be included in the Christmas menu. The traditional Christmas poppy seed cake has the layers of the dough which is thinner and the layers of the sweet poppy seed cream which are thicker.



Poles tend not to drink alcohol during the Christmas season and for Christmas Eve they serve their traditional and popular beverage **dried fruit compote (Kompot z Suszu)**. Polish people love dried and smoked fruits and use them especially in Christmas dishes. It is made from cooked dried and smoked fruits, typically plums, apples, pears, raisins and apricots. Its most appreciated purpose is to speed-up digestion.