

Christmas Eve Cultural Culinary Feasts Celebrated in the Blackstone River Valley!

By Diane Marie Mariani

"There's one day,
just one December day in a year,
a day, otherwise a normal one,
but on that day all quarrels disappear
and everybody sends wishes to everybody else,
Heaven to Earth,
and Earth to Heaven."

(A Polish Song)

Christmas – Natale- Noel- Boze Narodzenie. This December holiday celebrating the wondrous birth of Jesus is observed by many cultures throughout the world.

The fashions in which cultures celebrate vary. From attending holy services to lighting a colorful Christmas tree, the ways to be festive are numerous.

Yet, Christmas Eve and its Midnight Mass are wrapped in a tradition that many cultures have in common. The Italians, French, and Polish, feast!

For Italians, la vigilia is the meal on Christmas Eve. It means the vigil; to watch on the eve of a feast, wakefulness. It is held early in the evening so it ends in time for Midnight Mass.

Since Christmas Eve is a fasting holiday, the meal consists of pasta and fish dishes, without meat. Seven selections of fish are traditionally served, although, the choices of fish may vary according to each family.

Why seven selections? Seven may refer to the seven days of creation, seven pilgrimage churches in Rome, or the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church. The latter is the most widely believed explanation. Yet, it is also believed, that in biblical numerology, seven is a number representing perfection.

Some families may serve nine, eleven, or twelve selections. Nine may represent the Holy Trinity times three, and the number eleven stands for the number of apostles minus Judas. In opposition, the number thirteen represents the twelve apostles, plus, Jesus.

The feast of the seven fishes is the la vigilia tradition that my aunt in East Providence, Rhode Island has cooked for fifty-seven years, starting when she was twenty-one. My parents, my sister and I have enjoyed this feast many times at my mother's sister's home.

Her traditional dinner would commence with appetizers, including stuffed quahogs and a champagne punch. The fish dinner would include: Anti Paste consisting of scungilli (snail) salad, calamari (squid) salad, and Baccala (cod fish with pickled peppers and olive oil) salad. All of these flavorful dishes are served cold.

After the Anti Paste, the fried smelts, the fried shrimp and in my aunt's tradition, eel

would be served. Eel? Yes, eel flavored with orange rind, and marinated in oil, vinegar and spices. And lastly, the pasta alia olio (thin spaghetti, black olives, and anchovies tossed in garlic and oil).

Spumoni (ice cream) and torrone (nougat,) are served for dessert among others. Drinks with dinner, of course include, red wine and after dinner, espresso with anisette, or Galliano, or sambuca!

La Messe de Minuit on Christmas Eve is very important to the French Canadians, as it is to Italians and Poles. Yet their meal isn't before the mass, but after.

Le Reveillon is derived from the verb reveiller meaning to wake up or revive. It "is a symbolic awakening to the meaning of Christ's birth"¹. This meal is the most important of the Christmas season.

After Midnight Mass, folks will go to a relative or friend's home to feast on Ragout de Patte de Couchon, pea soup, and meat pies, until the "wee" hours of the morning.

The mother of someone dear to me, from Central Falls, Rhode Island shared the details of her mother's Ragout de Patte de Couchon with me.

Ragout means rux, sauce. De means of. Patte means feet, de, of. And, couchon means pig.

This dish basically consists of meatballs (hamburger rolled in flour) that are put in the pan that the hocs have been boiling in. The French Canadians use hoc (ankle of the pig) instead of the traditional pig's feet. These hocs are used to add a good taste to the gravy. The gravy is made by adding browned flour to the boiling water and seasoning it with salt, pepper, and onions. Some people eat the meat inside the hoc as it cooks well.

Meat pies can be made of all pork, beef, or both. Most people make pork pies. Yet, French Canadians make it all different. This particular family makes their meat pie with beef, pork, veal, celery, onions, potatoes (crackers may be used) and some cinnamon. And, of course, the pie is dressed with ketchup.

Once the children are in bed, some families wrap Christmas presents to be opened on Christmas morning. After Reveillon, a true French tradition is to leave a candle burning. This is for the instance that Virgin Mary passes by.

Wigilia, from the Latin term vigilare; to await. This is the Polish name for Christmas Eve and until the first star appears on this evening it is also recognized as a day of fasting.

Traditionally, dinner begins after the first star appears in the sky and the Christmas tree is lit. But, this may vary in modern households. In my experience, the meal begins with a prayer. Then, the male head of the family begins the sharing of the blessed oplatek (the oplatek is a consecrated bread wafer with a sacred picture imprinted on it). He takes the wafer and turns to the next person seated (traditionally this is his wife), offers the wafer to her while expressing good wishes for her. The action is reciprocated and then continued with the others dining at the table.

The serving of twelve or thirteen dishes is a tradition in Poland. This may differ in the Blackstone River Valley. But, again, this is the number of the apostles, and Jesus may be included as well.

The Wigilia dinner is traditionally meatless, as la vigilia. The first course usually consists of soup such as barszcz with pastries or small noodles called “ears” (because of their shape). Barszcz is a clear beetroot soup (it is clear because all the vegetables are taken away after being boiled and just a red color soup extract is left). The ears are little dumplings filled with boiled, dried wild mushrooms.

Fish is important to the Christmas Eve meal. Some may have pickled herring, yet, carp is the most important Christmas fish and it is the fish traditionally served in Poland.

Served either fried or boiled is the delicious pierogi. It is made in a pastry, shaped like tortellini, or large ravioli and are filled with sauerkraut and wild mushrooms.

Sauerkraut and mushrooms are considered to be difficult to digest. The foods served at the end of Wigilia may aide in digestion. These traditional desserts are made of poppy seed as in kutia, a very crunchy dessert made of poppy seeds, cooked wheat, nuts, almonds, raisins, figs, dates, honey, cream and some rum. Makowiec, poppy-seed rolls as well as dried fruit (especially prune compote) and nuts are, also, served.

With traditional Polish families the table is set in a certain way. Some folks may put some hay under the tablecloth, symbolizing the manger. And some set an extra dish. This dish is there for a stranger who may pass by or for someone who has passed on and can no longer be at the meal with you.

After Wigilia, it is time for Midnight Mass!

Merry Christmas!

Christmas is a contraction meaning Christ’s mass. It is derived from the Middle English Christemasse and Old English Cristes maesse, a phrase first recorded in 1038.

1 Laura, K. Lawless, Your Guide to French Language