



UKRAINIAN CHRISTMAS (*RIZDVO*) TRADITIONS AND CUSTOMS

The rich heritage of traditions and customs of the Christmas season are an integral part of the life of Ukrainians. Among Ukrainians in Canada, some celebrate Christmas on December 25th (Gregorian calendar) while others celebrate on January 7th (Julian calendar).

St. Nicholas

Saint Nicholas' (*Sviatyj Mykola*) Day is celebrated on December 19th. St. Nicholas is revered as a miracle worker and as the patron saint of children, known for his generosity and giving to those in need. St. Nicholas' Day is the traditional day of gift-giving in Ukraine, although in Canada today it is now common for St. Nicholas to bring gifts to children on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day instead. Many Ukrainian communities in Canada - especially through their local churches or Ukrainian schools - will have a St. Nicholas celebration on the 19th or the closest Saturday or Sunday to that date.

Preparation for Christmas

Traditionally there was a 40 day fast before Christmas, and particularly on Christmas Eve, which many Ukrainians in Canada still practice. The entire house is then prepared for the upcoming holy day, by cleaning thoroughly, washing linens and other household items, and of course, cooking and baking for the special supper of the evening. In times past, farm animals were given special consideration on this night because animals had shared their stable with Jesus in Bethlehem.

The First Star

The youngest child of the family is given the task of looking for the first star. The appearance of the first star in the night sky is the sign to begin Christmas Eve celebrations. Once the family has gathered, a sheaf of wheat known as the grandfather spirit (*didukh*) is brought in, representing the spirit of the family's ancestors and the role of wheat as the staff of life.

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Christmas Eve (*Sviat Vechir*)

In the Ukrainian tradition, the highlight of the Christmas celebration is a 12-dish meal on Christmas Eve (*Sviat Vechir*) in honour of the 12 apostles. This meal is steeped in tradition and symbolism.

On top of an embroidered tablecloth is a *kolach*, a round or elongated braided bread representing eternal life, with a candle that is left burning all night. Hay is put under the table as a reminder of the humble place of Christ's birth. A lighted candle is also placed in the window, to welcome anyone who may not have a home or supper waiting for them. An extra place setting is set to represent deceased members of the family.

The food for this holy supper is prepared with no meat or dairy products.

The first dish of the 12 is always *kutia* – a dish made from cooked wheat and sweetened with honey, poppy seeds, and perhaps dried fruits and nuts. In past times, the eldest of the family might throw a spoonful of the *kutia* to the ceiling; the more kernels that stick, the greater the good fortune for the upcoming year. The wheat is reminiscent of the bread served by Jesus at the Last Supper.

While exact dishes may vary somewhat depending on region, they all have a specific meaning that relate to the Nativity. Key dishes at every table include both baked and pickled fish dishes, *varenyky* (perogies), *holubsti* (cabbage rolls), and *borshch* (beet soup).

Christmas Mass

At midnight, members of the family attend Christmas Mass, a church celebration of the birth of Christ. Churchgoers greet each other with “*Khrystos Razdayestsia*” (Christ is Born), to which one replies, “*Slavite Yojo*” (Let us glorify him). Families often visit each other after mass, to sing Christmas hymns and eat the delicious pastries that have been prepared before retiring to bed.

Continuing Celebrations and Caroling (*Koliada*)

The celebration of Christmas through feasting and carolling continues on Christmas Day and beyond. Traditionally, groups of friends visit other homes to sing Christmas carols and hymns for the next several days (*Koliada*), and this tradition is maintained today in Canada, often as a means of fundraising for youth groups or other charitable organizations.

Malanka

Ukrainian New Year's Eve, also known as *Shchedryi Vechir*, is celebrated in Ukrainian communities across Canada approximately 2-3 weeks after December 31st. Youth groups, churches, and community organizations may host a dance, dinner, or other festive event open to all.

